The difference between happiness and joy is useful distinction, but it is also problematic, because in Psalm 126, the word “happiness” is never used. In these brief six verses, however, the words “joy” or “rejoiced,” appear four times. The problem is that the joy about which the psalmist writes is contingent joy. It is really “happiness” in that it is created or caused by an external event.

The psalmist remembers a time when the Lord restored “the fortunes of Zion,” possibly a reference to the recent return of many Hebrews from captivity in Babylon. Imagine the joy of the exiles when they approached Jerusalem; they thought they were dreaming. When they realized that their good fortune was real, their mouths were “filled with laughter” and their tongues “with shouts of joy.” The writer is reminiscing. “Back then,” he says, “we were so blessed. Our hearts were full.” Clearly, their joy was linked to their good fortune.

Of course, the psalmist could draw on countless stories showing God’s mighty power. The escape of the Israelites from Egypt. God holding back the Red Sea so the people could cross safely. God’s provision in the wilderness: manna and quail every morning, and water gushing from a rock. God’s daily presence as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God’s social order provided by the Ten Commandments. God’s surprising conquest of Jericho. The triumph of Elijah over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel proving God’s superiority. And so many more. The Israelites had a good thing going, but they messed it up; they forgot God and God’s ways, they suffered defeat and exile, and now the remnant in Babylon feels forgotten by God.

Then, suddenly their “fortunes” are restored! They are back in Jerusalem, albeit a ruined city kneeling in the ashes of 100 years of war and destruction. This is what the psalmist recalls: weeping in Babylon; rejoicing in Jerusalem. Would they say they were happy or joyful? The truth is, they did not care. Our text says joy. It may be contingent joy, but the people are happy and joy-filled once again.

What the psalmist now suggests is that he would like to experience that kind of joy again!“Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves” (vv. 4-6). Recalling God’s mighty deeds of the past, he wants a fresh, new visitation of the divine presence here and now.

We can all look back with fondness to a simpler time, perhaps a happier time, a time when everything seemed to go right. There was love, a relationship, children, a good job, a home, good health; everything one could want to be both happy and filled with joy. Even our relationship with God seemed good. We synced with God’s Spirit. Perhaps we even used words like the psalmist: “We were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” The pieces all fit. Our lives gelled. Then something happened. The pieces flew apart in a jumble and tangle, and we wondered how things got to be as they did. We cast about for something that will restore our joy.

Internet sites offer a myriad of options to get our joy jumping. One site suggests that we keep a journal, create something artistic, give thanks, practice forgiveness, exercise, power down our gadgets, volunteer, watch the sun rise, send snail mail to a friend, do a good deed, read a novel, light a candle, take a warm bath, listen to running water, take risks, make the bed, spend time with happy people, drink tea, and grow our own vegetables. All good ideas. But they do not address how to experience that special joy which comes when we receive what the apostle James calls “every good and perfect gift” which comes from above. This is the type of joy we seek. Something joy-filled. Something that endures, even if it is contingent upon the Lord’s good favor.

How do you ask God for this kind of restoration, for this type of joy? The writer uses three beautiful metaphors: drought, sorrow, and farming. First: “Lord, restore us like a barren desert that is flooded with streams.” Second: “Lord, restore us by turning sorrow into joy.” Third: “Lord, restore us by rewarding our sowing with reaping.” When the deserts of our lives are flowing with water; when our tears are tears of joy, not sorrow; and when we can reap a harvest, the fruit of our labor, then joy indeed will be our portion.

We need not get hung up on whether the gladness in our hearts is joy or happiness? Christmas is coming, and it is a festive time of year. The happiness we experience now is amplified. The joy we experience is intensified. There is something else happening above and beyond the bright lights, presents, fruitcake, and carols being sung.

We are about to welcome the ineffable, eternal God of the universe into our temporal and tangible world. This is huge! Imagine that actor Ryan Reynolds, or singer Lady Gaga, or Prince William and Kate are going to visit. The excitement and preparation would be enormous. Our minds cannot even wrap around the kind of prep work and security that would be involved.

But one night long ago, an event occurred that was both terrifying and exciting. The Lord of heaven stopped by a small village and stayed for about 33 years. Angels announced his arrival: Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord (Luke 2:10-11). Joy! Great joy! For all people!

Today, we are reminded that the birth of Jesus brings joy! Deep, long-lasting joy. A joy that cannot be extinguished by anything that happens in this world. No pandemic or economic crisis or social upheaval can rob us of the joy Jesus brings. I hope you find that kind of joy this season and that you share it with others. Put your joy on display. Share the hope and love and peace of Jesus with a world in desperate need of the joy he brings.

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**Joy on Display**

Sunday, December 13, 2020 Psalm 126

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

In a survey of more than 700 people, career coach and therapist Kathy Caprino, asked, “If you could say in one word what you want more of in life, what would that be?” How would you answer? What would your word be? Happiness was the #1 response. Money was #2. Joy came in at #5. Other answers: freedom, peace, balance, fulfillment, and confidence.

Curiously, respondents made a distinction between happiness and joy. Often, we equate the two, as if joy is just an elevated form of happiness. But there is a significant difference. Happiness is a momentary feeling of elation stimulated by some external, positive event. We receive a hug, or hear a funny joke, or see a beautiful sunset and we are happy for a short time. Joy, on the other hand, is a stream that flows deep and steady, unaffected by whatever turbulence may be roiling through our life. A loving and supportive spouse, a close-knit family, or a fulfilling job are enduring examples of joy. But Caprino’s audience clearly chose happiness over joy, preferring episodic bursts of giddy insanity to a long-lasting, deeply felt sense of pure delight.

Are we any different? We are easily excited when something surprisingly positive happens to us. We tap out text messages flooded with emoticons when we win $5 on a lottery ticket. We send out GIFs of a celebrity fist-pumping when a parking spot magically appears. We tweet to the world when our husband discovers how to use the vacuum cleaner. We light up Facebook when our teenager leaves the house, and then returns sayings, “You were right, mom, I do need my jacket.” Such moments make us crazy with happiness. Sheer bliss! Life is good! But such happiness is fleeting. Tomorrow’s lottery ticket will be a losing one, and there will be no parking spots (and it will probably be snowing), our husband will have amnesia about how the vacuum works, and our kids will decide that we are really, quite foolish.