

Editorial: As powerful as joy

December 14, 2023

Of hope, peace, joy and love, I think I have the hardest time with joy. That's not an admission I like to make, especially given my belief in Jesus and his saving work. Nevertheless.

When it comes to joy, I may tend toward glass-half-empty. Not exactly a full-throated confession, but again, not an admission I'm cheerful about making.

Pairing Christmas and joy has a tinny ring to me. It sounds of a temporary feeling I can experience only in December. Joy is supposed to be more than that, and frankly, I want more than that.

Good news. Joy *is* more than Christmas.

Joy is not limited to a season. The joy we celebrate this time of year is just a hint, a taste of the fullness of joy we can know at any and all times.

Joy is not limited by circumstances. It doesn't require a special season or the trappings of holly, tinsel, lights, ornaments, music and food, but bursts through even the toughest, most Spartan times.

Joy is not ignorant of or naïve about our troubles, but it takes all this world's heartache into account and still shines through.

Joy is all of that because joy has seen some things, endured some things, and knows how the story ends. That's the power of joy.

The joy of ballooning

Hot air ballooning is something I'm not Grinchy about. It's a picture of joy

for me, like the photo accompanying this editorial. I didn't take the photo, and it's not of any balloon I crewed or flew. It's a picture taken looking through the throat of a balloon toward the top vent while the balloon is still lying on its side being inflated.

When I crewed and flew hot air balloons, I stood in that same spot to inspect the lines, the vent and the fabric to ensure a safe launch and flight. With the inflator fans roaring behind me and a smile on my face, I said to the Lord each time, "Thank you for letting me do this."

People would ask what it costs to fly a hot air balloon. The joke was: "The first ride is free. The second will cost you \$30,000"—the cost of a new balloon in those days. Adjust for inflation. No pun intended.

Hot air balloon pilots invest a lot of time, energy and money into their sport. Since it involves an FAA-regulated aircraft, they also carry a great deal of responsibility. Every pilot knows the risks of ballooning, and they've experienced some of them. The joy of flight makes it all worth it.

This joy is contagious. It pours out in balloonists' exuberance to introduce people to the wonder of flight, to teach others about the sport of hot air ballooning and to celebrate each and every good landing.

Even though I'm not able to fly hot air balloons anymore, my joy in crewing and flying them hasn't diminished. That's the power of joy.

The joy beyond

As much joy as I experienced ballooning, it would be a tinny sounding thing if that's all I could know of joy.

The good news is—and this is where I'm at least glass-half-full—the joy the angels proclaimed to the shepherds (Luke 2:10-12), the joy Jesus wants us to have the full measure of (John 17:13) is unbounded and unfettered by the

constraints of this world.

This joy is powerful.

It's in the forgiveness freely given the sinner who confesses.

It's in the grace lavished on those with nothing to offer.

It stands in the bliss of eternity and reaches back to draw us forward through the difficulties of this world.

It does all of this, not in and of itself, but because this joy resides in Jesus, who came to us in the way all humans arrive—by being born. Its power is secured in this same Jesus dying an innocent death and then rising to live, never to die again. This joy is the fullness of what we only glimpse in this life.

This is why—though we struggle mightily to understand or appreciate it—James could write, “Consider it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds” (James: 1:2).

This is why Søren Kierkegaard, through the entirety of “Part Two” of his *Christian Discourses*, adamantly could proclaim the joy of hardship and suffering, not because there is joy inherent in them, but because joy exceeds them.

The power of joy

The power of joy is that it resides in eternity in Jesus, who promises to wipe away every tear and nullify mourning and pain (Isaiah 25:8; Revelation 21:4).

I wonder if the angels knew this already when they appeared to the shepherds. Whatever the extent of their knowledge about what Jesus would do, they brought tidings of great joy—suddenly, praising God and shining with God's glory.

This joy is fully aware of this life's sorrows and stepped right into the middle of them, not as a superhero, but as a helpless baby.

This joy has seen all things, endured all things, and wrote the story's end.

This joy is in the One who gave up eternal joy to take our suffering on himself (Isaiah 53:3; Philippians 2:6-8), who endured that suffering up to and into death, and who triumphed over it all and entered eternity again.

This joy has been through woe and reaches for us in our own, stands with us in our own, and draws us forward to him. That's a powerful joy, indeed.

This is the joy I'm looking for, and I bet I'm not alone.

Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard. He can be reached at eric.black@baptiststandard.com. The views expressed are those of the author.