

One of my wife Joan's favorite movies is "The Sound of Music," at least up to the wedding scene. I won't tell you how many times she has watched a good part of that movie because I don't have a clue, but I know that she has watched it a lot. There is a song in that movie that I may help us focus on the right things this Christmas season. It's called "My Favorite Things" and starts and ends like this:

Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens. Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens  
Brown paper packages tied up with strings. These are a few of my favorite things. ...  
When the dog bites. When the bee stings. When I'm feeling sad.  
I simply remember my favorite things. And then I don't feel so bad.

This is the time of year when we are celebrating Christmas. It should be a time of joy, but is it? Or are there so many other things going on in the world and in our lives that are getting us down? While some people have the "Christmas Spirit," I've bumped into a lot of people who make Ebenezer Scrooge look good.

One of the ways to turn things around is to focus on the positive instead of the negative. So let me ask you, what are your favorite things? What things put a smile on your face? What are the things that you really enjoy doing? Take a minute or two to talk with the people around you and share one or two of your favorite things. ... Two of my favorite things are laughing and singing.

Let's take that question one step further. What are your favorite things about Christmas? A lot of things could go on that list from favorite Christmas Carols and movies, to favorite Christmas stories, desserts and gifts. We can enjoy all of these things, but we need to remember that Jesus is the Reason for the Season. Christmas is the celebration of Jesus' birth, the miracle of the Incarnation, the Good News that God became a man to rescue us from sin and death. Jesus came as the Savior of all people. After Jesus was born, an angel of the Lord announced his birth to the Bethlehem Shepherds and said, "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people." (Luke 2:10 NLT) After the shepherds saw the Christ child, they were filled with joy. Luke 2:20 tells us, "The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." Our hearts are filled with Joy when we praise the Lord.

Let me ask the question another time. What are your favorite things about Jesus? The Christmas Gospels tell us that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus was not just a great religious or moral leader. Jesus was not just a popular traveling preacher. Jesus is the Son of God. The prophet Isaiah promised that the Immanuel would come. The name Immanuel means "God with us." Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise. Jesus is God with us, the God who will always be with His people. Jesus is also the risen Lord. The grave could not hold him. The soldiers posted at the tomb could not contain him. Jesus rose from the dead. Because He lives, we live also. His

victory of sin and death prove that Jesus is the Savior. He loves us, forgives us and restores us to God's family. And as our Lord and Savior, He gives us joy!

Christians are the followers of Jesus. Most of us here today would call ourselves Christians. So what are your favorite things about being a Christian? I hope it is not the coffee and cookies you get after the worship services. In a world filled with doubt and fear, one of the best things about being a Christian is being loved by God. It is knowing that nothing can separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:39) Because we know that God loves us, we can rejoice in the Lord. When things aren't going well, we always have the love of the Lord. And that means that we can rejoice in the Lord.

Nehemiah was called to lead the children of Israel during a tough time. After so many of the people had been held in exile in Babylon, they were allowed to return to their home land of Israel. But it wasn't easy. They had to give up the life they had made for themselves and their families in Babylon. They returned to a place that had been destroyed by the Babylonian army and was still in ruins. The people who occupied the land around them didn't want them to return and were doing their best to see that they were not able to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah's job was to help the people rebuild the walls of the city. The people were discouraged. But he got them organized so that could work together and defend each other. He reminded the people that **"the joy of the Lord is your strength."** (Nehemiah 8:10) The joy of the Lord is our strength, too.

This is the Christmas Season. This is a time of joy, of hope, of faith and love. It should put a smile on our faces. But sometimes we forget that or at least we forget to inform our faces of that fact. Instead of looking like it is Christmas Season, some of us look more like it is "Crab Apple Season." Instead of wishing the people around us "Merry Christmas" with a smile on our faces, we grumble and complain with a frown on our faces and a "Bah! Humbug!" in our hearts.

For Christians, this is the most wonderful time of the year. This is the time we celebrate the gift of Jesus. This is the time that he invites us again to enter into the Joy of the Lord. (Matthew 25:21). So to all of you, Merry Christmas! May the Joy of the Lord fill your hearts and lives and overflow to all of the people around you! Amen.