

Peace, Joy, and Hope
A Sermon for December 4, 2016
Romans 15:13
[Lansdowne UMC](#)

When I was in high school, I remember coming to the point where I wanted to know more about God. I had been hearing what other people had to say about God my whole life, and I wanted to start finding out for myself what all the fuss was about.

My Uncle had given me a Bible called “the student bible” for confirmation. I remember it had 3 different Bible Reading plans in it, and each of them only required reading a chapter a day. One plan was a two week overview of the life of Jesus. Another was a 6 month overview that hit each of the 66 books in the bible. The last was a 3 year plan to read through the whole bible. I decided to give the 6 month plan a try.

So for the next 6 months or so, each day I read the next chapter the plan had for me and I put a checkmark next to it. (That bible also taught me it’s ok to write in your bible!) A lot of days were pretty tough-- the reading wasn’t too interesting, or I didn’t see the point of it. Somehow I stuck with it. A couple months into the plan, I think, I ended up in the book of proverbs, chapter three-- maybe it was on the reading plan or maybe I just wandered there, I’m not sure. But I remember reading these words: Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

I don't remember what was going on in my life at the time, but I remember the feeling that I got when I read those word. Joy. Without even realizing it, I had been searching for something to latch on to-- something to point to how I could fulfill the desires of my heart-- and there it finally was. It was as if God put those words in the Bible just for me. The meaning was so clear to me: trust God and God will take care of you. I remember a peace that came over me as I imagined myself leaning into the embrace of my Heavenly Father.

And so you know what I did? I got out my yellow highlighter and I went to town on those verses. Somehow it didn't seem quite enough, though. So I got an index card and wrote them down and put them in my pocket, and the peace and the joy that that verse evoked came with it. It didn't take my young brain more than a few readings to have them memorized. And I've never lost them.

Well, for nearly the past three months, I've been thinking about another verse. I'm not going to pretend like I understand it completely-- that's why it's so great to keep turning over in my mind-- but it's had a similar effect on me that those verses from Proverbs did. It goes like this: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And so my mind has been mulling it over day after day, clause by clause:

- May the God of hope-- God is a God *of hope!*
- May the God of hope **fill you with all joy and peace in believing**-- My belief in God, my faith in God, my trust in God... they should bring me joy and peace... *all* joy and peace

- May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, **so that you may abound in hope**-- So that I might not just have a little bit of hope, but be so full of hope that I'm abounding in it, overflowing with it, oozing it!
- May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope **by the power of the Holy Spirit** -- These aren't contrived sentiments, but virtues that come through the power of God's Spirit.

Hope, peace, and joy. Aren't they words that are just itching to get printed all over Christmas cards? But what do they really mean?

Pastor Tim Keller identifies two essential components to hope, and I think he's right: the first is desire, and the second is expectation.¹ We hope in the person or the thing that we have the expectation will fulfill our desire. We all have deep desires within us-- longings of the heart. Longing for happiness.... for love... forever.

And here is the problem about hoping: the more life we experience, the more we tend to find that there is absolutely **no-thing** that will satisfy our deepest desires. Our hopes always fail us.

We hope that stuff will satisfy our desires, so we get more stuff. But when the package is under the tree on Christmas morning, by the time the evening comes, somehow we aren't full of the peace and joy we'd hoped for. Maybe we got the wrong stuff, and we just need different, better stuff.

¹ This section is indebted to this highly recommended lecture by Tim Keller: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SD5LYJ3us0U>

We hope that a person will satisfy our deepest desires. But even in the best of relationships, that person can't do that. We either crush that person with our expectations or they break our heart. Maybe it was the wrong person, we think. Or maybe just one person isn't enough. We're not full-- somehow we're still thirsty.

We hope that a certain level of personal success will fulfill our deepest desires. If I just get that job or start that business or make a bit more money... then I'll be happy. But when we get there, we're not full-- somehow we're still hungry.

We see the people that have those things-- the stuff, the person, the success-- and we say "I'd be happy if I had those things-- those things would fulfill my deepest desires." Somehow we miss the reality that those people aren't content either! Or maybe we see that they're not happy but we go on to tell ourselves this most dangerous of lies: "it will be different with me."

And then there are the set of older people that feel like they never got around to getting these things, or somehow circumstances deprived them of getting them. So they become bitter and hopeless.

And so what do we do with this reality? We're basically left with two options. The first is to declare that our deepest desires are just illusions. Nothing will ever fulfill them, so we need to repress them. They'll always be an inaccessible mirage in the desert. This is obviously a sad option, because these deep longings are part of what make us human. Choose this option, and there is nothing to keep us going.

The second option, is that in fact our deepest desires are meant to draw us into a relationship with God. As we do trust in the Lord with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding, we find that when we acknowledge God in everything, God will order our lives and give us the desires of our hearts. In other words, when we hope in God-- when we look to God to order and fulfill our longings-- we won't be left empty.

There's this famous story about John Wesley that I think illustrates the depth of Christian hope, peace, and joy-- and the connection between them. John Wesley was a clergyman in the Church of England back in the 1700s and he'd go on to be the leader of the Methodist movement. At the age of 32, he felt the call of God to go be a missionary in the newly formed Georgia colony. To get to Georgia, you had to take 3 month voyage across the Atlantic. Well, Wesley wasn't the only missionary on the boat. In addition to his brother Charles, there were also German Moravian Christians-- I want to tell you a lot more about them, but that'll have to wait for another day.

But I do want to share with you a little excerpt from John Wesley's Journal on Sunday, January 25, 1736. Forgive the old language-- these are his actual words:

“At seven I went to the Germans. I had long before observed the great seriousness of their behaviour. Of their humility they had given a continual proof, by performing those servile offices for the other passengers which none of the English would undertake; for which they desired and would receive no pay, saying, ‘it was good for their proud hearts,’ and ‘their loving Saviour had done more for them.’”

“And every day had given them occasion of showing a meekness which no injury could move. If they were pushed, struck, or thrown down, they rose again and went away; but no complaint was found in their mouth.

“There was *now* an opportunity of trying whether they were delivered from the **spirit of fear**, as well as from that of pride, anger, and revenge. In the midst of the psalm [[with which]] their service began, [wherein we were mentioning the power of God,] the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up.

“A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans [looked up, and without intermission] calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterwards, ‘[Were] you not afraid?’ He answered, ‘I thank God, no.’ I asked, ‘But were not your women and children afraid?’ He replied mildly, ‘No; our women and children are not afraid to die.’”²

These are the words and the actions of people who have peace and joy because of God. They weren’t afraid, because they had peace. They sang to God, because they had joy. And their future was secure in God, because they had hope. Hope, peace, and joy are so much more than nice sounding words for Christmas cards, they’re the trust in God to fulfill our deepest longings. They’re at the heart of the abundant life of Christ that God brings to us by the Holy Spirit. I carried a bit of peace and joy in my pocket on an index card as a teenager. The Moravians had hearts that overflowed with it.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

² John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock, vol. 1 (London: Robert Culley; Charles H. Kelly, 1909–1916), 142–143.

This encounter with the Moravians helped John to realize the reality-- they had something he himself did not have, plain and simple. Many other encounters with Moravians over the next two years would make clear to John exactly how true this was. Yet at the same time, their display of hope strengthened John's hope. He was able to go back to the English people on the ship and give great words of encouragement. That's what it looks like to "abound" with hope. It oozes out of you to others.

It's not that the Moravians were immune from the trials of the world. They certainly weren't, and they didn't pretend to be. Things didn't always go well. The storm still came. But the difference, which is all the difference in the world, is that God had filled them up so much with joy and peace, that even in the strongest storm, they had a secure refuge in their hope of God.

For them the scripture was true: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for you are with me!" Because not even death itself can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As I close...

Remember what Jesus said? “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” I can think of no better way to come to Christ and be filled than Holy Communion. Perhaps as you come up in a few moments and take a piece of bread and dip it in the cup, you can ask God to be for *you* the one who fills your deepest desires.