

A weary world rejoices - Christmas 2021

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[0 : 00] Well, thank you very much, Devraj, Noel, for reading that passage for us. And the last line of that Bible reading we just heard is quite remarkable, isn't it? When you stop to think about it, we write to make our joy complete.

Now, I think it's fair to say, isn't that the goal in life of virtually all of us? We long to have joy, and not just that, we want our joy to be complete. True, 100%.

That just seems to be part of what it means to be human. And Christmas season typically is associated with joy. After all, our Christmas carols have names like Joy to the World, and our Christmas festivities try to evoke joy, as we put up decorations like those magnificent trees that we see in mosques like Viva City.

Tis the season to be joyful. But is it really possible to know and have joy when we're in a pandemic? Over the past two years, as we all know, it's been anything but a joyful time.

At various times, we've all been fearful, or frightened, or fatigued, or flat-out numb, as we endured lockdowns, quarantines, and a million SOPs.

[1 : 14] And so it's no surprise that over the long term, we are increasingly worn down by our current circumstances. We're wondering, in 2021, are there any reasons for a weary world to rejoice?

In our current crisis, is it even possible? Well, according to John, the answer is yes. John, a follower of Jesus, is the author of the short passage that we just heard read out.

And it's the introduction to a letter written nearly 2,000 years ago. And in this introduction, John tells us that it is possible to know joy. It's possible if we know why there's reason to have joy, whatever the circumstances.

And John says that reason can be summarized in one word, Christmas. Oh, John doesn't use the word Christmas in that passage that we just heard read.

But in five sentences, he basically sums up the message and purpose of Christmas. And so this evening, let me just unpack for you what that message and purpose of Christmas is, via the words of John, which are, as I said, also printed on a sheet in front of you.

[2 : 31] There's also a talk outline in that booklet, if that helps you to follow along. And as we listen to him, my prayer is that all who are weary will know why they can rejoice.

And so firstly, let me unpack for you the message of Christmas. And here it is in three words. The life appeared. The life appeared.

That's what the first three words of verse 2 says. And really, that's a great summary of what Christmas is all about. Now, to get us thinking about the significance of those words, I just want to ask you if you've heard any good news of great joy recently.

One of my friends just announced that he and his wife are expecting a baby after years of trying. And so I'm excited for them at the appearing of this new life.

But while you might raise a polite smile at what I've just shared with you, it's pretty unlikely that you would say that that piece of news brings you great joy.

[3 : 37] After all, you probably don't know the friends that I'm talking about. You don't have a relationship with them. And so you naturally wouldn't share in their joy the way I would.

And that's how we can feel about Christmas. We know, of course, though we sometimes forget that Christmas is more than just another opportunity to engage in retail therapy or to enjoy a public holiday.

No, we understand that Christmas is when Christians celebrate the birth of Christ. But, hey, you know, Jesus was just some dude who lived 2,000 years ago, right?

Who taught some good things and lived a good life? What has he got to do with me today? Sure, I can respect that some very religious people find joy in his birth, but I myself don't really feel anything.

And that's a fair comment. Why should we care, never mind feel joy, about the birth of someone so historically and geographically distant from us?

[4 : 44] But John says, hang on a minute. Let's examine the baby of Christmas a little more. Let's figure out his identity. Who is he?

Well, John describes Jesus in an interesting way. We've just heard John call him the life in verse 2. Not just some random life, but the life.

You know when you use the word the instead of a, like the chosen one instead of a chosen one? It just feels more significant, doesn't it?

It feels more weighty. And indeed, right before that, John calls Jesus the world of life. And then right in the middle of verse 2, he calls him the eternal life.

Now, those are quite astonishing descriptions, aren't they? No one has ever called me the eternal life. And they show us that maybe Jesus isn't just another human baby.

[5 : 45] Now, let's consider that interesting description, the word of life, for a moment. Why does John call Jesus that? Well, to understand that phrase, we've got to remember that John also wrote another part of the Bible, simply called John's Gospel, which is a biography of Jesus.

And there, he makes clear that the word is another way of saying God. And by describing God in this way, he's making clear that God is the source of all life.

You see, right at the beginning of the Bible, we're given the description of how this world came into being. God spoke words. He said, let there be light, and ta-da, there was light.

Via his words, God breathed the heavens and the earth into existence, with its majestic seas, enormous mountains, beautiful plants, the wide creative array of animals.

His very words bring life. And so that's why God is sometimes described as the word of life. He's the source of all life as he speaks things into being.

[7 : 02] Now, why is that especially significant, considering our circumstances? Well, I want you to consider for a moment, what is it about this pandemic that makes us so anxious and fearful?

I want you to consider for a moment, why we even bother to have lockdowns and self-isolation procedures? Why we mask? Why I have to speak to you through a mask right now?

Why we have quarantine centers? Why we try so desperately not to let our health system be overwhelmed. Why do we want to avoid catching COVID-19? And the answer is blindingly obvious, isn't it?

It's because we want to avoid the prospect of death, especially premature death. And that's why we put up with all these extra precautions. What lies behind all our anxiety and our actions is this simple fact.

We don't want to die. And given that at least 5.5 million people worldwide have died from COVID-19 since this pandemic started, well, it's no wonder we find this coronavirus scary.

[8 : 15] It brings death. It robs us of joy. But now, John says, the life appeared.

The word of life is here. The one who is the opposite of death, indeed the one who is himself opposed to death, is here. And that's why we should care about this baby.

John is saying, the one from the very beginning, the source of all life, has come into our world. Now, how do we know for sure?

Well, John tells us in verse 2. We have seen it and testified to it. In other words, John is saying, we, that is, him and the other disciples of Jesus, are eyewitnesses.

We saw him and we recorded it down to tell others about it. This is not just a story or a myth that we are making up. It's true.

[9 : 22] Because, John says, verse 1, we've watched Jesus in action. We've heard him teach in a way that we've never heard anyone else teach before.

We've seen the miracles that Jesus performed, like walking on water or feeding 5,000 men with just five loaves of bread and two fish. We even touch him.

And we realize that Jesus is not just some dream. And we have come to this conclusion. This Christmas baby is no ordinary baby, but the God of eternity who has entered human history.

He's the God of life who has entered the realm of death. And there's no other way to explain it, John says. That's the most reasonable conclusion.

Now, at this point, you might ask, is it really? Isn't this more like the stuff of legend? How can believing Jesus did all that stuff, that he even rose from the dead, as Christians believe, be reasonable?

[10:31] After all, hasn't this pandemic taught us that we need evidence-based belief, not wild conspiracy theories? And I agree with you. We shouldn't believe anything just because someone said so.

But consider two things. First of all, consider that, actually, it's not just religious people who believe in miracles. We all do, even if we don't realize it.

Because, even if we don't believe in God, that means we still believe that this universe came into being from nothing. We believe that life comes from non-life.

Now, isn't that miraculous too? The question then is simply, where miracles originate from? Either we believe that there is no God, and somehow, all this just happened, because somehow, some atoms got together to produce something, or that there is a loving, powerful, personal God behind the universe.

And actually, doesn't the latter sound more reasonable than the former? And if such a God came into our world in human history, then there is no reason why people shouldn't witness miraculous events.

[11:57] and second of all, consider John's biography of Jesus, or any of the other biographies of Jesus written by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, they are known as the four Gospels, and they form part of the Bible.

Now, if you haven't read them before, or you haven't read them recently, then can I encourage you to pick up one and read for yourself? And as you do so, ask this question, does this sound more like the staff of legend, or the staff of eyewitness testimony?

Now, it's my conviction that it's more like the latter, but you don't have to take my word for it. Read it yourself. There's a recent book called Can We Trust the Gospels?

written by a scholar, Peter Williams, who's currently in Cambridge. And he asks us to imagine that someone asks you to write a story about events in places that you have never visited, and you're not allowed to use the internet for research.

It would be very difficult to make up a detailed story that a local would agree is authentic, wouldn't it? You have to get everything from the climate to the cultural customs to the architecture of the place right.

[13:17] And he says that when you apply this test to the Gospels, it's actually more reasonable to think that they are written by people who were actually there, recording what they were actually seeing, and not just someone trying to make up stuff.

And that's certainly my experience when I read John's words. But read it for yourself with an open mind and come to your own conclusion. And so here's the message of Christmas in a nutshell. The life appeared. God really came. That's a historical fact. But what difference does it make? What's the big deal?

Why does it mean that a weary world can rejoice? Well, this brings me to the second thing that I want to talk about this evening. The purpose of Christmas.

Why did Jesus come down? Well, let me try to summarize it in five words. To bring us into fellowship. To bring us into fellowship.

[14:27] Now, if there's one thing that this pandemic has exposed quite ruthlessly, it's the quality of our relationships, isn't it? During the early days of lockdown, when we were all stuck at home and squashed in with family and roommates, well, it wasn't always fun, was it?

We got irritated with one another more, we quarreled a little more, we might even have had an ongoing cold war. And if we were living on our own, then even the absence of conflict wasn't great, was it?

Since it simply exposed our isolation and our loneliness. What we realized is that we all want meaningful relationships, and yet none of us have perfect relationships.

that's what this pandemic exposes. You know, throughout these two years, we often hear cause to self-isolate, and often there is good reason to do that, maybe to prevent ourselves from being exposed to danger, or to prevent exposing ourselves to others and putting others into danger.

But we soon found out that we were not made to self-isolate. I'm sure there are a couple in this hall tonight who had to do that. And I myself had to self-isolate once during this pandemic, and I lived

alone, separate from my family, for a period of time.

[15:55] And I thought I was mentally prepared for it. I even thought that it might be kind of relaxing not to have my two young kids constantly calling for my attention for a while.

But that was certainly not my actual experience. I miss my wife and my kids. It felt wrong not to be with them and not to be able to see them, even though technically they were actually close in proximity.

You see, although self-isolation is meant to protect us from the threat of death, in one sense it feels like a kind of death in itself, because we are separated from everything that provides us with meaning.

And that is because God has created us as relational beings. After all, as I alluded to earlier, there are only really two possible ways we can think about the universe we live in.

It must either be impersonal or personal. Either this universe is simply a by-product of chance, or faith, or karma, or whatever you like to call it, in which case there is no real intrinsic purpose or meaning to this universe at all.

[17:10] And if so, then we should expect this universe to be a cold place where relationships are purely functional at best, and ultimately insignificant. Or, this universe is the result of a person who created it and intended it to fulfill some sort of purpose.

And if there is indeed a personal God, then we would expect our world to be one where relationships matter, where we long for friendships, where we feel it when we are isolated from one another.

And once again, given the evidence of the kind of world we live in, as I just presented to you, the latter sounds more reasonable than the former.

But here's our problem. We are relational beings. We want meaningful relationships. But study human history and you discover that the story of humanity is really the story of a broken family. It's a story of a people at war with one another. We saw it in micro form, didn't we, when we said that when we are stuck together, we end up quarreling with one another.

[18:26] But we also see it on a macro level. You know, whether we look afar to places like the United States or closer to home, right here in Malaysia, where we see examples like racial divisions and deep political polarization.

I mean, who would have thought three years ago whether the question of whether you should stay home or not would cause such bitterness? And the underlying reason for all that, the Bible says, is because all humans have turned their back on their heavenly father, God himself.

And that's what the Bible means by sin. We think of sin as doing naughty things, but the Bible says that is not the core definition of sin. Sin is when we reject relationship with God.

And when we reject him, we reject life. And when we reject life, no wonder the whole world turns chaotic. But if God is a personal God, and he has created us as relational beings, then it makes complete sense that he wants us to know him.

It makes sense that the most meaningful relationship he has created us for is with him. And so he still wants to share life with us. And here's my big point.

[19:45] That's why he became one of us. that's the ultimate purpose of Christmas. Look at verse 3. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. John is saying Christmas happened so that fellowship can happen.

Now that word fellowship is a very Christian-y word. It's not one that you hear much outside church settings. But understood rightly, it is a beautiful word because fellowship means togetherness.

Fellowship means sharing something with someone in a very profound way. Fellowship means friendship at a deep level. And John says Jesus has come to restore fellowship.

between God and us. He's come to bring us together. For the amazing truth about Christmas is that God has become someone whom we are no longer distant to.

[21:00] We can see him weep, we can see him laugh, and most amazingly of all, we can see him perform the greatest act of sacrifice in human history.

Because although he was the God of life, he gave himself up to death on the cross for us. This, John will say later in his letter, is how we know what love is.

Because when Jesus dies, two things happen. First of all, he deals with sin. Remember, sin is what ruptures our relationship with God?

Well, he repairs it. And second of all, he defeats death. Remember, this pandemic reminds us that death is the thing that we are most scared of?

Well, he beats it. Now, that is quite a lot to take in, especially if you are not a Christian today. This might all be new thoughts to you.

[22 : 08] And I appreciate that you might need more time and more explanation to explore what all these means. And that's perfectly fine. So, why not talk to your Christian friends about this?

Or come and join our Christianity Explored course, which is an informal, relaxed thing that we usually run a couple of times a year in our church for people who want to know more about Jesus. You can check out our website for the next time it's running.

But I just want to show you tonight that this is what Christianity claims Christmas is about. It's not at all about trying to be good and keep the rules or trying to be happy even when you are not.

No. It's about God coming to restore relationship. It's about God saying come know me and as you do you will find that it begins to restore balance to all your other relationships as well.

And so then this is the very reason why a weary world can rejoice. We can rejoice because in a time of death life has appeared.

[23 : 24] In a time of isolation the very word of life invites us back into a loving relationship with him. One which transcends death will last forever.

And that's why we can have joy. Perhaps some of you today are even ready to receive and share in that joy. You've heard about Jesus, you know what he's done, you even know what the cause is of following him, and all that is left is to actually place your trust confidence in him.

So will you do so this Christmas? I hope you do. Then you can have a truly joyous Christmas.

Thank you for listening and let me wish you a Merry Christmas once again.