

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: Finding Joy in the Midst of Sorrow

Lesson: Luke 2:41-52

⁴¹ Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. ⁴² When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. ⁴³ After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. ⁴⁴ Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." ⁴⁹ "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁵¹ Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

Friends, did you have a blessed and warm Christmas? Today is the last Sunday of this year, and in just a few days, we will step into a brand-new year, 2025. How do you feel at this moment?

Looking back over the past year, what kind of year was 2024 for you? When was your highest point? Conversely, when did you face the lowest moments? Of the plans and resolutions you made at the start of the year, which ones did you accomplish, and which ones remain unfulfilled? As the new year approaches, what are you hoping for or anticipating? Or does it feel like just another endless cycle of repeated days?

For my son, one of the most exciting moments this year was likely Christmas morning. My wife and I wanted to sleep in a little longer, but he woke up early, eagerly anticipating Santa's visit and the gifts under the tree. We wanted to capture his joy on video, so we led him to the tree, hand in hand. When he saw the presents, his face lit up with joy—it was the highway toy set he had wished for.

After breakfast, we packed up and headed to Wisconsin Dells to attend the Korean Caucus Conference. While it was delightful to reconnect with fellow Korean pastors and their families, the main purpose of the gathering was leadership training for those serving in Cross-Racial and Cross-Cultural ministries. Imagine attending lectures and training even on Christmas—doesn't it reflect the deep passion Korean pastors have for ministry?

During the conference, I had the opportunity to reflect on the questions I asked you earlier about this past year and the coming one. For me, 2024 was marked by gratitude: gratitude for my spiritual growth, for the family walking this journey with me, and for the deepening relationships I've built with all of you over the years. This perspective of gratitude allowed me to see everything as a blessing.

I am thankful that our three churches can gather here to worship and praise God together. I am grateful for your presence, even during this busy season, and for your love and dedication to the church. Truly, there is much to celebrate and appreciate in our lives.

The Advent season brought us joy through the Christmas programs prepared by the Sunday School and Youth Group, the Christmas Eve service, and the time spent with family. At Clear Lake UMC, we also held the "Christmas for Children" project, providing gifts to children in need. Just past Monday, I witnessed one such act of kindness through this program. It warmed my heart and filled me with pride for our church.

Of course, life isn't always filled with joy and gratitude. Sometimes, difficulties and challenges consume our focus, making it hard to see the blessings around us. In such times, we may find ourselves asking, "Why?" or "Why me?" I have also asked these questions in moments of despair.

However, through my life's experiences, I've learned that God never leaves us to dwell in sorrow. God doesn't abandon us to stay stuck in our worries and despair. After a time of sadness or concern, God opens our eyes to see the joy and gratitude around us, transforming our sorrow into joy and our worries into thanksgiving.

Today's story in Luke 2 shows us how God turns sorrow into joy.

When Jesus was twelve years old, His family traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover festival, the most significant holiday in Israel just like Christmas for us. During Passover, the people of Israel gathered in Jerusalem to commemorate the day God delivered them. Jesus, His parents, and their families and relatives made the journey from Nazareth to Jerusalem—a walk that took all day—to celebrate Passover together. After the festival, they began their journey back home.

In those days, men and women didn't walk together. Men typically walked ahead, while women followed behind at some distance. Joseph assumed Jesus was walking with Mary, and Mary thought Jesus was with Joseph. However, as they stopped to rest, they realized they couldn't find Jesus anywhere among their relatives and companions. That's when they realized He was missing.

As parents, losing a child brings extreme panic and emotional turmoil. Mary and Joseph must have been consumed with worry about where Jesus could be and whether something terrible had happened. They might have felt guilt for not looking after Him more carefully, blaming themselves and regretting their actions. Perhaps they even questioned and despaired over their situation, feeling anger toward themselves, their family, or even Jesus. As they were filled with many thoughts and feelings, they went back and forth between hoping they would find Him and fearing something bad might have happened.

Despite having traveled a significant distance from Jerusalem, Mary and Joseph returned to search for Jesus. By the time they arrived, it was already late, so they had to stay overnight and wait until morning to begin their search. From early morning until late at night the next day, they searched all over the city. But finding Jesus in the busy, crowded streets of Jerusalem during Passover was very difficult. That day ended without success.

On the third day, they entered the temple they had visited during Passover and saw a crowd gathered around a young boy. As they approached, they realized it was their son, Jesus. Overwhelmed with relief and joy, they must have also felt frustration and anger. Yet, when they saw Him, something

about Jesus seemed different. He even asked them, “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”

Though the time of searching was one of great anxiety, guilt, and despair for Mary and Joseph, it was a period during which Jesus solidified His identity as the Son of God. This understanding would later lead Him, at age thirty, to be baptized by John the Baptist and begin His ministry, fulfilling the purpose for which He came to this world. While Mary and Joseph’s memory of losing their son might have been one they wished to forget, God used their sorrow and worry to bring about the eternal joy of salvation for all humanity through Jesus.

Beloved, when we are in sorrow or worry, it can feel like those times will never end. But God does not leave us in despair. God transforms our sadness into joy and our worries into thanksgiving.

Romans 8:28 says, “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

God stays with us in our hard times, giving us the strength and courage to keep going. He opens our hearts and eyes to see His work. Slowly, He turns our sadness into joy and our worries into blessings.

As we end this year and step into the new one, let us look to God’s love and grace for us. May we trust that God is always working in our struggles, transforming all our hardships into joy. I pray this for all of us in Jesus’ name. Amen.