

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 2:10-11 "God's Christmas Gifts: Joy"

"I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." So said the Angel of the Lord to shepherds who "watched their flocks by night" on the hills above Bethlehem. What good news? Who was it for? And why was it "of great joy"?

The news was a birth that would change the world: God had arrived in human form in the most improbable way - not as a King, but as a baby born to a teenage peasant woman in a cave where animals sheltered. Just why this was "good news" would not be fully evident for decades. But the birth was unusual enough to attract attention, not least because hosts of angels arrived to announce it!

Who would benefit from this birth? "All the people:" certainly all Israel, probably all peoples - Gentiles as well as Jews, Greeks and Romans and Gauls and Britons... As author Walter Wangerin says in his book *Preparing For Jesus*, "That's why the shepherds are first: they represent all the nameless, all the working stiffs, the great wheeling population of the whole world."

But why is this "news of great joy"? And what is "joy," anyway? One dictionary I consulted says joy is "a feeling of great pleasure and happiness." Not a very satisfying definition! Webster does a little better: joy is "the emotion evoked by well-being, success or good fortune..." But this is still nowhere

close to what the Bible means by joy. Joy is not a fleeting emotion, but a deep-seated inward disposition toward life, a serenity and security that can endure suffering as well as enjoy "good fortune" (whatever that is!).

Biblically, joy is *the inner disposition of people who know and trust God, who recognize his work in themselves and in the world, and who know they are blessed simply because their lives are in God's hands.* Joy is what is hidden deep in the lives of those certain people who we discover are a pleasure to be around. Not everyone has it!

Joy is the inner life of a woman who lived to be 101, and although she spent her last few years in bed, to the end she was sweet and gentle and liked to laugh. Her bedroom walls were covered with cards and pictures of and by her grand-children and great-grandchildren, and facing the foot of her bed was a huge poster of George Clooney! Joy is the reaction of a family when a boy tells Santa at the mall that what he wants for Christmas is that his brother will remain free of cancer from now on.

Joy is men in retirement who want to "give back," and donate hundreds of volunteer hours to working in their churches, for Rotary, at soup kitchens and food banks. Joy is women who have been through a lot in their marriages, and endured all the things

that teenagers bring into a family's life, but are cheerful, positive, optimistic, and always ready to help other people. Joy is the secret of a woman who shows such serenity and spiritual depth that when she speaks, everyone in the room stops to listen, because they know she is distilling decades of wisdom and faith into a few quiet words.

Joy is behind youth leaders' persistent belief that what God can do in the lives of young people makes it worth enduring mission trips to inner cities, to outposts in Appalachia or the Adirondacks or Virginia's Eastern Shore, or leading winter retreats in the snows of New Hampshire. Joy is the inner life of a woman dying of cancer, who through her last months still keeps up long, deep and wise conversations with visitors, and as one of her last acts, gives one of them her Bible. Joy is what's inside people with chronic degenerative diseases who smile almost all the time, and are always thanking God for his goodness. Joy is what sustains mothers and fathers through long years of waiting for prodigal sons and daughters to come home. Joy is what radiates from those special people who, when you visit them in the hospital, make you come away feeling better than when you went in!

These are people you are glad to be around, because they have a hidden inner resource that makes them able to "weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice;" people who are not just happy when things go well, but who persevere when things are tough and never lose heart; people who show love and hope and laughter and peace and grace and energy and perseverance - and any family, any church, any workplace, any community, is blessed to have them in its midst.

How do they do it? Where does the joy come from? Think of it as *a gift* - and in a sense it is, *a spiritual gift*. That's a term the Bible uses

to describe what you might call a "by-product of faith." Like many good things, you can't get joy by going after it directly. You can pursue pleasure, you can perhaps buy a little happiness, but joy comes as a gift.

It comes to those who have faith in God. In particular, in Christian teaching, it comes to those who hear the "good news" and respond to it: when the angel says "*today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord,*" they understand and embrace and accept that this is a story *for them!* These are people who discover that the baby of Bethlehem turns out to be the promised King of the house of David, the Lord who returns to Zion, the Deliverer of his people from their long exile from God, the Savior who brings forgiveness of sins, the Teacher who shows the way forward, and will ultimately be crowned King of Kings.

People who trust this man who turns out to be God-in-the-flesh, who believe what he says is true and what he did matters, find that when they follow him, they are changed. Within a generation, Jesus' first disciples began to describe their experience as "a new life," and said that following him and trusting him and learning from him and accepting that he died and rose for them was like being "born all over again."

And in that new life Jesus' disciples discovered that his Spirit was creating in them qualities and virtues they had never known before: love, joy, peace, hope, patience, forgiveness, kindness, goodness. They called them "spiritual gifts." And the pagan world that surrounded them noticed. "See how these Christians care for each other! They look after the old, they don't kill unwanted babies, they share food and money with their widows and orphans. And they do these things for people outside their circle as well - in fact they are changing

whole communities by the way they treat and serve other people.”

People who believe, people who have faith, receive these gifts of the Spirit. Nobody has all of them to perfection; Christians are only forgiven sinners, after all! But among them you meet people of such generosity, such grace, such peace, such joy, that they are a pleasure to be around – better yet, to be among!

But all people in all places and all times get the offer: the good news of great joy is “for all the people,” even those of us who live two millennia later on the other side of the world, in a place called America. The offer comes around to us regularly, but there is no better time than Christmas to accept it. People who embrace it discover that “the package of faith” brings with it the possibility of joy in life, joy in death; joy in feasts and celebrations, joy in troubles and suffering; joy now, joy always; joy that goes far deeper and far beyond anything we had imagined.

C. S. Lewis, known best to Americans as the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, was a Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at Oxford and then at Cambridge, who came to Christian faith in his adult years – “the most reluctant convert in all England,” he said. But he later called his autobiography *Surprised By Joy*. In one of his Christian books, Lewis wrote that “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when *joy* is offered to us – like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies on an empty lot in a slum, because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a week’s vacation at an ocean beach. We are far too easily pleased.” (adapted, from *The Weight Of Glory*).

If you suspect that too much of your life is spent fooling around in the mud, this Christmas let the Spirit speak to you of the power and the truth and the *possibility* behind the angel’s announcement: “*I bring you good news, of great joy, that will be for all the people...*”

Let us pray...