

“Joy Every Morning”

Luke 2:8-20

Rico Rodriguez

The Woodside Church

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Today, on this fourth Sunday of Advent, we receive God’s gift of Joy. Joy came to shepherds who were living in the fields around Bethlehem when an Angel of the Lord announced the birth of a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. Hear God’s Word from the Gospel of Luke verses 8 to 20.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Life for the shepherds was harsh and difficult. Their world was filled with conflict and strife, worry and fear, hunger and disease. And yet, in the middle of all this they received joy from the Lord.

Our world in 2020 is filled with conflict and strife, worry and fear, hunger and disease. And yet, in the middle of all this, we can receive Joy from the Lord. Many people search for happiness in this life. But happiness only happens when everything happens to turn out good. Joy is different. Joy is a gift from God which comes to us regardless of the circumstances. Joy comes in good times and bad, health and sickness, strife and peace. The only question is – will you receive God’s gift of Joy?

Today, we are thrilled to share with you a story of Joy. Rico Rodriguez was one of the first people we knew to be infected by the Corona virus. He endured a long, arduous and at times

uncertain recovery. We prayed for him and celebrated with his family when he was finally able to go home. Today he is looking forward to celebrating Christmas with his wife Beth and daughters Riley and Regan. Not only Christmas, but everyday has new meaning for him. Today he wants to share with us how he has Joy every morning.

How did your battle with Covid begin?

One moment Beth and I are in Nashville having a good time together and then we come back and shortly thereafter, I started feeling fatigued, had an extremely difficult time breathing and developed a high fever. I was in St. Mary Medical Center from March 26 to May 15 (51 days, 37 of which were on the ventilator) and in St. Mary Rehabilitation Hospital for another 4 days. It was supposed to be 2-3 weeks of rehab but I had to go home and be with my family.

What do you remember from that time?

Needless to say, I was heavily medicated but I remember bits and pieces of being in extreme pain, not being able to breathe and begging my doctor and nurses to put me out. And when I did wake up from the medically-induced coma, I remember just wanting to get out, to go home. I ripped tubes out of my body and even jumped out of bed. I had to be restrained with Velcro straps because I was delusional.

What were some of the treatments you received?

Since waking up, I was told about so many of the treatments that I received in the 51 days I was at St. Mary's. Dr. Solomon told me that the virus was so new, only 2-3 months old at the time so no one really knew what to do or how to combat it. He said that he was on the phone every night with doctors in New York learning what they were doing or trying with their patients. Dr. Solomon and Dr. Patel said that they "threw everything at me". Whether it was hydroxychloroquine, plasma or a dozen other unheard of treatments and methods, they were just trying whatever worked at the time. And the virus spread throughout my body. It started with my lungs, then my kidneys, then my liver and gall bladder. Then because of the medication, my hands and feet developed gangrene. As Dr. Solomon explained to me in layman's terms, "Picture yourself drowning. First it was your lungs. We fixed that then you went under water again because your kidneys started failing, so we put you on dialysis, so you went above water, then fell under again when your liver was affected. So we treated your liver but then your gall bladder was hit. So we treated that." God worked through my doctors' hands.

What words would you use to describe the experience?

Blessed... life-altering and lucky. I'm a baseball fan and all I kept thinking about what was Lou Gehrig's Farewell Speech when he said, "Today, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth. (Echoing, echoing...)" That is how I felt and that is how I feel today and every day for the rest of my life.

What feelings did you have?

I felt frustration upon waking up initially but after the medication wore off, I remember just positive feelings. I would be on FaceTime with Beth and my girls and just seeing their faces....their beautiful, smiling faces. That was all the motivation I needed to do whatever it took to become healthy again... to walk again, to be able to dress myself and brush my teeth and eat on my own again. I was determined to get better in as short a period of time as possible so I

could go home faster. As my mental state improved, I texted with everyone, communicated on Facebook. I felt so much love and support from everyone. The entire community supported us, showed us so much care and love. Beth told me how I slept for 37 days, throughout the entire month of April. I slept through both of my daughters' birthdays. As I remember saying when I realized that, shortly after I woke up, I don't care that I missed their birthdays this year because I'll happily take the rest of their birthdays. I look back and I wonder at times whether God was testing me, as he tested Job. I ask myself if there is something I'm supposed to learn from this experience. How can I be a better person, let alone a better Christian? How can I help others more? Do I have a higher purpose now? I came across this the other day:

No test has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tested beyond what you can bear. But when you are tested, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. 1 Corinthians 10:13

What did you learn from this ordeal?

I learned how fragile life really is. Our life changed so quickly and we were reminded that nothing is guaranteed in life. This is often said after accidents, illnesses and tragedies but it cannot be said enough: We have to live in each moment that God gives us. We have to love one another more, hug each other more often and do not take a moment for granted. We get so caught up in our daily lives and it's so easy to overlook what are actually significant moments in our lives especially at the light speed in which we live through our daily routines. But the one thing about this virus, the one silver lining is that it has slowed us down. It has forced us to stop and take a look at our lives, to reflect and spend time together and appreciate the ones we love the most.

Did it change you in any way?

I feel that I am a better person. I reflect on my life, on my family and everything that God has bestowed upon me and I am just grateful for the second chance that God has given me. I now value the little things in life and I thank God every morning, for every sunrise that I am lucky enough to witness. I literally say "Thank you God for today!" I talk to God throughout the day. Almost everything that happens to me, all around me, I thank God for giving me the opportunity to experience it.

Did it affect your outlook on life going forward?

I realized that life is too short to waste time. Time really is so precious. Especially time with my family. I always valued family time but now, it's as if there's a time clock and as each day passes, I think of how I can maximize the quality of the time we spend together. I cannot say this enough, we have to appreciate every moment of every day. Look around and ask ourselves: how can we show each other more love? How can we help one another? We have to just love one another and know that we are all the same. We are all mortals and vulnerable to this virus. We are all in this together. We need to remember that each of us is going through something, our own struggles. We have to understand and support one another. Be kind and caring, spread love!

Is there anything you do differently now?

If there's anything that I would do differently, it is to try to be more understanding of others, of our differences. All of those little things that bothered me before, they don't matter now. But I'm not perfect, I tend to forget at times and it is when I see Beth and I hear my children's voices, that's when I am reminded of how blessed I am and how lucky I am to be alive. So that puts it all back in perspective.

Is there a message about life you'd like to encourage others to follow?

To live the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matthew 7:12). Love and support one another. Be kind to one another. Let go of any grudges. Life is short. We all need to realize what is truly important in our lives: Family, friends, our community.

Did going through this experience change your relationship to God? If so, how?

I was close to God before this experience however I feel much closer to God now. I feel that there is a reason that God gave me another chance. Something bigger than I can imagine. At least, that's what I want to believe. I want to spread good. I know God does things for a reason. I remember so many dreams while I was in my coma. A lot of them were about my family, losing loved ones and talking to them and being told that I will be okay. I remember some dreams in which I mended relationships with some loved ones and woke up feeling the need to speak to them. I feel that I have grown more insightful. I am now more outspoken about God and my philosophical beliefs, all with the purpose of helping others.

How will this Christmas be different for you?

Honestly, and this may sound overstated to anyone who hasn't felt a sense of loss or was so close to losing everything, but every day since I got back with my family is Christmas to me. I understand that Christmas is a celebration of the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. I'm not taking anything away from the meaning of Christmas. What I'm talking about is the feeling you have during the season. You feel utter joy and happiness and are so thankful and everyone shares in that feeling. That's how I feel about every day now. I am so thankful and so grateful that I am able to wake up and look over at my wife, then walk to my daughters' rooms and see them sleeping soundly. I look out the window, I see another sun rise. I cannot say it enough, I thank God every morning for my second chance. So yes, every day is Christmas to me.