

A few years ago, during advent, feeling not particularly cheerful, I decided I needed to understand these words Rejoice and Joy better. You see, being happy and bubbly and full of joy doesn't come easily to me. It seemed like Joy, and the command to rejoice, had to mean something more. Because, for many of us, the Christmas season can be complicated, and full of lots of emotion - happy and sad close companions. And so I offer these gleanings from my word study then and now.

Rejoice and joy are both forms of the Greek word Chairō, and closely related to the word charis which means grace. Rejoice, joy, grace are woven together.

Xairo (chairō) literally means to experience *God's grace, or favor*. It means to be conscious, glad, for God's *grace*. **So here's my definition of rejoice: to be aware of and grateful for God's grace. To rejoice is to experience; to be aware and to choose gratitude, noticing God at work in the world**

When Paul says "Rejoice; rejoice in the Lord always" what he's telling us to do is to WAKE UP and see the Lord at work all around you. Wake up, notice God in this place, and be grateful; give thanks.

When we wake up - when we put on the lens of gratitude and see God at work - that's when we can choose to open ourselves up to receive God's grace. We are called to risk believing and living into the promise that God's love welcomes us in, no matter our condition - that's what it means to rejoice.

Give thanks! Remember that God is at work, in every and all circumstances. Written from a prison cell, not knowing if he would ever get out, Paul reminds us to Rejoice. Isaiah tells us to sing for Joy. This isn't saying 'don't worry, be happy'. No, both Paul

and Isaiah are encouraging us to remember, to hold all of life, the hard moments, the ones that cause grief and sadness, right next to the ones that bring a sense of lightness and happiness - to see God at work, to wake up, to give thanks and experience God's love and grace.

Rebecca Stoltzfus, president of Goshen College, writes of finding Joy in the midst of her own grief. She tells of her infertility and how grief was her constant companion during those years. And how in the midst of her grief, that she realized that joy was still in the room. That she could entertain them both - joy in the midst of grief. She says that if God is always with us, then joy is always in the room - if we can learn to entertain it, to notice it. Joy is not a discipline she writes; the cultivation of joy is. Joy is a gift. Just as we experience other emotions - anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, so joy can live in the midst of these. Joy is the quiet one, the gift and the strength we must cultivate. We grow into joy by noticing God at work - sometimes in the most unexpected times and places.<sup>1</sup>

I have 2 distinct memories of joy I'd like to share, moments of receiving the gift of joy, of rejoicing - one was 20 years ago, when my husband, Sam, was sick. He knew he was dying and wanted to formally join the church we'd been attending the past year and a half, and had planned on joining later that year. He was too weak to get out of the house, so church came to our house that January afternoon. Sam was perched in his recliner chair, the living room overflowing with family and church members. There was singing, story telling, a faith statement made by Sam. I remember at one point standing at the doorway between living room and kitchen, gazing in at all these people gathered around us, and I had such a moment of joy. For it was then that I saw, I knew, deep, deep in my bones, that I was not alone on this journey. That God was here, with us, among us. And I wondered, Who was I to receive so much love? Wondered, was I worthy of so much love? With tears streaming down my face I knew joy.

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<sup>1</sup> Stoltzfus, Rebecca. *Joy in the Midst of Grief*. The Mennonite. December 2018.

The other happened on a mountain top this past summer. I was backpacking alone, high in the Wheeler Peaks wilderness area in New Mexico - hadn't seen a person in days. I reached the summit of my hike at just under 13,000 feet, huffing and puffing, still not used to the altitude, cold, even in the intense August sun and wind. I took off my pack and did a 360 - I saw no signs of human intervention, no - All around, for miles and miles, was wilderness. I burst into tears, tears of joy, sobbing up there alone. Again, overcome with a sense of being so blessed to see God at work in the world. Who was I to be in this place - loved and known by God and yet no more important than the trees below and rocks around me? I experienced a fierce joy. In that moment, I woke up. I was aware of and grateful for God's presence and grace.

We must cultivate Joy. Rejoicing sometimes comes easily, sometimes we have to dig through the weeds to find it. Cultivating joy requires that we pay attention. We must wake up. Look around us and give thanks that God is present; that God's grace is here, that nothing is impossible with God. So, enough words for this morning. I offer some glimpses of Joy. I invite you to take a deep breath as the slide show comes up. To make space to notice God in the ordinariness of a smile, of a child, or a place of beauty. As you watch these slides, notice if joy might hold the happiness, the sadness, the knowledge that God is with us, no matter what.

Rejoice in the Lord always, I say it again, Rejoice!