

*7th Mission Response*

# *Celebrate*



# 43

## Celebrating the Joy

“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”  
(John 15:11)

A young man has spent five years traveling throughout the world making a documentary on native dances. He is nearing the end of his project and winds up in Australia in Alice Springs. He begins to talk to an Aborigine, who asks the researcher if he ever saw the “Butcher Dance.”

“Butcher Dance? What’s that?” he asks.  
“What? You never heard of it?”

Well, the Aborigine convinces the fellow that he must see the “Butcher Dance” to finish his project. Once convinced, the man gets excited about being able to experience this very famous dance. They begin their trek over the outback to a place where the Butcher Dance is observed. They follow a dirt track for 200 miles, walking for three days through creeks and valleys. It takes them another four days to get over the mountains. And, of course, all this time they are dragging their camera equipment and crew with them. After seven long days of grueling travel, they finally reach the village of the Butcher Dance. They find the village chief and explain to him why they have traveled so far and say they are anxious to start filming this exotic dance.

Then the bad news hits them. The chief explains that the Butcher Dance Festival was the previous night. The chief adds, “Maybe you can see it the next time.”

“Well, when will you hold the next dance?” the researcher asks.

“Not ‘til next year.”

“Couldn’t you please hold it just one more time tonight so we could see it and film it for our documentary?”

“No,” was the reply. “The Butcher Dance is very holy and is performed only once a year.”

The man is devastated but has no other option than to wait until the next year. So he decides to stay in the area and tries to make a go of it in the village, even though it is very difficult. He becomes ill, cannot find work, misses his family, but alas, he sticks it out.

A year passes and the day of reckoning comes—the next festival of the Butcher Dance. The natives form a circle around a huge roaring fire. A deathly hush descends over the performers and some sort of witch doctor appears and begins the ritual. The researcher is getting caught up in the fervor of the event. “Wow,” he thinks, “here I am, the first white man to see the famous Butcher Dance.” He starts filming. The chief strides to his position in the circle and, in a big booming voice, starts to sing. He says, “You butch yer right arm in. You butch yer right arm out. You butch yer right arm in, and you shake it all about!” (Bimler, pp.118-120).

That story makes me laugh. Laughter is a good thing in life. It reflects joy in the heart. Joy is a good thing. It must be, because there are over 800 passages in the Bible that deal with “joy.” God must like the word. Even more than liking the word in the Bible, God loves it when there is joy in life.

Jesus entered into His public ministry talking about joy. As He began His public ministry, some of His first words were regarding joy. He stood before the people in His hometown and read the words of Isaiah:

*“The spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).*

Is it only coincidence that the text for His message is tied into the Old Testament celebration of the Year of Jubilee? As He entered ministry with a festal shout, so He prepared to end His days talking about joy: *“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11)*. Amazing, when you think about it—on a night when Jesus is faced with deep anguish, He talks about joy.

Martin Luther once said, “God is not a God of sadness, but the devil is. Christ is a God of joy. It is pleasing to the dear God whenever you rejoice or laugh from the bottom of your heart.”

That makes sense to me. When I see my girls laughing, it pleases me so much. Why would it not be true with God when He sees me laugh?

At a time when Jesus shared some difficult teaching (some of it regarding obedience to His command to love as He has loved), He followed it with these words, *“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”* He does not give us His commands because we are too happy and He wants to make us more serious. He gives us the command to love one another because He believes that we are not joyous enough. There is no one in the entire universe who is happier or more joyous than God! He wants that joy to be in you and me.

The absence of joy from the life of the church and the Christian is a serious hindrance to our witness. Dallas Willard writes:

“How many people are radically and permanently repelled from The Way by Christians who are unfeeling, stiff, unapproachable, boringly lifeless, obsessive, and dissatisfied? Yet such Christians are everywhere, and what they are missing is the wholesome liveliness springing from a balanced vitality within the freedom of God’s loving rule” (p. 80).

Joy in the life of a believer is not only fun; it is a necessity. Take to heart the words of Nehemiah: “. . . *for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (8:10)*.

For all those times I know the joy of the Lord through His body and blood, which I receive at His altar, or through the comforting presence of His Spirit, I ditto what Nehemiah said: “The joy of the Lord is my strength.” In times of trouble, joy gives strength. In times of temptation, joy gives strength. It is the absence of joy that makes us weak.

“Celebration heartily done makes our deprivations and sorrows seem small, and we find in it great strength to do the will of our God because his goodness becomes so real to us” (Willard, p. 181).

It is very basic when we delight in God as our greatest joy. Sinful actions are not as appealing or attractive. There is strength in that joy. Don’t get me wrong. Temptations are still attractive. They are just not *as* attractive. It only follows that where there is a heart of joy, it will seek the opportunity to celebrate.

When the Red Sox recently won the World Series, fans who had waited so long (86 years—but who’s counting?), looked for some way to celebrate the joy with others. Phone calls. E-mails. It was too sweet and too good to keep inside.

God understands this basic need and desire. He knows that our delight in Him needs a chance to express itself in community. This is one of the great joys of worshipping with other Christians. The Old Testament places a lot of emphasis on the feast days.

These days of feasting were to be as influential as were the strict regulations of fasting and sacrifices. The Book of Leviticus has the reputation for being a book of laws and regulations. It has a fair share in its pages. But it also has a lot to say about celebrating among the community of believers.

God is pleased when His people gather to celebrate in His name—celebrating His victories, His faithfulness and grace. This is what rests at the very heart and center of worship—the celebration of God’s goodness and glory. So often we want to make worship about us. We look for hymns that move us in certain ways; messages that help us with “real life” problems; worship time that helps us to experience His presence. I rejoice when this is the result of worship, but these are secondary. First and foremost, our worship celebrates Him. He alone is worthy to receive our praise and honor. This is reflected so well in the hymn of praise, “This is the Feast”:

This is the feast of victory for our God.  
Alleluia.  
Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain,  
Whose blood set us free to be people of  
God.  
Power and riches and wisdom and strength  
And honor and blessing and glory are his.

This is the feast of victory for our God.  
Alleleluia.  
Sing with all the people of God,  
And join in the hymn of all creation:  
Blessing and honor and glory and might  
Be to God and the Lamb forever. Amen.  
This is the feast of victory for our God,  
For the Lamb who was slain has begun his  
reign.  
Alleluia, alleluia.  
(Lutheran Worship. pp. 182-183)

When worship is carried out in spirit and truth as Jesus taught (John 4:23), all of worship is a feast—a feast on the love and faithfulness of God. The highpoint of this

feast is the celebration of Holy Communion. What a great way to refer to this meal—the *celebration* of Holy Communion. That is precisely what it is—a celebration. God is victorious. He rules. He alone is worthy.

Worship is nothing less than offering Him the praise He deserves in a rhythm that echoes our daily walk with Him.

“Our Lord speaks and we listen. His Word bestows what it says. Faith that is born from what is heard acknowledges the gifts received with eager thankfulness and praise. Music is drawn into this thankfulness and praise, enlarging and elevating the adoration of our gracious giver God.

“Saying back to him what he has said to us, we repeat what is most true and sure. Most true and sure is his name, which he put upon us with the water of our Baptism. We are his. This we acknowledge at the beginning of the Divine Service. Where his name is, there is he. Before him we acknowledge that we are sinners, and we plead for forgiveness. His forgiveness is given us, and we, freed and forgiven, acclaim him as our great and gracious God as we apply to ourselves the words he has used to make himself known to us.

“The rhythm of our worship is from him to us, and then from us back to him. He gives his gifts, and together we receive and extol them. We build one another up as we speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Our Lord gives us his body to eat and his blood to drink. Finally his blessing moves us out into our calling, where his gifts have their fruition. How best to do this we may learn from his Word and from the way his Word has prompted his worship through the centuries. We are heirs of an astonishingly rich tradition. Each generation receives from those who went before and, in making that tradition of the Divine Service its own, adds what best may serve in

its own day—the living heritage and something new” (Lutheran Worship, p. 6).

In worship, we are reminded through the hymns that our celebration of joy can sometimes be found in the midst of great pain. Some of the most endearing celebrations of joy have been in the presence of much pain, for the joy is not found in life’s circumstances but in the joy of the Lord.

Horatio Spafford stands witness to this so powerfully. Spafford was born in 1828 and lived much of his life in Chicago as a successful lawyer and businessman. He was deeply religious and active in his church.

Beginning in 1870, a series of tragic events tested his faith greatly. In 1873, a doctor advised the Spaffords to take a vacation for the family’s well being. Hearing that a dear friend, Dwight L. Moody, would be preaching in England, the Spaffords decided to leave for a vacation there. Spafford’s wife and their four daughters set sail, and Horatio would follow after completing some business. On November 22, 1873, while enroute, their ship sunk. Mrs. Spafford survived, but the four daughters were lost. When she arrived in Wales, she cabled her husband with the news: “Saved alone.”

Receiving the news, Spafford left immediately to join his wife. He asked the captain of the ship to notify him when they approached the approximate location of where his daughters’ ship went down. Notified that the area was near, Spafford went down into his cabin and wrote this hymn, which today we know as “When Peace Like A River,” or better known as “It is Well With My Soul”:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,  
“It is well, it is well with my soul.”  
It is well with my soul.  
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, tho’ trials should come,

Let this blest assurance control,  
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,  
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

It is well with my soul.  
It is well, it is well with my soul.

My sin . . . O, the bliss of this glorious thought,

My sin, not in part but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more.

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

It is well with my soul.  
It is well, it is well with my soul.

And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,

The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,  
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend.

“Even so” – it is well with my soul.  
It is well with my soul.  
It is well, it is well with my soul.”

Jesus said,

*“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”*

What amazes me about this statement is when He said it. He was facing death in the morning. How could He talk about joy?

*“Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame (Hebrews 12:2).*

What is that joy that was before Him? It is obeying the will of His Father. The joy of obedience. Beyond this, it is His joy of knowing that in the anguish of *His* soul, it may be well with *our* souls.

Joy in this life almost always involves an attitude of “No matter what, I will rejoice.”

There is certain defiance, because we know that at the Cross “it is well with my soul.” When faith shall be sight, we know that joy will have the last word.

For the sheer joy of knowing Him and for the joy of life itself, why not then celebrate the joy? “Butch yer right arm in, butch yer right arm out; butch yer right arm in and shake it all about.”

**Prayer:** Jesus, you are the happiest person in the universe. let your joy be my joy this day. no matter what goes on tody, let me say, “It is well with my soul. **Amen.**”

**Challenge:** What about God makes you smile and laugh? Be sure to laugh today and let the joy show to others.

**Scripture Reading:** Psalm 96

**From the Book of Concord:** “Alongside this definition, the word ‘gospel’ is used in another (that is, in a strict) sense, when it includes not the proclamation of repentance but only the proclamation of the grace of God, as in the subsequent passage in Mark 1[:15], ‘Repent, and believe in the gospel.’”

“In a similar way the little word ‘repentance’ is not used in just one sense in Holy Scripture. For in certain passages in Holy Scripture it is used and understood as the entire conversion of the person, as in Luke 13[:5], ‘Unless you repent, you will all perish,’ and in Luke 15[:7], ‘There will be joy over one sinner who repents . . .’ But in the passage in Mark 1[:15] and in other places where repentance and faith in Christ (Acts 20[:24]) or ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins’ (Luke 24[:47]) are set in contrast, repentance means nothing else than to recognize sin truly, to be heartily sorrowful for it, and to abstain from it. This recognition comes from the law but is not sufficient for a salutary conversion to God, if faith in Christ is not joined to it. The comforting proclamation of the holy gospel offers his merit to all repentant sinners whom the proclamation of the law has terrified. For the gospel proclaims forgiveness of sins not to crude, secure hearts, but to those who have been crushed or are repentant (Luke 4[:18]). So that despair does not develop out of the sorrow or terror of the law, the proclamation of the gospel must be added to it, so that there may be a ‘sorrow that leads to salvation’ (2 Cor. 7[:10])” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article V: Law and Gospel, p. 582.6-9).

# 44 Celebrating the Homecoming

*“In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:10)*

Tony Campolo tells the story of a trip that he took to Hawaii. Jet lag kept him awake late into the night, and he went out for a walk on the streets of Honolulu. At two in the morning, he found himself in a doughnut shop. Sitting at the counter, he overheard several prostitutes who were sharing a booth. One of the girls, whose name was Agnes, mentioned that it was her birthday.

After she had left, Tony turned to the cook and the other prostitutes and said, “Let’s throw a party for Agnes.” The other girls agreed to bring decorations, and the cook said that he would bake a cake.

That night, they all gathered at the shop and when Agnes walked in, they brought out the cake and began to sing, “Happy Birthday.” Tears streamed down Agnes’ face, and when it came time to cut the cake, she just stood there. Finally she said, “Could I buy another cake and we’ll eat that one? I want to take this one home and show it to my mother.”

With that, she took the cake and left. In the sudden silence that filled the shop after she left, Tony bowed his head and began to pray, “Lord we thank you for Agnes and for your love for her. You loved her enough to send your Son to die for her on the cross. We thank you for the best present of all—the present of your own Son. Amen.” When he raised his head, he saw that all of the prostitutes had their heads bowed and had been praying with him.

The cook looked at him and said, “You’re a preacher!” When Tony admitted that he

was, the cook asked, “What kind of church do you have?” In a sudden flash of insight, Tony replied, “The kind that throws parties for prostitutes and gives invitations to sinners” (Campolo, pp. 3-7).

Jesus likes parties. This is pretty obvious in the fifteenth chapter of Luke. Three parables. Three things lost: A lost sheep. A lost coin. A lost son. Each story ends up with a party. Each story has one person looking for friends and neighbors to share in the joy and celebration. This is the thread that connects all three. Look over these three parables. The object of attention is not the sheep or the coin or the son. The focus is on the one searching. Each of them find what they are looking or waiting for, and they invite people to share in their joy and join in the party.

Nothing brings God greater joy than when one sinner repents and is safely back in the fold. Lost people matter to God. It matters not why they are lost. Some who are lost are very close to home, even within the confines of the church. They, like the coin, are helpless and can do nothing on their own to help themselves. Others are lost due to their ignorance and waywardness. Like the sheep, they are vulnerable to danger and harm. Searching for them is a much wider adventure. As with the lost son, some are lost because of willful disobedience and sinful living. No matter the condition or the reason, lost people matter to God. Charles Spurgeon wrote a century ago:

“There are Christmas days in heaven where Christ’s high mass is kept, and Christ is not glorified because He was born in a manger but because He is born in a broken heart. And these are days when the Shepherd brings home the lost sheep upon His shoulders, when the church has swept her house and found the lost piece of money, for then are those friends and neighbors called together, and they rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory over one sinner who repents” (MacArthur, 1996, p. 246).

It’s rather amazing, isn’t it? Jesus portrays the sheer delight that goes on over one sinner who repents. In the movie, “It’s A Wonderful Life,” Clarence, the angel, explains that each time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings. That is nothing compared to the picture here. Jesus portrays three different views. In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus says:

*“I tell you that in the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (Luke 15:7).*

*“There is more rejoicing in heaven.”*

Who is it that shares in this rejoicing? Is it the angels? The saints? It is left unsaid, but this much is clear: When one sinner repents, there is a party in heaven.

In the second parable, the picture is one of God leading the rejoicing.

*“In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10).*

In his commentary on Luke, Dr. William Arndt writes:

“Bringing a lost one back into safety is the basis of joy before the angels of God, that is, in God Himself, who is here thought of as sitting on His throne, surrounded by the heavenly servants, who see Him rejoice and share His joy” (p. 348).

I can only begin to imagine the angels looking on as God dances around, cheering and applauding wildly in joy over just one sinner who is back home again. What must go through their minds to see God in all of His glory taking such delight over one person—a mortal, no less—being carried back home on the shoulders of Jesus?

That leads me to ask, “Where am I in that crowd when the cheering starts? Do I share in the joy?” God is exuberant, but I am afraid that I am not always quick to join in the celebration or to invite people like that prostitute to the party. In the third parable of the lost son, at the very end, the picture of rejoicing is much different:

*“But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:32).*

This parable portrays that the rejoicing is more by those on earth. Those who are a part of the family and community of this prodigal son are the ones who rejoice and celebrate. That would seem to place this question directly at the feet of the church today: How shall we rejoice and join with God and the heavenly hosts in rejoicing over the lost who have come home?

Maybe it would help if we understood what all the fuss was about. Why the rejoicing in the first place?

Those in heaven who see God rejoicing and leading the cheers understand exactly what the father was saying to the older son when the younger son returned home: *“But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.”*

Lost or found. Dead or alive. Damned or saved. Foolish or wise. There is no neutral ground when it comes to things spiritual. There is no middle road when it comes to one’s walk with Christ.

When the RMS Titanic sank, more than twenty-two hundred people were cast into the

frigid waters of the Atlantic. On shore, the names of the passengers were posted in two simple columns: Saved and Lost. God's list is equally simple (Lucado, p. 148).

The angels rejoice and celebrate with God over each person that repents. How many times has it been that this party was thrown in my honor? How many times have I been the one that strayed off, only to be rescued and carried home in the arms of love and grace? Shall I now sit here and watch as some neutral spectator? Why is it that I show more joy watching my favorite team celebrate a championship on the field than I do

in knowing God's joy in just one person who is safe at home with Him? Celebrating is the response of those who are passionate about the mission Christ has given us. God is looking for churches that will join Him in rejoicing over the lost coming home. He is looking for churches that know how to throw a great homecoming party.

**Prayer:** Father, in the repentance of just one sinner your heart is filled with joy. All of heaven joins in your celebration. May I and your church on Earth be marked by this joy as well. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

**Challenge:** Is there someone you know who has come back home to Christ? Send them a note or gift and let them know the joy it gives you to have them back.

**Scripture Reading:** Luke 15

**From the Book of Concord:** "In the last chapter of Luke [24:47], Christ commands the preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name. The gospel accuses all people of being under sin and subject to eternal wrath and death and for Christ's sake offers the forgiveness of sins and justification, which are received by faith. The proclamation of repentance, which accuses us, terrifies consciences with genuine and serious terrors. In the midst of these, hearts must once again receive consolation. This happens when they believe the promise of Christ, namely, that on his account we have the forgiveness of sins. This faith, which arises and consoles in the midst of those fears, receives the forgiveness of sins, justifies us, and makes alive. For this consolation is a new and spiritual life" (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV: Justification, p. 130.62).

# 45 Celebrating the Community

*“Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.” (Luke 24:52-53)*

I like wearing baseball caps. I have a bunch of them. One is my favorite above all others. It is blue and has one mark on it: “B.” It doesn’t stand for Barry. It stands for Boston, as in Boston Red Sox. I won’t talk about it for long, but indulge me for a moment. After all, we waited 86 years for this moment.

October 27, 2004 was a celebration that I never thought would come. That was the night the Red Sox beat the St. Louis Cardinals to claim the World Series. (Did I mention that they did it in four straight?) Forgive me for delighting in this so. Getting there was not easy or painless. Bucky Dent in 1978. Bill Buckner in 1986. Someone once said that watching the Boston Red Sox was like watching Greek tragedy. In Greek tragedy, you know someone is going to get killed; you just don’t know how it will be done. Watching the Red Sox is a lot like that. You knew they would lose. You just did not know how they would do it. Until October 27, 2004.

When they won that night, and especially when they beat the Yankees (sorry, I just had to get that in at least once), a bond developed among people. E-mails and phone calls and conversations at the water cooler. It did not matter if you knew the other person; there was a sense of oneness when you knew that you shared a common joy and pain. I experienced this at a local coffee shop. I saw a man wearing a ball cap similar to mine. I had never seen him before—no matter, I called out to him and said, “Love your hat!” He smiled

and we waved high-fives to each other. “The Red Sox Nation” is what some call it.

When the game was over on October 27, I spoke with my brother on the phone—just to share in the moment. Then my girls called, and there was the sharing of laughter and tears and stories about Grampie Toi. (How he would have loved this moment!) I realized then that a bond of another type had been formed between my girls and their grandfather who used to love listening to the Sox. This sentiment was apparently felt by many. The Boston Globe printed this article on October 29:

“Despite all that’s been said about a curse, a lot of Red Sox fans weren’t thinking of Babe Ruth or Bucky Dent the moment Boston won the World Series Wednesday night. They were thinking of their favorite uncle who was buried in a Sox jersey, or the hot dog vendor who used to sneak children into Fenway Park, or the neighbor who cried the night the ball went between Bill Buckner’s legs—all the loved ones who should have been there to share the moment” (Peter DeMarco).

After the game and the conversations, it was hard to turn the TV off. I just wanted to linger with the joy of the moment. Sleep could wait another day. The Sox were World Champions tonight. Plus, you never know when you might experience this again—if ever. Eighty-six years is a long time to wait.

All of this leads me to Luke 24:52-53: *“And they were on their knees, worshiping him. They returned to Jerusalem bursting with joy. They spent all their time in the Temple praising God. Yes” (MSG).*

Such was their joy in the victory of the resurrected and ascended Lord that they didn't want to leave it. They were ecstatic and wanted to hang out with each other in the temple, giving praise to God. I wonder what that was like for the religious leaders of the day. They did not believe but were in the temple, carrying out the required sacrifices and worship. What must it have been like to have seen and heard the joyous worship of these disciples?

Please don't think that I am comparing the victory of Jesus to that of a World Series victory. It's not even close. But, if you can relate to that sense of joy, that sense of community that is so great and so precious that you don't want it to end—then you have a mere hint of what it was like for those first believers after Christ's resurrection. In Acts 2, it says of them:

*“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (vv. 42-47).*

This, to me, is the picture of a victory party. It looks to me like a bunch of people who are lingering in the joy of the moment and the celebration. Who can blame them? Their celebration is like no other that has ever been experienced. It is not a temporary one

like that of a World Series. It is an everlasting victory. There is no “wait till next year” when it comes to a victory celebration in Jesus. Ours is the joy of saying, “He is Risen!” “He is Risen, Indeed!” It is an ever present reality that will not be lost or given up. I know all too well how fleeting is the joy of October 27. But for anyone who is in Jesus Christ—the crown of life that one wears by grace will not be taken away. It is eternal!

Much was made in the World Series of certain heroes: Johnny Damon and Curt Schilling, and Manny Ramirez, who was the MVP. People long to shower their adoration upon heroes. We wear shirts with their names on them; we want their photos and autographs. We are willing to pay a lot of money just for the “privilege” of having these things in our possession. We seek to pour our praise on someone great. We long to attach ourselves with someone we admire and respect.

There is, however, only one MVP—in all of Scripture and in all the world—the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God alone is the true hero. There are some amazing people in Scripture, but each one of them had their share of faults and weaknesses. Only One deserves our praise and adoration. God alone is the hero. Yet, incredibly, He wants us to have His name. Better than any autograph or jersey, God places His name upon us in our Baptism. Wherever we go, His name is upon us. It costs us nothing to receive it. It cost Him everything to offer it.

When I envision the Church, I see people gathering together in worship services (and through e-mails and at the water cooler) as they share together a common love and bond in the celebration of Christ's victory. So great is their joy that they linger there with each other, not wanting it to end. Just as the Red Sox victory was and is my victory, even more so—eternally so—is the victory of Christ my victory by means of my Baptism, where I am joined in His death, buried with Him in the grave, and raised with Him in His resurrection (Romans 6:1-14).

Within the Church that Jesus commissioned to carry His message to the world, there is the gathering of people who are so filled with joy that they cannot help but constantly talk about it. When they see strangers in public who wear the cross, or a fish symbol on the bumper of a car, there is an instant bond with this person that causes them to want to wave high-fives to each other from a distance. This is the celebration of community that I see in the Book of Acts. This is the Church that excites me when I see it in action today.

I see a danger, however, when one's faith and certainty of salvation becomes too private. This is not how I see it in Scripture. Salvation is very personal, but it is also communal. Personally, I have received by grace the gift of salvation. Jesus is my Lord. That also means that now, with Him as my King, I am made a citizen of His Kingdom, a Holy Nation like no other. The Church of today needs to lay claim once again on the joy of the celebration of community.

There is one other dimension to the Church, though, that should also be mentioned, for it also is very much a part of the celebration of community. Let's go back to the article in the Boston Globe:

“By yesterday, fans across the globe had posted hundreds of memorials on a website to those they had lost. Postings from London to Melbourne filled 54 pages, some tearful, many bittersweet, others overflowing with happiness. All

recalled great fans who never stopped believing in their team, but did not live to witness the dream . . . fans who posted to the website, as well as those who thought about loved ones Wednesday night as the Sox cruised to victory, agreed that the Red Sox Nation wasn't just on earth.”

My dad, who has been with Jesus for many years now, was a huge Red Sox fan. I do not believe, however, that his joy in heaven is increased by a Red Sox victory. If there is such a thing as a Red Sox Nation, then it is confined here to earth.

But the Church that celebrates the victory of Christ is both here on earth and in heaven. My dad and I share this victory together. When I worship, I am joined with him and all the company of heaven, singing the praises of our Triune God. When I receive the body and blood of my Savior, it is a feast that we share in together.

When you go out today or tomorrow, if you happen to see someone wearing a cross or some sign that they are a Christian, say hello to them. Take a moment to share in the joy of the victory—for we Christians are part of a Holy Nation together. In Christ, we are world champions!

**Prayer:** You, O Christ, are the Victor. You have defeated Satan and death and sin itself. I praise you and honor you, offering you my life this day in thanksgiving for making your victory my own through my Baptism. In your name, **Amen.**

**Challenge:** If you see someone this day wearing a cross or other Christian symbol, acknowledge to them that you too are a part of that “Holy Nation.”

**Scripture Reading:** Luke 24

**From the Book of Concord:** “This teaching offers the following beautiful, wonderful comfort. God made the conversion, righteousness, and salvation of each individual Christian such a high personal concern and intended to remain so faithful to it that ‘even before the foundation of the world’ [Eph. 1:4] he resolved and ‘according to his own purpose’ [2 Tim. 1:9] he preordained how he would bring me to salvation and preserve me in it. <sup>cr</sup>Likewise, he desired to guarantee my salvation so completely and certainly—because it could slip through our fingers so easily through the weakness and wickedness of our flesh or be snatched and taken from our hands through the deceit and power of the devil and the world. For he has preordained this salvation through his eternal intention, which cannot fail or be overthrown, and he has placed it for safekeeping into the almighty hand of our Savior Jesus Christ, from which no one can snatch us away (John 10 [:28]). Therefore, Paul also asks in Romans 8[:28, 35, 39], since we are called in accord with God’s intention, ‘Who will separate us from the love of God in Christ?’” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article XI: Election, p. 648.45-47).

# 46 Celebrating the Day

*“This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”  
(Psalm 118:24)*

There is a story of a little boy who came home from Sunday School on Easter Sunday very excited about what he had learned. He raced into the kitchen and shouted, “Wow, I learned what Jesus said when He burst out of the tomb on Easter morning!” His mom and dad were excited too, and they asked him, “Well what did He say on the first Easter morning?” And the little boy ran up to them, threw his hands up in the air, and shouted “TA-DA!” (Bimler, p. 14).

Obviously, the young boy has paraphrased Jesus a little bit. I suspect, though, that he is capturing the essence of joy and celebration that were evident that first Easter morning. “TA-DA—Here I am! I am alive, just as I said!” As a result, our lives are “TA-DA!” lives. We are able to enter each day in the confidence that Jesus is alive. Wherever we go, we give witness and bear testimony to the truth that Jesus is alive and ready to reveal Himself. Even in those days when the challenges are overwhelming, Christ stands ready to say to us, “TA-DA!” His resurrection gives us the ability to say with joyous defiance, *“This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:24)*. What day is the Psalmist referring to in this verse? Look two verses earlier at verse 22:

*“The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (vv. 22-24).*

What so many thought to be worthless (the life of Christ, and so they discarded it), God raises up and uses as the cornerstone for what He is building. The day He has made is the Day of Resurrection, which makes every day a “TA-DA!” day—a day for rejoicing and celebrating. The joy of the resurrection is so great and timeless that it cannot be confined to one single day.

Martin Luther offers this thought regarding it:

“This is the time of the New Testament, a different day from that which the good sun daily makes. Here the Lord Himself is the Sun. He creates this day with its light and splendor. This day is not followed by night, nor does its light shine into the eyes of the body; it shines into the heart . . . This light teaches grace, peace, and forgiveness of sins before God, of which reason knows nothing . . . This is a happy day, as the psalmist here rejoices and says, ‘Let us be glad!’ The light and teaching of grace gives the heart peace, rest and joy in Christ. It realizes that its sins are without merit, that it is delivered from death, and that in God it forever has a gracious Father through Christ, as St. Paul says (Rom. 5:1): ‘Therefore since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.’ And then he further describes this peace and joy as something that endures in tribulation and gives courage. No unbeliever can know anything of this joy

and peace, nor can those who by their works endeavor to be pious and wipe out their sins . . . What could be more precious and nobler than an enlightened heart, a heart that knows God and all things, a heart that can judge rightly and speak truly in all things before God? Where could there be a higher or greater joy than in a happy, secure and fearless conscience, a conscience that trusts in God and fears neither the world nor the devil?" (Luther's Works, Vol. 14, p. 100).

If, then, there is to be celebration, let it be today. Why wait? So often we fall into the illusion that joy will come. We try to sing "The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow," but it is not only our voice that ends up flat. We go to school and think, "I will be happy tomorrow." Then we graduate and get married. She or he is not exactly what we bargained for and we say, "I will be happy tomorrow." It never ends. Resurrection faith says in the face of it all, "*This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*" We have seen through the eyes of faith what God can do with what others saw as worthless. The day we are in can then be redeemed by this same power.

Can this be said in the presence of tragedy? What I have seen in ministry is that so often it is precisely in these moments that those touched most deeply by suffering experience the joy of hope.

*"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:1-5).*

Jeremy Camp, a Christian songwriter, had only been married for a few months when his wife, Melissa, was diagnosed with cancer. She had come home from the hospital and asked him to get his guitar so that they could sing and worship. The song she wanted him to play was, "For You Are Good." Even in the midst of her dying, Melissa knew that God alone deserved the praise that her heart could offer. Weeks after Melissa's death, Jeremy wrote a song entitled, "I Still Believe":

Scattered words and empty thoughts  
Seem to pour from my heart.  
I've never felt so torn before,  
Seems I don't know where to start.  
But it's now that I feel your grace  
fall like rain From every fingertip,  
washing away my pain.

I still believe in your faithfulness.  
I still believe in your truth.  
I still believe in your Holy Word,  
Even when I don't see, I still believe.

Though the questions still fog up my mind  
With promises, I still seem to bear,  
Even when answers slowly unwind,  
It's my heart I see you prepare.  
But it's now that I feel your grace  
fall like rain From every fingertip,  
washing away my pain.

I still believe in your faithfulness.  
I still believe in your truth.  
I still believe in your Holy Word,  
Even when I don't see, I still believe.

The only place I can go is into your arms,  
Where I throw to you my feeble prayers.  
In brokenness I can see that this was your  
will for me.  
Help me to know you are near.

I still believe in your faithfulness.  
I still believe in your truth.  
I still believe in your Holy Word,  
Even when I don't see, I still believe.

Even in the midst of pain or in days when we are confused and torn, the Cross assures us of God's love, and the empty Tomb proclaims His victory. I love the words from Romans 8:

*"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that has loved us" (v. 37).*

No matter what Satan throws at us, no matter how unfairly the world treats us, we are more than conquerors. We do not merely win out over evil because Christ—He even takes every wound, every hurt, every failure, and

weaves them into the fabric of our life's story. More than conquerors.

Today is the day.

*"This is the day which the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."*

Christ is ready to reveal Himself as the Victor. Today is a "TA-DA!" day!

**Prayer:** Father, this is the day which you have made. I will rejoice and be glad in it.

**Amen.**

**Challenge:** Memorize Psalm 118:24 and repeat it to yourself throughout the day.

**Scripture Reading:** Psalm 118

**From the Book of Concord:** "This faith uplifts, sustains, and gives life to the contrite, according to the passage [Rom. 5:1]: 'Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God.' This faith receives the forgiveness of sins. This faith justifies before God, as the same passage testifies, 'since we are justified by faith.' This faith shows the difference between the contrition of Judas and Saul on the one hand, and Peter and David on the other. The contrition of Judas or Saul was useless for the reason that it lacked the faith that grasps the forgiveness of sins granted on account of Christ" (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XII: Repentance, p. 192:36).

# 47

## Celebrating His Greatness

*“Say among the nations, ‘The Lord reigns.’ The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity. Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy; they will sing before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the people in his truth.” (Psalm 96:10-13)*

Microscopes and telescopes caught my interest as I was growing up. What is not to love for a junior high kid looking through the lens of a microscope and seeing all types of crawling and creepy things? It was as if I was looking at another world within a world. As for the telescope, I stood in wonder looking through it at the vastness of the universe. I suspect that in seventh grade the word “vastness” was not in my vocabulary. “Huge” and “gigundo” are words that better describe my thinking at that time.

Whatever the words, the lens of the microscope and the telescope gave witness to God. Microbes and stars shouted out with His praise:

*“Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy” (Psalm 96: 11-12).*

It is a pretty amazing universe when you think about, where rocks can talk and trees sing and clap their hands (Isaiah 55:12). Just the picture of that in my mind makes me laugh. I especially like the way Psalm 96:11-12 reads in the translation from The Message:

*“Let’s hear it from Sky,  
With Earth joining in,  
And a huge round of applause from Sea.  
Let Wilderness turn cartwheels,*

*Animals, come dance,  
Put every tree of the forest in the choir.”*

Look with me through the lens of a telescope for a moment and behold the wonder of His glory and majesty. If you could travel at the speed of light (186,273 miles per second or 5,874,305,328,000 miles per year—a light year), then you could travel:

- around the Earth at the leisurely pace of seven times in one second.
- to the moon in 1 1/3 seconds.
- from the sun to Earth in 8 1/3 minutes.
- from the sun to Pluto in 5 1/2 hours.
- from the sun to the next star after Pluto in 4 1/3 years.

Gigundo! One more: At the speed of light, you could travel from Earth to the center of the Milky Way in 33,000 years. It is estimated that the Milky Way contains about 100,000,000 stars. It would take you more than 3,000 years to count them at the rate of one per second! That is just our galaxy. There are thousands of others.

*“For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary” (Psalm 96:4-6).*

Now look with me through the lens of a microscope and behold the wonder of His glory and majesty on a smaller but no less grand scale:

- Within the human body, one square inch of skin contains four yards of nerve fibers, 1,300 nerve cells, 100 sweat glands, three million cells and three yards of blood vessels.
- The human eye can distinguish up to one million color surfaces, taking in more information than the world's largest telescope.
- We have over 600 muscles; it takes 10 muscles to smile and 12 to frown. (So smile—it is easier.)
- We make one liter of saliva a day. (This statistic is for the seventh graders reading this who want to gross out their friends.)
- Every person has a unique tongue print.
- In one square inch of our hand we have nine feet of blood vessels, 600 pain sensors, 9,000 nerve endings, 36 heat sensors and 75 pressure sensors.
- The average scalp has 100,000 hairs. Redheads have 80,000 and blondes have the most at 120,000!
- It is normal to lose 100 hairs per day from the scalp. (I think I am above that average.)

Had enough? Oh well, two more: If it were possible to take from an average human body all of its arteries, veins and capillaries and join them end to end, they would stretch over 60,000 miles (the equivalent of two and a half times around the earth). Finally, the small air sacs in your lungs (if you were to cut and lay them flat), could cover half of a tennis court!

*“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. From*

*the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet all flocks and herds, and the beast of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth” (Psalm 8).*

The earth and the universe celebrate the majesty and glory of God. Talking rocks and clapping and singing trees. He is a God that just makes you stand back and smile and stand in awe. The awe of God is different than the fear of God. Fear makes us shrink back while awe draws us in. The awe of God is “to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in common and the simple, to feel in the rush of the passing, the stillness of the eternal” (Heschel, p. 75).

The lens of the microscope and the telescope reveal the glory and wonder of God in fascinating ways. However, they fall woefully short of revealing the most essential things about God. They cannot show me those things that matter eternally. I need a third lens through which I can see God—a lens that reveals to me what the microscope and telescope cannot: His holiness and grace. This is the lens of His Word. Take time to read Psalm 19:1-6. These verses refer to the lens of His creation. Read further, however, and see Him through the lens of His Word:

*“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving*

*joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer” (Psalm 19:7-14).*

The words of that Psalm remind us that the Word of God reveals His law that warns us and convicts us. The same Word reveals His love that forgives us and allows us to call on Jesus as our Redeemer.

It is the Word of God, as Luther says, that is the very “cradle of Christ.” Each page is a lens through which I see Christ and the unfolding plan and wisdom of God.

*“No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him,’ but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2: 7-10).*

The Word of God alone enables me to answer the question that God asked to Adam and Eve in the Garden: “Where are you?” Ever since then, people have been trying to respond and answer that question. Scripture alone is able to give us the answer. It is one that can only be found at the foot of the Cross.

As the Lord is revealed through the lens of His Word, we are then invited to magnify that view through one more lens—the lens of worship.

God-pleasing worship is about Him. When Mary was told that she was pregnant with the Christ, she worshipped. Her first words were, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” What a great definition for worship: “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Helping me to get a handle on this, I find these words helpful from the King James Version of the Bible:

*“Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power; for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created” (Revelation 4:11).*

*“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom and strength, and honour, and glory and blessing . . . Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever” (Revelation 5:12-13).*

“As we worship in this manner, giving careful attention to the details of God’s actions and to his ‘worthiness,’ the good we adore enters our minds and hearts to increase our faith and strengthen us to be as he is” (Willard, p. 178).

Worship focuses on Him. Along with this, He even provides me with the words to offer Him, the water that cleanses, and the bread and wine that nourish me. He gives me the Spirit to enlighten me as to His goodness. It is truly all about Him. He serves me before I can serve Him.

For me, the joy of worship is that it gives me the opportunity to celebrate His goodness and faithfulness with other believers. I hear someone once in a while say, “I can worship God at home or in the woods.” I suppose they are right, but why would you want to, in place of celebrating it with other believers? The questions I want to ask someone who says that are, “Would you want to celebrate

your birthday alone?” “Would you want to celebrate a Super Bowl win alone?” It is only natural that at times of celebration we seek to share that joy. This, to me, is the beauty of congregational worship. It adds to our joy while, at the same time, uniting us as one Body. God asked Israel in the Old Testament to gather together three times a year to celebrate His goodness. Those were festival holidays. Those moments gave them joy and strength and unity.

The Christian Church of the twenty-first century needs this no less. One of our most enticing mission responses that we can offer the world is the witness of believers in the celebration of worship.

On a clear night, look up at the stars and try to count them. Stand in awe of Him. Look at your eye in the mirror. Your retina is thinner than paper, yet its tiny surface contains 137 million light-sensitive cells. Blink your eyes in wonder. Then look into His Word and see Him on the Cross. He is there for you. See the empty Tomb. You need not fear the grave any longer. Then, with other believers, let your soul magnify Him in worship.

**Prayer:** I stand in awe of all that you have created. The universe declares your glory. Even greater, though, I stand at the foot of the Cross in awe and wonder of your mercy and love for me. All praise be to you, O Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

**Challenge:** Make a list of the top ten things you see today that demonstrate the wonder and majesty of God. Give God thanks for each of these and, above all others, express to Him what the Cross means to you.

**Scripture Reading:** Psalm 19

**From the Book of Concord:** “The chief articles of our Christian faith constrain and compel us to maintain this distinction. First, in the article of creation, Scripture testifies not only that God created human nature before the fall but also that even after the fall it remains the creature and work of God (Deut. 32[:6]; Isa. 45[:11]; 54[:5]; 64[:8]; Acts 17[:25, 26]; Rev. 4[:11]).

“‘Your hands,’ Job said, ‘fashioned and made me; and now you turn and destroy me. Remember that you fashioned me like clay; and will you turn me to dust again? Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese? You clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews. You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit’ (Job 10[:8–12]).

“‘I praise you,’ says David, ‘for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed’ (Ps. 139[:14–16]),

In Ecclesiastes 12[:7] it is written, ‘The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it.’

“These verses testify clearly that even after the fall God is the creator of human beings and fashions the human body and soul. Therefore, the corrupted human being cannot be sin itself, without any distinction between the two. Otherwise, God would be a creator of sin. This is also confessed in our Small Catechism, in the explanation of the first article, where it is written, ‘I

believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties.’ Likewise, it is written in the Large Catechism [‘Creed,’ 13], ‘I hold and believe that I am God’s creature; that is, that he has given me and constantly sustains my body, soul, and life, my members great and small, all my senses, my reason and understanding,’ etc. It is of course true that this creature and handiwork of God is tragically corrupted by sin, since the *massa* [lump] from which God forms and makes the human being is corrupted and perverted in Adam and is bequeathed to us.

“Here upright Christian hearts should remember the indescribable goodness of God, that God does not cast such a corrupted, perverted, sinful *massa* immediately into the fires of hell. Instead, out of it God makes and fashions human nature as it now is, so tragically corrupted by sin, so that he might cleanse, sanctify, and save it through his dear Son” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article I: Original Sin, pp. 537-538.34-39).

# 48

## Celebrating the Carefree Life

*“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:4-7)*

### The Cookie Thief

A woman was waiting at an airport one night with several long hours before her flight.

She hunted for a book in the airport shop, bought a bag of cookies, and found a place to drop.

She was engrossed in her book but happened to see, that the man beside her, as bold as could be, grabbed a cookie or two from the bag between, which she tried to ignore, to avoid a scene.

She read, munched cookies, and watched the clock, as the gutsy “cookie thief” diminished her stock.

She was getting more irritated as the minutes ticked by, thinking, “If I wasn’t so nice, I’d blacken his eye!”

With each cookie she took, he took one too. When only one was left, she wondered what he’d do.

With a smile on his face and a nervous laugh, he took the last cookie and broke it in half.

He offered her half as he ate the other. She snatched it from him and thought, “Oh brother—

This guy has some nerve, and he’s also rude. Why, he didn’t even show any gratitude!”

She had never known when she had been so galled, and sighed with relief when her flight was called.

She gathered her belongings and headed for the gate, refusing to look back at the “thieving ingrate.”

She boarded the plane and sank in her seat, then sought her book, which was almost complete.

As she reached in her baggage, she gasped with surprise. There was her bag of cookies in front of her eyes!

“If mine are here,” she moaned with despair, “then the others were his, and he tried to share!”

Too late to apologize, she realized with grief, that she was the rude one, the ingrate, the thief.

(Author unknown.)

That story reminds me that sometimes in life you just have to laugh at yourself and not take yourself too seriously. Being carefree is no easy thing. There is a lot that bogs us down with the cares of the day. This is what I love about God’s Word. It can be so deep while, at the same time, so practical.

*“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”* But is that practical? Paul continues, “. . . *Do not be anxious about anything.*” I kind of like the way the King James Version expresses it: *“Be careful for nothing.”* That is actually a way of

expressing the negative side of “rejoicing.” Paul says that the way in which we can rejoice is to be “full of care about nothing” (don’t become filled with anxiety). Jesus was getting at the same thought when He taught:

*“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?” (Matthew 6:25).*

Both Paul and Jesus use the same word for “anxious.” When you look closely at what Jesus is saying, isn’t He teaching us to not get all hung up about all the daily necessities that so often occupy our minds, such as the clothes we have or don’t have? So much time and so much energy spent being full of care on things that, in the end, rob us of joy. It is hard, though, to break those thoughts. We have been trained since childhood to think just the opposite.

As my girls would go off to school or out with their friends, I said what every dad says: “Be careful.” Being full of care for nothing does not mean that we are careless. It does mean, however, that we rely on God to provide, rather than constantly worrying about it ourselves. We are able to relax our minds and our hearts, knowing that we are in His hands.

It is no accident, having said that we should be full of care for nothing, that Paul then says:

*“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6).*

The best way I know how to deal with worry is to stop focusing on me and to begin focusing on God. And the best way I know how to do that is in prayer and in worship. The result will be that God’s peace, beyond

my understanding, will guard my heart and mind and keep watch over me. His peace then helps me to let my mind and heart be at rest. I find it intriguing that the original language for “guard” is a military term for “sentry,” one who keeps watch over something valuable.

Rejoice. Relax. Rest. These three make it possible for me to celebrate.

I wish I could say that joy comes simply through prayer and telling ourselves not to worry. It isn’t that easy. You know that, and I know that. I am saved by grace and grace alone. I have no part in that whatsoever. This does not mean, however, that once I am in the faith God does not have certain expectations of me. Living with a spirit of joy and celebration is rooted in the peace that God alone provides me. Yet Paul, in the way of a command, places this right at our feet:

*“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4: 8-9).*

Each day, we are faced with decisions as to what we will allow our minds to focus on. I cannot expect my day or my heart to be filled with joy if I choose to let my mind dwell on sinful or ungodly thoughts, or if I fill my calendar and time with issues that have no eternal significance.

*“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace . . .” (Galatians 5:22),* but the soil of my heart is cultivated and nourished day by day with those things that I think and dwell on in my life.

Paul’s teaching is not easy, but it is right on the mark when he guides us to re-direct our focus and thinking. I really like the way in which Richard Foster expresses it in “Celebration of Discipline” when he writes:

“The decision to set the mind on the higher things of life is an act of the will. That is why celebration is a Discipline. It is not something that falls on our heads. It is the result of a consciously chosen way of thinking and living. When we choose this way, the healing and redemption in Christ will break into the inner recesses of our lives and relationships, and the inevitable result will be joy” (p. 195).

Joy begins in the heart. All of our efforts will not give joy to life if the heart is not right. The only way to make the heart right is when we are covered in the righteousness of Jesus. If we are not right in Him and with Him, there will be no joy.

*A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit . . . All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast” (Proverbs 15:13, 15).*

While His righteousness gives me joy, I must remain alert. I know all too well that there is someone worse than the cookie thief who wants nothing less than to steal away the peace and joy I have in Jesus. Satan will seek to do this by filling my mind with worry. My confidence, however, rests in knowing that God’s peace, like a military sentry, will patrol the boundaries of my mind and keep me in Christ Jesus.

**Prayer:** Jesus, may the peace that you alone give guard my heart and mind in you this day. May your peace that passes my understanding halt every anxious thought from entering.  
**Amen.**

**Challenge:** What will you allow your mind to dwell on this day? Try to focus on those things that are “true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable and praiseworthy.”

#### **Scripture Reading: Philippians 4**

**From the Book of Concord:** “‘Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.’ In chapter 5[:1] he says: ‘Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God,’ that is, we have tranquil and joyful consciences before God. And in Romans 10[:10]: ‘For one believes with the heart and so is justified.’ Here he states that faith is the righteousness of the heart. Galatians 2[:16]: ‘And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by . . . works of the law.’ Ephesians 2[:8–9]: ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast’” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV: Justification, p. 136.91-93).

# 40 Celebrating God's Handkerchiefs

*"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'" (Revelation 21:1-4)*

What does a "saint" look like to you? What would be the words that you would use to describe one? When I ask that question to various classes, the responses I get back often include words like "holy," "good," "Christ-like," "God-fearing." You get the idea. All good answers. The Greek word for saint, *hagios*, refers to "separate from common condition and use; pure; righteous."

Those are helpful definitions, but I especially like the one that Frederick Buechner wrote:

*"In His holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called Saints" (2004, p. 352).*

What a marvelous picture of those saints God places in our lives. Add this thought to your pondering as well:

*"God, the shy and proper lover whose heart has been stolen away by the world, drops a handkerchief in the pure, naïve hope that the world, that someone, will notice and pick it up and give it back and in so doing notice God and fall madly in love with God and talk with God, laugh with God, cry with God, even fight with God and fall asleep in His embrace" (Buechner, 1993.)*

If it seems like a stretch to picture God as our lover who longs to be one with us, consider how often He refers to us as being His bride:

*"I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (Isaiah 61:10-11).*

*"As a young man married a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride so will your God rejoice over you" (Isaiah 62:5).*

*"Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7).*

*"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with me, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more*

*death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true . . . Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Revelation 21: 2-5, 9).*

God has a wedding on His mind. He cannot get it off His mind. He talks about it all the time in Scripture. His love for His Church, His holy and beautiful bride, is passionate like that of a lover. It is a theme woven into the fabric of Scripture as each page points toward the wedding that will be celebrated in heaven. It is not always a joyful theme. Much of the story of the Bible is one that is filled with great heartache. Listen to this love letter He writes to His wayward and unfaithful beloved, the nation of Israel, as He tries to woo them back to His love:

*"Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt. 'In that day,' declares the Lord, 'you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master.' . . . I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord. 'In that day I will respond,' declares the Lord—'I will respond to the skies, and they will respond to the earth; and the earth will respond to the grain, the new wine and oil, and they will respond to Jezreel. I will plant her for myself in the land; I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one.' I will*

*say to those called, 'Not my people,' 'You are my people'; and they will say, 'You are my God'" (Hosea 2:14-16, 19-23).*

The story of Scripture is the story of God seeking to gain the attention of His people, enticing them back to His love. "God, the shy and proper lover" seeks to win over His people once again. "*How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?*" (Hosea 11:8) is the plea of God heard through the prophet Hosea.

God is Almighty. He is Lord of the Universe. Yet, He will not force His way or His love upon you. "God, the shy and proper lover" will seek to catch your attention through what Frederick Buechner calls a "holy flirtation."

Many of us are too young to remember the days of dropping the handkerchief. The idea was simple: A woman conveniently drops her hanky to the ground. A gentleman notices this and stoops down to pick it up. As he hands it to her, their eyes meet and lock for that moment. She has his attention, and soon his love.

God has dropped many, many, many handkerchiefs into the world, hoping that the world would notice. Some of those handkerchiefs have been soaked with God's tears, such as those shed over the blood of Abel spilled onto the ground and all the persecuted who would follow.

*"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10).*

Stephen was one of God's dropped handkerchiefs. His life bore testimony to the very love and forgiveness of Jesus. A man by the name of Saul took notice of this. He would not, however, celebrate the gift at that time, but would assist in stoning Stephen by holding onto the coats who hurled the stones (Acts 7:58).

God dropped His handkerchiefs as He sent one prophet after another to catch the attention of His unfaithful lover, Israel. Time

after time, however, his “holy flirtation” was only to be picked up and flung in a furious and hateful swell of rage and anger. Instead of celebrating these gifts, the world would, as God’s unfaithful lover, reject them while they chased after other lovers.

Sometimes the handkerchiefs God dropped were so young and so fresh. Samuel was called as a young boy, and David was chosen among all of his older and stronger brothers. These, too, were the ways in which God sought to catch the attention of His lover.

There were times, as well, when the handkerchiefs held a sweet fragrance. The scent left from those whose lives radiated with the aroma of His love by means of their sacrificial gifts and actions. The woman with the alabaster jar, the widow and her mite, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who lovingly wrapped the body of Jesus in clean linen—they were among those fragrant handkerchiefs that God dropped into this world, all in the hope of catching the eye of His lover.

*“Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8).*

When the world would not take notice, God then dropped His very best and most personal Handkerchief—His own Son. This was the One who carried the very fragrance of God Himself. This Handkerchief was marked by His love and holiness. This was the One that God dropped in the hopes that finally He would catch the attention of the one He loved. Jesus expressed this hope in one of His parables, shortly before His crucifixion:

*“Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent*

*other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” (Matthew 21: 33-40).*

When finally this pure and clean Handkerchief of God had been stained with blood, they would lay Him in a grave. Wrapping Him in linens, ironically, they would place over His face a “handkerchief” or a “napkin.” When He arose, we are told:

*“Simon Peter arrived after him, entered the tomb, observed the linen cloths lying there, and the kerchief used to cover his head not lying with the linen cloths but separate, neatly folded by itself” (John 20: 6-7 MSG).*

I have always found it curious and humorous to think of Jesus rising up through the grave cloths and then neatly folding the face cloth to the side as if to make a little statement there in the tomb: “TA-DA!”

I am reminded of that little face cloth each time communion is offered and the cloth, or as some call it the “purificator,” is used to wipe the chalice. This is not the intent of this cloth, yet it reminds me of a God who is deeply in love. It gives silent witness to God who seeks to catch the eye of His lover, His holy bride, the Church. In this sense, communion is like that of a wedding rehearsal dinner where we celebrate a foretaste of the wedding feast that is yet to come when “God, the shy and proper lover” will be joined forever with His bride.

Over the years, God has continued to carry out His “holy flirtation” with the world. A study of world history reveals many “handkerchiefs” that God has used to

catch the eye and heart of His bride. There is great merit in taking time to study the lives and service of people like Martin Luther, Chuck Colson, Florence Nightingale, Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Lincoln, George Washington Carver, and Anne Sullivan. God has made Himself known through all of these and so many others. God's desire is that others would notice Him and that they would be joined as one through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Who are the handkerchiefs that God is dropping in the world today? Who are the handkerchiefs that God has dropped into your life—those saints through whom God has sought to catch your eye and your heart? There are a few whose names come to my mind very quickly—those people who are so filled with grace that in their presence I have been drawn closer to God and have grown deeper in love with Him as a result.

*“Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) Then the angel said to me, ‘Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’” And he added, ‘These are the true words of God’” (Revelation 19:7-9).*

The wedding plans are under way. The banquet is being prepared. God is sending us out as His invitations, asking the world to share in His joy and eternal fellowship with Him. You and I are carriers of those

invitations. One person at a time, will you join in the “Ablaze! Initiative” of sharing the Gospel with 100 million people by the year 2017?

*“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:18-21).*

“God, the shy and proper lover” is still seeking to catch the attention of His bride and His lover. Our lives have been blessed by those handkerchiefs He has dropped along our path to catch our attention. Now it is His desire to use you in the same way, in the hopes that through your life and witness others might “notice God and fall madly in love with God and talk with God, laugh with God, cry with God, even fight with God and fall asleep in His embrace.”

**Prayer:** Father, I thank you for all those whose lives and service have caused me to notice you and to fall in love with you. As you desire, I am willing to be used in this same way to draw someone's eyes toward you. **Amen.**

**Challenge:** Who has been a “handkerchief” of God in your life? If possible, let them know. Buy a handkerchief and give it to them as a way of thanking them.

**Scripture Reading:** Revelation 19-21

**From the Book of Concord:** “Our confession approves giving honor to the saints. This honor is threefold. The first is thanksgiving: we ought to give thanks to God because he has given examples of his mercy, because he has shown that he wants to save humankind, and because he has given teachers and other gifts to the church. Since these are the greatest gifts, they ought to be extolled very highly, and we ought to praise the saints themselves for faithfully using these gifts just as Christ praises faithful managers [Matt. 25:21, 23]. The second kind of veneration is the strengthening of our faith. When we see Peter forgiven after his denial, we, too, are encouraged to believe that grace truly superabounds much more over sin [Rom. 5:20]. The third honor is imitation: first of their faith, then of their other virtues, which people should imitate according to their callings. The opponents do not require these true honors. They only argue about invocation, which, even if it were not dangerous, is certainly not necessary.

**In Your Own Words:** Write below or in the margins the key thought or lesson you have learned in this chapter on Celebrate and/or a thought you would like to explore further.

# 50 Living with Hearts Ablaze

*“They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us? They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, ‘It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon. Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.’” (Luke 24:32-35)*

They ran down the road like those who know the privilege of carrying the Olympic Torch. The flame they carried, however, was burning within their heart.

It was not that long before that they had just walked this road. At the beginning of that journey, the flame in their heart was barely flickering and beginning to fade. As He walked with them, His teaching began to rekindle that flame. Then, as they sat at the table with Him, He broke bread and their eyes were opened. They recognized Him. In the breaking of the bread, He made Himself known. Then He disappeared. He was still present, just no longer visible to them.

Filled with joy and wonder, they sat there looking at each other. I would not be surprised if they weren't thinking, “What just happened? Did you see what I saw?” Then the question recorded in Scripture: *“Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”*

A fire had been set ablaze within their hearts. This fire would not be extinguished. As is fire's nature, this fire would consume them—not in a destructive way, but in a purifying fashion. This fire could not be contained. It had to spread. How can you possibly keep this inside of you? They went back to their friends. They had to know.

Those who have recognized Jesus in the breaking of bread know the need to tell someone the Good News. Those who have learned of Christ as He is revealed in His Word understand the urgency of going and sharing the Good News with friends and neighbors. How can a believer be silent?

The four lepers understood how good news compels one to not be silent. In 2 Kings 6-7, King Benhadad of Aramea had laid siege to the city of Samaria. The people were starving. Some people were so hungry and desperate that they were killing and eating their own children. Who can imagine the horror of a situation like this? In Chapter 7 we read of four lepers at the city gates. They realized that they would die anyway, and so they decided to go for broke and surrender.

*“Why stay here until we die? If we say, ‘We’ll go into the city’—the famine is there, and we will die. And if we stay here, we will die. So let’s go over to the camp of the Arameans and surrender. If they spare us, we live; if they kill us, then we die” (vv. 3-5).*

They entered the camp of the Aramean army to surrender. In the meantime, the Bible reveals that God had caused Benhadad and all of his army to hear the sound of hoofbeats and the rolling chariots of a mighty army

coming. Frightened, they reasoned that Israel had signed a treaty with Egypt and that the Egyptian army was coming to Israel's aid. They fled for their lives, leaving behind tables full of food and other treasures. These four lepers walked into the enemy camp to surrender and no one was there. They went into the tents of the enemy and saw tables full of food. They were starving and so they feasted. Later they found silver and gold and fine clothing. They began to carry it away for themselves. Then after a while they said to each other,

*"We're not doing right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight, punishment will overtake us. Let's go at once and report this to the royal palace" (v. 9).*

So they ran back to the city and told the people the good news. The people thought it was too good to be true. They sent spies to investigate. Sure enough, the enemy was gone. The starving city came out and there was enough food for everyone.

How can you keep that kind of news to yourself? Even more so, how could these two men in Emmaus keep the Good News to themselves? They have news that will do more than satisfy the bodily hunger of a city. They have news that will satisfy the spiritual hunger of a world. It is unthinkable that they would not want to immediately tell everyone they knew.

They returned to Jerusalem: "It is true! The Lord has risen!" Out of breath but full of joy, they excitedly shared with the eleven and those gathered what they had seen and heard.

*"While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a*

*ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.' When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, 'Do you have anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence. He said to them, 'This is what I told you while I was still with you; everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.' Then he opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures. He told them, 'This is what is written: 'The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.' You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high'" (Luke 24:36-49).*

The fire that was burning in the heart of these two men was beginning to spread. There in that locked room, Christ unlocked the storehouse of God's riches. Peace, joy, hope and a sense of purpose are the gifts of God at Christ's expense. He had paid the price. Now, they could be at peace because Jesus had overcome the world.

There is a great visual reminder of this in Rockefeller Center, New York City. At the entrance of the GE Building (formerly the RCA Building) is a huge statue of Atlas struggling to keep the world on his shoulders. Across the street in Saint Patrick's Cathedral behind the altar is a small statue of Jesus effortlessly holding the whole world in one hand.

Peace is not easy when we strive to balance the world on our own backs. But we don't need to. Jesus invites us to cast the weight of the world into His hands where He holds it with ease. Along with peace, the

disciples were overcome with joy. So joyous were they that they had a hard time believing at first. *“And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement . . . .”* Have you ever had trouble believing the Good News of His love and grace for you because of the sheer joy of it? The joy of the believer is one of the most influential and convincing proofs of faith. Malcom Muggeridge was a Marxist before he became a Christian. During the Cold War he traveled to Russia to write a story about the Communist party and the decline of religion in that atheistic regime. After conducting a series of interviews with officials in the Kremlin, he attended a Russian Orthodox Easter service. The church was packed. At the close of the service the priest announced, “Christ is risen!” and the people shouted back, “He is risen indeed!” Muggeridge looked into their faces and instantly realized that they were right and Stalin was wrong. He said it was the reality of their joy that tipped the scales of his soul toward Christ.

The reality of Christian joy is compelling. The joy of the believer, be it in persecution or in times of suffering or in great celebration, is one of the most winsome qualities of the Christian witness and life.

The room was ablaze. It was ablaze with peace and joy like they had never known. What fueled all of this was nothing less than hope. Everything that was written about Jesus had come to pass. Everything Jesus said was fulfilled.

*“He said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms’” (v. 44).*

They could trust the Word. It had not let them down. Christian hope is not mere wishful thinking. Christian hope is the certainty and assurance of what cannot yet be seen but is known without a doubt through the

Word of God. As John Maxwell describes it:

What Does Hope Do For Mankind?

Hope shines brightest when the hour is darkest.

Hope motivates when discouragement comes.

Hope energizes when the body is tired.

Hope sweetens while bitterness bites.

Hope sings when all melodies are gone.

Hope believes when evidence is eliminated.

Hope listens for answers when no one is talking.

Hope climbs over obstacles when no one is helping.

Hope endures hardship when no one is caring.

Hope smiles confidently when no one is laughing.

Hope reaches for answers when no one is asking.

Hope presses toward victory when no one is encouraging.

Hope dares to give when no one is sharing.

Hope brings the victory when no one is winning.

The hearts of those in the room were on fire. It was a fire fueled by the peace that Christ was giving them. It was fueled by the fullness of joy that is only found in the emptiness of a tomb. It was fueled by a hope that God’s Word cannot be stopped. Fire like this, however, is all consuming. It cannot be contained. Jesus does not want it to be contained.

*“You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (vv. 48-49).*

Their mission was to the world. They were called to carry that flame burning within their heart to a world lost in darkness. It is the mission before you and me today. What is

the fire burning within your heart? I believe that within each of us there is a flame we carry wherever we go. What fuels the fire?

A.W. Tozer once wrote, “To derail us, all Satan needs to do is minimize our passion for two things—the person of God and the place of God” (Alcorn, p. 6). I believe that. So often God does not have my full attention or devotion. My passion for Him can so quickly get minimized and marginalized by the demands and expectations of so many others. So often the place of God is not my first love. God takes on second or third place all too quickly when my day or my week is full of other demands. The world and the things of the world have a way of dampening that fire.

The resurrected Christ places before us a mission that deserves and demands our all. He is not looking for lukewarm Christians, but those who are red-hot for His mission. His mission leaves each of us with a choice: “We face a choice to be worldly Christians or world Christians” (Minatrea, p. 5). Jesus prayed about this very thing in the Garden:

*“My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (John 17:15-18).*

It is an awesome task. It is an even more awesome privilege that He has entrusted to us. One message—Christ the Lord! Do you know of any other way, any other truth, any other life? One mission—Ablaze!—dedicated to sharing the Gospel with 100 million unreached or uncommitted people by the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

Yes, it seems like a huge undertaking. As I wrote at the beginning of these devotions, my first reaction to the Ablaze! Initiative was to laugh in disbelief. So did Sarah and Abraham when they heard that they would have a baby about the time they were getting

ready for a retirement center.

On our own, it is impossible. We will never even get out of the gate. We do not have to do it alone. We cannot do it alone.

*“You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:48-49).*

Ten days after Jesus ascended, the Spirit came as promised upon these timid, confused disciples. The world was transformed. It wasn't due to them. It was and is the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the One who first disturbed them out of their comfort zone and then empowered them to carry the flame of the Gospel to a dark and cold world. That same promise is given to you and me and the Church today. It is time for the Church to celebrate anew the gift and blessing of Pentecost—the outpouring of the Spirit upon His holy bride, the Church.

Let the celebration begin by rededicating ourselves to responding to His Great Commission, first by *learning* and *praying*. Then, let us put our learning and prayers into action by *telling* and *giving*. Pray on behalf of His bride that she might be disturbed out of her apathy and comfort zone and be known as a *sending* Church, where believers are missionaries as much as they are members, *going* wherever God sends them. Then as the lost souls are saved and lives transformed, let His Holy Nation, the priesthood of believers, join with God and all the company of heaven, *celebrating* over each soul that returns home.

To God Alone Be The Glory!

**Prayer:** Father, in the Resurrection of your Son, you have lit a fire within my heart. Your Spirit has ignited me with His love, peace, joy and hope. Help me carry that flame into the lost and darkened world that I enter into now. In all that I do and in all that I say, may your name be glorified and honored. Through Jesus I ask this. **Amen.**

**Challenge:** Throughout the day today, and every day for the rest of your life, ask yourself, “What is the fire in my heart?” As you are going, carry the flame of His love and make disciples.

**Scripture Reading:** John 1

**From the Book of Concord:** “‘Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God,’ that is, we have tranquil and joyful consciences before God. And in Romans 10[:10]: ‘For one believes with the heart and so is justified.’ Here he states that faith is the righteousness of the heart. Galatians 2[:16]: ‘And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by . . . works of the law.’ Ephesians 2[:8–9]: ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.’

“John 1[:12–13]: ‘But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.’ John 3[:14–16]: ‘And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may . . . not perish but may have eternal life’ Likewise [John 3:17–18], ‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned’” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV: Justification, p. 136.91-94).

*Disturb us, Lord,  
when we are too well pleased with ourselves;  
when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little;  
when we arrive safely because we sailed too close to the shore.*

*Disturb us, Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess  
we have lost our thirst for the Waters of Life;  
having fallen in love with life, we have ceased to dream of eternity;  
and in our efforts to build a new earth,  
we have allowed our vision of the new heaven to dim.*

*Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,  
to venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery;  
where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.  
We ask you to push back the horizons of our hopes,  
and to push us in the future with strength, courage, hope and love.*

*(Sir Francis Drake)*