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***The Joy of the LORD is Your Strength***

- 1. May our celebration point us to the joy that we have in Jesus.***
- 2. May our lives reflect a renewed joy in our salvation.***

*Let us pray: Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Amen.*

Coming home for Christmas can be a special thing. To go back home (or welcome home children after they are all grown up) can be a very special part of the holidays. The familiar sights and smells bring back memories. Maybe it is the smell of the tree that is cut down and dragged into the house every year. Or maybe it is the sight of that same old tree which was once again brought out of storage and trimmed with familiar ornaments. Some of those ornaments may even share their own unique memories. A plate of those tasty treats is out once more in the very same spot just like it is every year and the anticipation is building for that traditional annual banquet that will be spread out before those gathered around that same table at Christmas time. But it is not just the smells of the season, or the sights that we see, or the songs that we sing that can bring back a flood of memories, but it's also the people that we meet. At this time of year there is the custom of a reconnection with family, with relatives and friends, and often these visits are wrapped up warmly in the revisiting of old familiar traditions.

A warm roar of nostalgia rises like a welcoming fire as memories are rekindled and old traditions are dusted off and brought out once more for this special time of year.

The days leading up to Christmas have certainly become wrapped up in such displays of happy tradition. But as is the reminder around this time of year each year, let us never forget the reason for the season, the reason for the traditions, the reason for the real joy in our celebration. Our joy comes from the good news of salvation through Jesus, our Savior. That joy lifts our spirits in these happy times and that joy of the LORD is there to lift us up in the not so happy times too. For the Joy of the LORD is your strength. May our celebration point us to the joy that we have in Jesus. May our lives reflect a renewed joy in our salvation.

Our lesson reminds us of time when God's children had come home, they had returned home to Judah and Jerusalem. The first group that had returned was led by Zerubbabel and they had, by God's direction and grace, restored the temple. About 80 years later Ezra and Nehemiah were part of the effort to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. God's people had returned home, they familiar sights and sounds of the temple had been restored for them, and now they were in the midst of rebuilding this broken city. Ezra, the scribe, and Nehemiah, the governor, were overseeing the rebuilding of the holy city of Jerusalem and the rebirth of a nation. As they had rebuilt the walls, they were also seeking to fully rebuild a connection between the people and the LORD. And so they dusted off some old and useful traditions. They began reading from God's Word. And as they were reading through the Law it must have started as this very warm and wonderful thing. Very likely a warm rush of nostalgia came over the people as they pulled out the scrolls in order to listen to and to hear the Word of the LORD in this home of the forefathers. But as they listened to the Word they were reminded of some terrible things. The ugly unfaithfulness of God's people, the commandments that were broken, the Word of God that was neglected and disregarded. It very likely would have reminded them of why God's people had been exiled in the first place. Those who had come home were suddenly confronted by how their forefathers had mistreated their Heavenly Father: the past idolatry, the rampant unfaithfulness. And as these people heard the word of the Law they were also confronted by their own sins, their own unfaithfulness, their own neglect of God's Word, their own current immorality, and their own doubt and lack of trust in God. And so as the people heard this Word of the Law read and proclaimed tears came to their eyes. They wept over sin. They mourned as they were filled with sorrow and regret.

Sometimes we come back home for Christmas and the memories are not always so warm and wonderful. Joyous memories are often rivaled by at least a few things that you would like to forget. It's good to see family. The same sights and sounds are there to bring cheer, but past deeds or tragic events are sometimes brought back to the surface. Your sin or the sin that touched your life is revisited. And so these words of God before us today speak to our hearts just as they did in Nehemiah's day. We are reminded of the sorrow and pain that sin brings, tears of sorrow may even fill your eyes, but God comforts us as he brings us His word of joy. When the sins of the past haunt you, when sin-filled situations in the present trouble you, when pain and sorrow disturb your heart may the LORD put these Words of His on our hearts and minds. ***"Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."*** The joy of the LORD is your strength. We have reason to celebrate, we have reason to rejoice, and it is not only because of the happy hijinks of children gathered for Christmas pageants or the cheerful greetings and glad happy meetings that will soon be here. But most importantly we have lasting joy in Jesus, and no one can ever change that or take that away because our joy is found in the things that

our God has done for us in Christ. And so may our celebrations serve to point us to the joy we have in Jesus and renew in us the joy of our salvation.

For the LORD God himself came down to this earth and he became one of us. The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. Like all Old Testament Festivals, this festival of booths, or as it is also called, the feast of tabernacles, served to point the people both to the past and to the coming Christ. This feast of Tabernacles served as a reminder that God dwelt among his people in the wilderness and so graciously provided for them. But it is also foreshadowed how God would come and make his dwelling among his people. God would take on flesh and take on a temporary dwelling among us so that we would have eternal joy. Our God who provides for us, would provide for our greatest need; a Savior, who would forgive our sins and enable us to take up eternal residence with our God in our true home in heaven. God dwelt among his people so that we might be with God forever. This was a special truth wrapped up in an old happy tradition. Christ is there in this Old Testament festival.

As the people were hearing the Word of the LORD they were reminded that this 1<sup>st</sup> week of the 7<sup>th</sup> month was a time of special celebration. It was to be the beginning of a festival of booths, or the feast of tabernacles. The people of God were to ***“Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make booths”*** And so the people living in Jerusalem and that time, did just that; they went out and cut down parts of trees and brought them to their homes. (Which sounds, a little bit, like a tradition we have, doesn't it?) And after they cut down those branches, they were to go up on the flat roofs of their homes and they were to build temporary shelters where they would feast on the finest of food and drink. They were to celebrate with great joy as they focused their thoughts on the goodness of God.

However, we should not neglect to notice what else was part of this tradition. Please, notice that along with the cutting down of tree branches, and the food and the drink and the celebration, and the great gathering of people, there was the hearing and learning from the Word of God! In verse 13 it reads, ***“On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law.”*** And again it is written in verse 18, ***18 Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.”*** And their joy was very great because they heard the Word of the LORD and understood just how much God had done for them and how much he would do for them. The LORD had restored them to the land of their fathers, despite the great unfaithfulness of God's people, past, present, and future. And the LORD in his great mercy and grace had brought them back to this land so that he could send his Son as promised. The child would be born in Bethlehem, in Judea, and he would save the people from their sins. The promised Savior, God himself, would make his dwelling among us temporally so that we could dwell with God eternally. And so the branches were cut down, the preparations were made, they ate and drank, they celebrated, and the Word of God was read. God's Word tells us that the people were filled with great joy as they heard of the steadfast love of their faithful God who promised to forgive their many their sins. Remember how the priests of God addressed the people with these wonderful words, ***“Be still... be calm... and the joy of the LORD is your strength.”***

For many of us the tree has been cut down and brought in, bought, or brought out of storage. The house has been decorated, perhaps even a few items have been built and fastened on top of

our not-so-flat roofs. But there is something that too often and too easily gets pushed out of our happy traditions. Too often the hearing and reading of God's Word gets lost in the grand and busy shuffle of Christmas time. The busyness of decorating, of feasting, of planning, of getting together to observe all those warm and welcome traditions can easily take its unfortunate toll, as the message of salvation is covered up by Christmas clutter or pushed to the side by misplaced Holiday cheer.

As you go through all of these welcome traditions don't lose sight of the one thing that truly gives us this great Christmas Joy; the Word of God. Make room in this busy time to let the Word of God bring the joy of Jesus as it proclaims the steadfast love of our gracious LORD. In love he would send his only Son to save us. In love, God would be our Immanuel, He would take on flesh and make his dwelling among us. Be still, and hear the word of the LORD in your homes, the Word that brings peace and joy to our busy hearts. Be still, and be comforted by the Word of the LORD that is proclaimed in public worship. As we gather together that Word cuts to our hearts as it exposes our many sins, but then it mends and heals, builds and restores, as we understand just how much God has done for us in Christ Jesus. Be still, in this busy time and hear the Word of the LORD that God so graciously proclaims. **On earth peace and good will toward men (Luke 2:14). A Savior has been born to you, he is Christ the LORD (Luke 2:11). The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us (John 1:14). And in him was life and that life was the light of all mankind. (John 1:4).** We were destined to be lost to the darkness and condemned to eternal sadness and suffering, but instead we have life and light and joy in Jesus. Our relationship with God, once broken because of sin, is restored. We are reconciled through our Savior, this holy child who would come on Christmas Day. There is joy in Jesus and it is more than just a feeling of elation, this is a message of certain hope. Our sins are forgiven. Heaven is open to us. The LORD dwelt here among us and through faith in Jesus we will dwell with our God forever in heaven. God is our Father and he cares for us. Jesus is our brother and is there for us.

We have joy in Jesus and this joy of the LORD is our strength. For the LORD God is not a god who is far off, but he is one who is near. He lived in this world of pain and sorrow for us. He came and he knows what we go through. He has seen the horrors that we have seen, he experienced the troubles of life that we have been through. He knows my pain, he knows your sin and mine and in mercy he takes them away, he overcomes, he heals and mends, comforts and restores, rebuilds and makes new. The promised Savior, Jesus strengthens you and me each day with his goodness, and kindness, patience and love, which is brought to our hearts and minds through his saving Word. There is joy in Jesus, and that joy of the LORD is our strength.

And so we can bring in the tree, we can string up the lights, we can feast on the finest of food and drink, and go through these happy traditions all with true and lasting joy in our hearts. We can celebrate, we can be kind and generous to each other. We can share our Christmas joy through generosity, acts of kindness, and by telling others of the good news of salvation, because we have that joy in Jesus. We can even handle those tougher moments, that past sins, those feelings of guilt and regret because we have joy in Jesus. And so dear friends, be still, be calm, because no matter how the memories hit us this year, whether they are mostly good or mostly bad or somewhere in between, we have joy in Jesus and the joy of the LORD is your strength. Amen.

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