

"Joy To The World!"
Luke 2:8-20
Series: Advent 2008 [#3]
December 14, 2008
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Theme: **Christ Replaces Fear With Joy.**

Introduction

On this third Sunday of Advent we are now just eleven days away from Christmas. That can be a joyful and scary thought—at the same time! Anticipating the great celebration on the one hand, and on the other, panicking over an impossibly long to do list that keeps getting longer. Joy and fear are so different, and yet so often linked.

Our theme for this morning is *Joy*. We are looking at the wonderful truth, God's startling message through the angel to some very frightened shepherds of "*Joy To The World!*" "Do not be afraid! Why? Because I bring you a message of *great joy!*"

God moved those shepherds from great fear to great joy. In this encounter we see God's truth that *Christ replaces fear with joy*. Let's think about that together—what it means, how it can and does happen.

The Starting Point To Joy.

It may surprise us that the starting point, the foundation to true joy is God's truth. Christians, along with non-Christians, often see joy as something that *happens to us*. The happy, glad, cheerful feelings that brighten our days and lift our hearts because something nice, good, beautiful or wonderful happens. We think of a pleasurable inner feeling, but one which most often comes from outside of us. We feel it mainly when circumstances are positive.

There is a grain of truth about true Biblical joy in this view in that it does come from outside of ourselves. But God's joy does not come from the circumstances of our lives. Let me give you my working definition of true joy: *Biblical joy is God's gift of steadfast delightful certainty.*

The foundation of this joy is God Himself and His truth. We see this in the encounter of the angel and the shepherds. When the angel appeared out of the blue, or better, out of the black, the shepherds were scared, terribly frightened, terrified, filled with fear or, as the King James Version put it, "they were sore afraid."

Now, people are frightened by many things. For example, three classic fears of children, sometimes referred to as *The Three Ds*, are the dark, doctors and dogs.

If we had been out on that field in the dark with those shepherds, I am sure we too would have been scared out of our wits. Imagine a calm, dark night. You are talking with your friends, perhaps trying to stay awake. All of a sudden the dark night skies explode with

light brighter than the brightest day! And, more than that, there it is, an angel of God in God's brilliant glory right in front of you! How did God, through the angel, calm their fear? By turning the light down to a nice mellow glow? No. By playing soft smoothing music? No. He calmed them with a message, a message of truth.

“...Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of *great joy* which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

The message more than calmed them. It was this message of Christ's coming which replaced their fear with joy.

Let's do a brief review of God's truth being the essential foundation to experiencing His joy which replaces our fears. After all, we live in a fearful world and experience fears. First, the Bible tells us that God is the source of true joy. Psalm 16:11, “...In Your presence there is gladness of *joy*; in Your right hand there are *pleasures* forever.”

Then, God tells us that He gives His joy to His people. Ecclesiastes 2:26, “For to a person who is good in His sight [God] has given wisdom and knowledge and *joy*...” And God gives us joy through His truth, truth from and about Christ, the truth we now have in the Bible. Jesus said in John 15:11, “These things I have spoken to you so that My *joy* may be in you, and that your *joy* may be made full.” The apostle Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit works in believers to produce this joy through God's truth. It is part of the “fruit of the Spirit” described in Galatians 5.

We find testimonies in Scripture that this is true. For example, King David, Psalm 4:7, “You have put *gladness* in my heart, more than when [their] grain and new wine abound.” Then Jeremiah, “Your words were found and I ate them [i.e., I took them in, absorbed their truth], and Your words became for me a *joy* and the *delight* of my heart.”

Also, this joy is God's gift to motivate us to be steadfast when times are tough, to be able to look ahead to the certainty of joy from and with God in the future. The prime example is Jesus Himself. Hebrews chapter 12 calls us to

“run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the *joy* set before *Him* endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (12:1b-2)

And so James opens his letter,

“Consider it all *joy*, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, *knowing* that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (1:2-4)

Yes, the starting place, the foundation to experiencing God's gift of steadfast delightful certainty is God's truth in Christ. *Christ replaces fear with joy.*

“But,” you may say, “that may be so for the great people of the Bible like King David and the prophets, and some people today, but I am not sure that I can experience that kind of joy.” Biblical joy, God's gift of joy is available to all, to everyone who comes to Him through Jesus Christ.

Go back to the angel's message in Luke 2:10 again, “...I bring you good news of great joy which will be for *all* the people.” Now, without getting technical, *all* means *all!* Even God's choice of these lower class, often rough and gruff, looked-down-on shepherds demonstrates this. It includes you. God's joy is available to you. The process of experiencing it is not complex, but, in fact, simple.

The Simple Process To Joy.

There is one important clarification about this simple process to joy: while it is simple and not complex, it is neither automatic nor always easy. It is a process which begins with accepting God's message of joy.

Think about those shepherds in that field. After the angel finished its announcement and the huge choir of angels concluded their anthem of praise to God, they left. The angels and brilliant light of God's glory were gone. The shepherds were, again, alone in the dark.

What did they do? What if they had not accepted the message, or if they panicked and sped out of there—running as far away as fast as they could? But, they didn't do that. Go to verse 15,

“When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, ‘Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.’”

They talked it over. I picture each one making sure that the others had seen and heard what he had. They wanted to be sure this was real. And when they were certain, they accepted the angel's message as true, evidenced by their plan to go and see for themselves what had already taken place.

We must accept God's truth, His message of joy, to experience His joy. That begins with accepting who Jesus is—God the Son who became one of us to do what we can never do, pay for our sins. To accept that there is forgiveness and life with God now and forever only in and through Jesus Christ. As Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life” (John 6:47).

Once we truly believe, the process of experiencing and growing in God's joy begins. It is grounded in the truth that God has given us. It is confirmed as God answers our prayers. As keep on learning and believing what God shows us, we keep on growing in experiencing

His joy. Paul prayed in Romans 15:13, “Now may the God of hope fill you with all *joy* and peace *in believing*, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Then, along with accepting God’s message of joy the process includes a second aspect, acting on God’s message of joy. Accepting something as being true does not mean it necessarily makes any difference to how you think or live. Consider the shepherds. They saw and heard. They discussed and verified what they heard. They accepted it as true. They could have filed that away in their minds and settled back down by the fire or made a patrol to make sure their flock was still there and safe after all the commotion. They could have returned back to *normal*, without this startling event and news affecting how they thought and lived from then on.

Go on to verse 16, “So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger.” Their actions were a result of what they saw, heard, accepted. It changed their thinking. It changed their plans. It changed what they chose to do. They acted on God’s message of joy in Jesus.

So it always has been and will be. So it was before Christ came. In Deuteronomy 28 God gave the people of Israel some strong warnings about not acting on, not being obedient to his truth, including curses He would bring on them. He said,

“So all these curses shall come on you and pursue you and overtake you until you are destroyed, because you would not obey the LORD your God by keeping His commandments and His statutes which He commanded you. They shall become a sign and a wonder on you and your descendants forever. Because you did not serve the LORD your God *with joy and a glad heart*, for the abundance of all things; therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness, and in the lack of all things; and He will put an iron yoke on your neck until He has destroyed you.” (45-48)

And so it still is. When I said this process is simple but not always easy, in part I was referring to this step of a person’s spiritual journey. The person says, as the shepherds did, “Yes, this is real, it is true.” But, when it comes to the real test of acting on the truth, many people struggle. You see, Jesus does not come to us to be an abstract truth, or a reassuring reality tucked among the clutter of many things we accept and may draw on at times when we feel a need. He comes to begin a personal relationship with us in which we relate to Him in His rightful position as our God. You can accept the Christmas story without accepting Christ as your Savior. As the apostle John summed it up,

“And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son [not just has knowledge of the Son, but he who *has* the Son] has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that

you have eternal life.” (1 John 5:11-13)

But this also continues on in our journey as believers, as people who have accepted Christ as Savior. Earlier I cited James’ words in his letter,

“Consider it all *joy*, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (1:2-4)

How do you and I respond when we encounter all sorts of trials, difficulties and disasters? Do we act on God’s message of joy in Christ... or not? The apostle Peter opened his first letter, a letter written to people suffering persecution because of their faith,

“In this you *greatly rejoice*, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, *so that* the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, *you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory*, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.”
(1:6-9)

It is not just acting on, obeying God’s truth through Christ when we are here together in church or when times are good and easy, but in all times. You see, the process of experiencing God’s joy, of having His joy replace our fears is simple, but not always easy. It means accepting God’s message of joy. It means acting on God’s message of joy.

How are we doing? How do we know how we are doing? The shepherds show us a couple of tests to see how we are doing, to see if we have the *sparkling presence of God’s joy brightly beaming within and out from us*.

The Sparkling Presence Of Joy.

The first evidence is that if we are experiencing and growing in God’s joy we will be overflowing with praise to God. Look at the familiar description of this in the shepherds in verse 20, “The shepherds went back [after seeing Jesus and telling others], *glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen*, just as had been told them.”

What an unlikely praise team or choir! A bunch of rough, gruff, uneducated, not eloquent men, some of whom, if they were singing God’s praises, probably couldn’t hit any note on the scale, let alone the right one. But there they are. Christ replaced their fear with His joy. They were overflowing with praise to God.

They were far from the first or last to be called to this and to experience it. Think back to our first Scripture reading today, 1 Chronicles 16, beginning at verse 25,

“[For] great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; He also is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before Him, strength and joy are in His place. Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due His name; bring an offering, and come before Him; worship the LORD in holy array. Tremble before Him, all the earth; indeed, the world is firmly established, it will not be moved. Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; and let them say among the nations, ‘The LORD reigns.’ Let the sea roar, and all it contains; let the field exult, and all that is in it. Then the trees of the forest will sing for joy before the LORD; for He is coming to judge the earth. O give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting.”

(25-34)

The psalmists join the chorus, “Sing for joy in the LORD, O you righteous ones; praise is becoming to the upright” (33:1), and “O clap your hands, all peoples; shout to God with the voice of joy” (47:1).

What does God’s joy look like? I can tell you one thing, it looks much different than the scene in one church a Sunday. A small boy was sitting with his Mom, turning around, and giving the biggest smile to everyone. He wasn’t saying anything. He wasn’t creating any kind of commotion. He was just giving this big smile to everyone. Suddenly his mother jerked him around and said (in a *whisper* loud enough for everyone to hear), “Stop grinning. You’re in church!” Along with that she gave him a quick spanking and, as the tears rolled down his cheeks, she added, “That’s better!” and returned to her ... *worship*.

When you think about it, the shepherd’s response makes sense. When enjoying God’s gift of steadfast delightful certainty, how can one but overflow with praise to Him?

A second evidence of *the sparkling presence of joy* is proclaiming the good news to others. You know the account, but look again at verse 17,

“When [the shepherds] had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds.”

They didn’t let any lack of detailed knowledge, ability to speak, or acceptance by the people they saw stop them. Just as they overflowed with praise to God, they overflowed with the good news that the Christ, the Messiah had come. They shared it with everyone they bumped into in that crowded town.

Like the shepherds, if we are experiencing and growing in God’s gift of steadfast delightful certainty in Christ, we will be proclaiming the good news to others.

Eleven days until Christmas. Advent is over half completed. How are we doing in living and speaking as His witnesses? And, of course, the question is not just for this season of the year, but for all of our days and years. *The sparkling presence of God's joy* will lead us to be witnesses.

“Joy To The World!” Christ has come, and as we come to Him *He replaces our fears with His joy*. Where are you spiritually? If you have never come to the Savior born in Bethlehem who died on the cross for you, who will give you life forever with Him, who will replace your fears with joy, who will return to earth from heaven, why wait? Open your heart to Him now, in these next few moments of quietness and then talk with me or someone else before you leave here today.

If you have already done that, even if it was a long time ago, thank Him again for what He has done for you. Praise Him that He gives you His joy, even though you may not always experience it as He wants you to. Determine to examine not only your life's opportunities and problems, but God's truth in His Word—to accept and act on it. Be ready and willing to overflow with joy and your own witness for Jesus.

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