

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Dwell: Home for Christmas”

Dr. Jay Howell

1 John 1:4

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Today being the final Sunday in Advent, in a sense we're finishing our series “Dwell” today, even though we'll still be in 1 John 1 for another Sunday after Christmas. We've been looking at the prologue of John's First Letter, just one verse each week, considering especially the claims, the good news of the mystery and miracle of the Incarnation of Jesus, the Word made flesh, the very reason we celebrate Christmas in the first place.

Since we'll wrap this up today, a word on what we'll be looking at in the new year. The holidays can be a joyous time of year. They can also be stressful—that's not an earth-breaking point. Among the stressors is the family-component. Holidays put families together—a lot of times that's a wonderful thing, but other times it can add fuel to a fire of conflict, or just be a reminder of past conflicts or losses. Families are tough—that's the name of the series, by the way—and everybody's got their different kinds of tough, but how might the gospel of grace speak into all our levels of dysfunction? That's what we'll look at in the new year.

Today, as we near the end of this Advent season, we find John speaking of an inseparable part of the good news: joy, and sharing that joy. Let's go to God's Word together.

[Read passage, 1 John 1:4.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God of Joy, we praise you this day for this word of hope, for this word of joy. We pray that you would speak anew by your Spirit and that you would stir us to seek out and share the hope within us. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

“This is the last train home for the rest of the day. We need to be on it if we want to get home for Christmas,” Lucy said to her three older siblings. There were four of them: Louis, Lydia, Lawrence, and Lucy. They were all on a long trip together away from home, but as they were away, they could each sense a growing, gnawing feeling that something was missing. Though they found some things that brought about amusement, it wasn't joy. And they longed for the comforts, the rest, the joy of home, especially in this season of the year.

So Louis, Lydia, Lawrence, and Lucy all bought tickets on the last train home. The train station was packed with holiday travel. It seems lots of others had the same idea. But then the conductor cried out, “All Aboard,” and they got onto the train. As the train pulled out of the station, they shared and reminisced together about some of glimpses of joy they had felt at home before, and what they were eager to feel again. “I just can't wait see the house all decorated for Christmas,” said Louis, “The wreath on the door, the lights on the trees. “I remember the comfort of a warm mug of hot chocolate,” said Lydia, “That's the first thing I'm doing.” “I can see the stockings hanging over the cozy fireplace,” said Lawrence, “It's like I can almost feel the warmth of it even now.”

But Lucy didn't say much. She agreed with everything her siblings said and couldn't wait to see the lights, to taste the hot chocolate, to feel the fire. She felt the same longing to be home. But for her, she couldn't quite put

her finger on why she longed for such rest, such peace, such joy, and why she had this inescapable feeling that home was where she would find it.

So as her siblings chatted on and on about the comforts and joys of home, Lucy would occasionally chime in or nod in agreement, but for the most part she would look out the window at the landscape passing by in the low winter sun. And as the sun started to set, she could feel her joy get closer and closer.

In this fourth verse of 1 John 1, the letter speaks of “joy” becoming “complete.” “We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete,” it says. Obviously it’s just verse by verse, so John is assuming we can connect a few dots. By “these things,” it’s referring to what John was talking about in the three verses prior, what we’ve been looking these past three weeks. “These things” are those monumental claims of the Incarnation, the Word of God made flesh, the mystery of Jesus the Eternal Son of God yet born a baby in Bethlehem. And the purpose of “these things”? As we heard in v. 3 last week, it’s for fellowship, for togetherness—and that’s no trite thing; we’re talking not just in the sense of hanging out with each other, but communion with each other and the Eternal Living God.

And what John is saying here is that all of those things come together to bring about joy, and no passing joy at that, but one that is complete, fulfilled. It’s an important aspect of the faith we share, the good news we claim: namely that it is in fact, *good* news, that it speaks to God’s goodness, that Christ is the ultimate source of all good things, and therefore if we talk about joy, “Joy to the World” as we sing in this season, the deepest truest place of that joy is in the Lord and how he reveals himself in Jesus Christ.

We feel that. We may be able to point to glimpses of it, like Louis, Lydia, and Lawrence. Or maybe we feel the undeniable pull, but like Lucy, we couldn’t quite put it into words.

The four siblings continued on their train ride. It had since gotten dark when the train pulled into its first stop. The conductor said they would stop there for a few minutes if any wished to get off the train, but warned not to leave the platform, as the train had to keep to a strict schedule.

The siblings, Louis, Lydia, Lawrence, and Lucy, got off the train in the cold winter air to stretch their legs.

“Oh look down there!” Louis said, “Those are some great Christmas lights,” motioning toward the far end of the platform. Always a sucker for Christmas lights, Louis said to his siblings, “I gotta get a closer look. Won’t be a minute.” and went down the platform to see them up close, while his siblings got back onto the train to get out of the cold.

They lost sight of Louis, and what they didn’t see what that he saw another display just a few steps off the platform, so he thought, “It’s just a few steps; I need to check this one too.” Then another display, a little bit further away, and again and again.

All they knew was the whistle blowing, the doors shutting, and train pulling out, and in a panic they looked out the window only to find Louis rushing back toward the platform in vain as the train left.

Louis loved his Christmas lights; they gave him joy, he thought. But whenever he saw one, he would inevitably be looking for the next, bigger, brighter display. He may have felt they gave him joy, but it always left him looking for the next one.

You may have heard the words, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” Those were penned by a pillar in the early church known as Augustine of Hippo. He wrote something

similar regarding the notion of joy, or enjoyment. To enjoy something, he wrote, is “to rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake.” Connecting the dots a bit, what Augustine would claim about the rightful place of joy is that there is only one place where true joy, that true “rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake,” can be felt: in the Lord, because apart from that our hearts are restless.

The tragedy, he describes, is that human condition is one of a “profound confusion” between what we should as a passing sensation, a distraction, and what we should cling to as our true fulfilment. Nothing wrong with Louis being amused by Christmas lights, but when they only leave you hopping from one display to the next, well, he missed his train.

The remaining three siblings, Lydia, Lawrence, and Lucy, continued on the train. They were deeply worried, but what could they do? That was the last train. (This is all before cell phones, I should add.)

Some time passed, and the train in the middle of the night reached the next stop. The conductor gave the same instructions about the train keeping to schedule but that you could go out on the platform if you wanted to.

They looked out the window and saw on the platform a small crowd of people huddling around a hot chocolate stand. Lydia saw it and exclaimed, “Oh, I’ve got to get some.” So she put on her coat, told her brother and sister that she’d be right back, and got off—all with her brother and sister warning her not to miss the train.

The line moved quickly, but as Lucy and Lawrence were watching, they noticed that folks who had gotten their hot chocolate were just getting back in line to get some more, over and over again.

What they didn’t know was that the vendors at the stand were up to no good. They were adding a special powder to the hot chocolate, a special ingredient, that made it irresistible, made you want more and more and more. The dangerous part was that the added ingredient was in fact a slow-acting poison.

Lawrence and Lucy didn’t know that, of course. All they saw was their sister get to the front of the line, take a sip of hot chocolate, then quickly drink the rest of it, and get back in line to get another one. They didn’t realize what was happening until, again, the train whistle blew. They motioned frantically from the window to Lydia to get back on the train. She looked back from the line, saw her brother and sister, but then turned back to wait her turn to get some more. The doors shut, and the train pulled away.

Some things can feel so all-consuming that they *seem* complete, that they *seem* fulfilling, but in reality are anything but. It can be hard to recognize it when you’re in the middle of it. But when that which we think gives us joy, or rest, or peace, only makes us crave more and to our detriment, there’s nothing complete or fulfilling about it.

Lawrence and Lucy couldn’t believe what they had just seen happen. But again, what could they do? It was the last train.

Some more time passed as the train kept going through the night. And at one point, it felt like it was getting colder in the train. The conductor came by and confirmed that one of the heaters for the cabin had broken, so it was going to get a little chilly. Lawrence was especially sensitive to the cold, so he was there shivering.

The train pulled into the next station. Again, the conductor said folks could get off onto the platform if they’d like but warned that they had a strict schedule.

Lawrence and Lucy looked out the window, and Lawrence noticed on the platform the flickers of a fire coming up out of a metal trash barrel, with folks huddled around it. Shivering, he told Lucy, “I’ve got to get warm, but I’ll be back.” His sister replied, “But home’s not much further. It’s the next stop, and you know there’s a warm, cozy fire at home.” But he ignored her, and he got off the train and went to the fire in the trash barrel.

He quickly discovered that the fire in the trash barrel was hot enough to provide some warmth, but because it was so cold, and because so many people were huddled around it, and because the fire was still pretty small, he could only warm his hands up just a little bit if he stretched them out, but the rest of him was still cold.

Still, he thought, having warm hands is better than nothing, forgetting that a warmer, better fire was at home waiting for him, so he kept pushing and jostling, trying to get a little closer and feel a little more warmth from the fire in the trash barrel.

He was so focused on getting warm, that he didn’t even hear the train whistle blow or see his sister motioning frantically from the window. But sadly, for a third time, Lucy heard the train doors shut and the engine puff into gear, leaving one of her siblings behind.

There truly is a tragedy in what we let distract or turn us. Augustine wrote of the same kind of thing when he wrote about joy, describing, in fact, a kind of journey that served as the inspiration for today’s little parable. He wrote, “Suppose, then, we were wanderers in a strange country, and could not live happily away from our fatherland, and that we felt wretched in our wandering, and wishing to put an end to our misery, determined to return home.... [But] we become unwilling to hasten the end of our journey; and becoming engrossed in a factitious delight, our thoughts are diverted from that home whose delights would make us truly happy. Such is a picture of our condition in this life or mortality.”

Whether it’s an amusing distraction, a harmful fixation, or a seemingly desperate need, we trade the joy of the destination, of home, of rest in the Lord, of grace, of being with God, of the assurance of God with us, of Christ, the Word made flesh, for the stops we find along the way.

Early in the morning, as the sun was coming up, the train pulled into its last station, and Lucy got off the train. She made her way home and found a warm greeting from her parents, who true to form, had the wreath and lights on the door, had a mug of hot chocolate ready for her, and a warm, cozy fire in the living room for her to sit by. There she felt the rest, the peace, the joy she had missed, the unmistakable truth that this was where she belonged.

But she shared the sad news about her siblings, and they were all deeply concerned. And while they knew that on one hand, they felt the joy of fellowship with each other as a family, for Lucy there was just as unmistakable the sense that others should be there too, and that she needed to tell her siblings.

So Lucy set about writing some telegrams, messages that would be relayed up and down the train line, with instructions that the telegram office might find her siblings Louis, Lydia, and Lawrence, to beg them to come home for Christmas, to tell them of the joy she had found at home, and to remind them of what waited for them too.

And after she sent the telegrams, she realized that her joy somehow grew even just in sharing it.

“We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.