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First Christian Church
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Live Joyfully

Isaiah 52:1-3, 7-10 Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion! Put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for the uncircumcised and the unclean shall enter you no more. 2 Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem; loose the bonds from your neck, O captive daughter Zion!... 7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." 8 Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. 9 Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. 10 The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Isaiah 65:17-19a For behold I create new heavens and a new earth.... be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. 19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people.

Have any of you heard the story of the precocious little girl who was gathered one Christmas afternoon with all her extended family? I suspect some of you can imagine that scene in your mind's eye from your own experience – folks bloated from indulging and over-indulging in all the Christmas goodies that conspire against our waistlines this time of year, various folks who – like in every family – have their quirks and foibles but who love each other nonetheless even if they have determined they really do need to not talk politics, the extroverts more and more energized with each conversation and the introverts looking for places to hide, and the tree that had been so pretty with packages and ribbons and tinsel now looking a little forlorn with the debris of joyous present-opening spread about. Now imagine you hear one of those kindly aunts or uncles there turn to the little girl and say *"Did you get everything you wanted for*

*Christmas?” , and listen to how that small but wise one answers, “No, but then, after all, it’s not **MY** birthday, is it?”*

I’ve told this story to some of you before, but when I was four-years-old, it was my birthday, and my parents had planned a Saturday morning birthday party and had invited about a dozen of my friends. And my mother used to delight in telling the story of how, fifteen minutes before the appointed hour, I stood up at the screen door of that little house in Ft. Worth, Texas, peering outside and swiveling my head to look up and down the sidewalks, and saying in a loud and whiny voice *“Where are all my present-bringers!?!”*

That little girl at that Christmas gathering was wiser than I was, for while it was my birthday indeed, it would take me many more years to realize that the largest joy of Christmas, or birthdays, or any occasion for presents is not so much in the receiving, but in the glories of giving – and that even when it was my turn to receive, the greatest present of all was to see the joy that the giver takes in giving. Am I not right? Don’t you just shiver a little in expectation and glee when you are convinced that you have found the perfect present for someone, something that he or she will take joy from? And isn’t part of the wonder of that moment the fact that your recipient not only is indeed delighted by what you give but also delighted by the joy it gives you to give?

Do you know why God gave us Jesus? Do you know why God gave those uncounted expressions of grace going back to the Hebrew people and continuing through Christ and even to this very moment? It is because God too takes delight, takes joy, in giving. And, what’s more, God takes delight in our delight, joy in our joy. Did you hear how the prophet Isaiah put it, oh-so-simply, speaking for God? *“I am*

*about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people....” I will **delight** in my people.* The gift of Christ, the gift of that light that shines even when things seem darkest, that light that cannot, will not be put out, is an expression of a God who never ceases in taking joy and delight in giving, and who wants to delight in us. They are such powerful words – **joy and delight**. Not mere pleasure, not just a sense of mild satisfaction, but sheer joy, effusive delight! God wants us to take joy in our lives, God wants us to find purpose, God wants us to know promise and sends Christ to show us how. Now, God weeps, yes, God surely weeps, when human beings reject that gift, or when they turn that delight into dirges, or when they do evil in horrific ways.

But the good news, the unstinting, unending, not-to-be-extinguished good news of Christmas morning is that God has not and will not give up seeking to grace our lives and the life of this world, seeking to bring good from evil, seeking to overcome poverty of every sort with fullness, seeking to engender hope in the hopeless and hurting. That is who God is, that is what Christ showed us, and it is God’s continuing desire that joy and delight will be both God’s companion and our companions on our journey together.

The thesaurus would tell you that the opposite of “joy” is “sorrow.” But I don’t think that’s right. And it was Linus who taught me something this week in that clip from “*A Charlie Brown Christmas*” that I had seen a thousand times, but which hit me with something new this week; watch it with me: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKk9rv2hUfA> Linus does something in his recitation of those ancient words that is crucial. Did you notice it? The climactic words of this story are these: “fear not,” and when he says

those words, **Linus drops his blanket**¹ - perhaps for the only time in any of the Charlie Brown cartoons. And in that moment he teaches us that it is not sorrow that is the opposite of joy, it's fear. Fear. But he also teaches you and me that we too can drop our blankets and live defying the fear that so enervates us sometimes. We too can drop the blanket of cynicism that we have used to protect ourselves against the world's hurts. We too can drop the blanket of an old resentment that we have snuggled up to for far too long. We too can drop the blanket of suspiciousness of the stranger remembering that our lives, our country's life, and our faith have all been strengthened and made nobler through the gifts of those who are "different."

Each of these blankets that we wrap ourselves in keeps joy at bay. It's oh-so-hard to be joyful if you live fearfully, cynically, resentfully, suspiciously. But we don't have to live that way and we too can drop our blankets and seek to act out the joy that Christ comes to bring us on this day. How? Well, let us return to that precocious little girl's observation, "*After all, it's not MY birthday,*" and ask, as that lovely Christmas song asks, *What can I give Him*" – for after all, it **IS** indeed his birthday. Well, my answer is this: What we can give to Jesus – and how you and I will more fully be able to know joy – is to seek to ever more fully make this a world of delight for ourselves and for others. We can hug our children tighter. We can resolve to make sure that we do just a little more to hasten the day when **no** child goes un-hugged and un-loved. We can remember in our prayers and our gifts and our words that the children of Aleppo and too many other places are just as deserving of grace and hope and peace as was that

¹It was the Rev. Bosco Peters who pointed this out earlier this week:
<https://twitter.com/Liturgy/status/812108317413646338>

other refugee child born so long ago in a manger on this day. We can say “I’m sorry” when we have hurt. We can stake out a portion of every day where we do nothing but give thanks for the things that grace our lives, and we can decide how we can do just a little bit more to help those whose lives are more grind than grace. Those are the sorts of things we can give Him. In doing so we will be following the lead of our God, our Christ, who always patiently, persistently, and powerfully keeps on offering love to a sometimes loved-starved world, Who keeps on offering the choice for joy.

For it IS Christ’s birthday and we are indeed His present-bringers, following in the footsteps of those shepherds, those Wise Men, and those men and women and children in every age who have turned away from fear, who have taken delight in the Good News and brought their gifts, their words, their actions, their attitudes joyously and generously. For fear not – for unto us is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Merry Christmas!