

**The Sense of Christmas:
The Sound of Joy
Philippians 4:4-9
Isaiah 12**

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There have to be rules! Otherwise the world just falls into absolute total chaos!

There are rules! And my children will tell you that THE rule in the Flowers' household is that you cannot listen to Christmas music until Santa appears at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. That is the REAL Santa, and he marks the beginning of the Christmas season. Once he appears, it is all Christmas music all the time!

Now I know that may not be the rule in your home. After all, Thanksgiving here is in October and we can't have Santa combating witches and goblins (though we do!) I know there are people who believe it is acceptable to put up outdoor lights any warm dry day after Remembrance Day (and have we had more than one of those?) You have those rules in your house!

But there are those people (I'm talking about you Vanessa) who live a lawless ruleless life! They listen to Christmas music any time! I come into the office in June getting in the mood for Canada Day and wafting from the other room are the strains of "*I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas.*" Seriously??? I mean we may want some relief from the heat, but White Christmas???

No! Just No!

There have to be rules.

But there are those who continue to ignore them. They decorate early, leave them up late. In one church a gentleman said that their tree was the best it would ever be and so he just put a large sheet over it after Christmas! And left it up for the whole year! I can understand that! But to listen to Mannheim Steamroller version of *Silent Night*¹ in May? Just no!

There have to be rules!

Right?

But this year, the weekend BEFORE American Thanksgiving, the weekend BEFORE Santa arrived, I looked at Anita and asked, "*Should we put up the tree?*" She looked at me as if I had grown another head! Not because of the tree, but because she knew, I knew that decorating the tree meant we would have to hear the playlist:

Charlie Brown Christmas—"*Christmas time is here!*"

The album I have decorated a tree to since my second year at Wake Forest—Kenny Loggins' *Celebrate Me Home*.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTSkS0Abas4>

Nat King Cole singing *The Christmas Song*, Elvis singing *Blue Christmas*....oh the playlist goes on and on!

We didn't! We waited until after Santa appeared, because there have to be rules, right?

But ever since....

There is something about the music of this season that just makes us happy. It would be interesting to hear your favorite Christmas song. If I asked, we might be here all afternoon. That is what made this season last year in the midst of Covid so hard. We couldn't sing! We came to worship, we lit our candles, but we couldn't sing. We couldn't sing *Away in the Manger*, *Silent Night*, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*. We came together for worship, and it was Advent, but...the joy was lacking.

Maybe that is what made our 4:00 Christmas Eve service so wonderful. Were you there, huddled, socially distanced in the freezing cold as we sang! We sang all our Christmas carols! I would have cried, but my tears would have frozen! We are going to do it again this year! (And the forecast is possible snow, just what I wanted last year!)

But it's not the snow. It is the sounds that bring us so much joy! The sounds of our carols, the sounds of children's glee, the sounds of family gathering around tables. In a year like we have had we so need those sounds don't we? We need the sound of joy.

Note that it is joy, not happy. Many times we use them as synonyms, but they are not the same! The root of happiness is *hap*, meaning chance (as in happenstance or haphazard.) As Frederick Buechner says, "*happiness turns up more or less where you'd expect it to.*"² Happiness depends on things going our way, whereas joy is based on the knowledge of the presence of God-with-us at all times, from the very beginning.

I love the way that my friend John Ballenger makes the distinction. He says, "*Happiness is rooted in circumstances, but Joy is rooted in transcendence.*" "Happiness is rooted in circumstances, but Joy is rooted in transcendence."

David Spangler echoes that idea in his book, *A Pilgrim in Aquarius*. He writes, "*Joy is an active, creative, unconditional force that flows from the heart of the Beloved; it rejoices not so much at what is happening in the world but in resonance with the love and wholeness that is the fundamental reality of the world. It is a connective force that allows the healing and transforming power of that deeper reality to enter and work its magic in our world of imperfect and incomplete manifestations.*

"Joyousness is, as I said, a connecting force linking our hearts and minds with the presence of the sacred. Joy is what the sacred is. How can we step into the presence of the Beloved if we cannot understand or accept the qualities which manifest that presence?"

² <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/7/21/joy>

*"I do not look for joy in the events or things of my life; I look for joy in the connection with my soul and in my connection with the world. Joy is not necessarily the absence of suffering; it is the presence of God."*³

Joy is the presence of God!

Could it be that was the real message of those angels on that first Christmas as they sang to the shepherd keeping watch over their flock by night. Out there in the fields, because to be honest, no one wanted them near by. As much as we idealize shepherds, in that culture they were only slightly above pig farmers in the social strata. They were unwanted, looked down on, and to be honest, rather smelly. There isn't a lot of joy being a shepherd, especially at night.

Yet it was into that world that the first Christmas message came. "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy!" Great joy!

The very presence of God.

That is where the joy comes from. It doesn't come with the toys under the tree, with the family gathering around the table, even in the wonderful music! No joy comes when we experience the presence of God.

And that doesn't have to just be at Christmas! We can and should experience throughout the year. We can and should, but let's be honest, we look for it a bit more at this time of the year. We share it a bit more this time of the year.

This year, maybe we need joy more than in most. It has been a hard year, two years. We have lost so much, and so many. Perhaps the greatest loss has been our rituals on how to grieve. Separated from each other it has felt that we are separated from God.

That is why we so need to hear, to hear the songs, the story of Christmas. We need to hear them because they bring us joy, and joy is the presence of God.

So listen to your Christmas music. Let it wash over you and bring you the joy that your soul so needs this year. So today, let us hear and experience the joy of God as our choir leads us.

³ David Spangler. *A Pilgrim in Aquarius*. Excerpt found at <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/excerpts.php?id=13259>