



Joy To The World!
Text: Luke 2:8-20
Series: Advent 2018 [#3]
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December 16, 2018

Theme: **Christ Replaces Fear With Joy.**

Introduction

On this third Sunday of Advent we are now just nine 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 and schedule that keeps getting longer.

Joy and fear are so different, and yet so often linked. For example, moving ahead from the Advent season to Easter, Matthew's gospel tells us the women who encountered an angel at Jesus' empty tomb left quickly with "fear and great joy."¹ Then, Some researches say that the same brain chemical that is linked to pleasure and joy may also trigger fear.² So it's not weird to experience feeling of joy and fear at the same time.

That being said, 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!" The angel said, "Do not be afraid!"³ Why? Because the angel was bringing them a message of "great joy!"⁴

God moved those shepherds from great fear to great joy. They were not stuck in fear, or even having both fear and joy continuing together. 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 be a surprise to some people 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. A beautiful sunrise or sunset. Receiving a compliment. Finishing a project. Family or friends coming to visit. We tend to think of a pleasurable inner feeling 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 depend on or come from the circumstances of our lives.

Let me give you my working definition of true joy: *Biblical joy, true 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 black, dark night—Luke tells us the shepherds were scared, terribly frightened, terrified, filled with great fear.⁵ People are frightened by many things. For example, three classic fears of children are sometimes referred to as *The Three Ds*: 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 calm their fear through the angel? By turning the light down to a nice mellow glow? No. By playing soft soothing music? No, again. He calmed them with a message, a message of truth.

“Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (verses 10-11).

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. King David testified and taught us in Psalm 16, "In Your presence [God] there is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever" (verse 11, NASB). Then we read in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes that God gives His joy to His people. It says, "For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight."⁶

And God gives us joy through His truth, truth from and about Christ, the truth we now have in the Bible. Jesus said to His disciples, "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full."⁷ Jesus' words, His truth is the foundation for their and our joy being full, complete. 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."⁸

We find testimonies in Scripture that this is true. King David testifies in Psalm 4, "[God] You have given me greater joy than those who have abundant harvests of grain and new wine" (verse 7, NLT). Jeremiah declared, "Your words [God] were found, and I ate them [that is, I took them in, absorbed their truth], and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart."⁹

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, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (verses 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" (NASB).¹⁰

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

"But," some people, "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 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.

Let's start with those shepherds. There is no comment in the text on their faith, but we know from history that they generally were not respected nor even considered acceptable. They generally lived out in the fields with the sheep in their care. They *kept watch* over the flocks to make sure they were safe from predators and did not wander off. Because they lived out in the fields it was difficult to impossible for them to observe all the ceremonial law. As a result they were looked down on and even despised by many people. So we find some of our Christmas songs referring to them as "lowly shepherds." God turned the fear of these lowly, despised men into great joy.

Now go back to the angel's message in Luke chapter 2 verse 10 again, "I bring you good news of great joy which will be to all people" (verse 10). Without getting technical, *all* means *all!* We have seen that God's choice of these lower class, often rough and gruff, looked-down-on shepherds demonstrates this. But note, do not miss that this includes you, no matter what you or others think of yourself. *God's joy is available to you.*

The Simple Process To Joy.

The process of experiencing it is not complex but, in fact, simple. 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,

“So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, 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 according to the Bible, God's certain truth. Accepting that God the Son became one of us to do what we can never do, pay for our sins. As John's gospel tells us, “the Word [that is, God the Son, Christ] became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”¹¹ The apostle Paul said the gospel God revealed to him is about Jesus Christ who “died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”¹²

Joy begins with accepting that there is forgiveness and life with God now and forever only in and through Jesus Christ. As Jesus said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life.”¹³

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 in the Bible. It is confirmed as God answers our prayers. We keep on growing in experiencing His joy as we keep on learning and believing what God shows us. Paul prayed for the church in Rome, “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴

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. Let me repeat that, *accepting*

something as being true does not mean it necessarily makes any difference to how you think or live. Think about it. Have you ever heard someone say, or have you yourself said, “I know I need to let you go, but I have to tell you this!”? Then, people who drink and drive know if they get caught they can be in big trouble, but they do it anyway. How about times when we are full and know that eating another slice of pizza or turkey will make us uncomfortable, how often do we do it anyway?

Accepting something as being true does not mean it necessarily makes any difference to how you think or live. This is true in our relationship with God and experiencing His joy.

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, “And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.” Their actions were a result of what they saw, heard and accepted. It changed their thinking. It changed their plans. It changed what they chose to do. They acted on, they chose to act on God’s message of joy in and through Jesus.

So it always has been and will be. So it was before Christ came. In Deuteronomy chapter 28 God gave the people of Israel some strong warnings about not acting on, not being obedient to his truth. 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” (verses 45-48, NASB).

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. There are people who say, 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. There are, I believe, many people who accept the Christmas story without accepting Christ as their 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 has the life." *Please note*: he did not say he who just has knowledge of the Son, but he who *has* the Son. John continues,

"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" (NASB).¹⁵

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" (NASB).¹⁶

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, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpress-

ible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.”¹⁷

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.

The Sparkling Presence Of Joy.

Question: How are we doing? How do we know how we are doing? The shepherds shows 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 first test and 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, “Then the shepherds returned [after seeing Jesus and telling others], glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was 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. Listen to King David’s joyful Psalm of praise celebration. To me it is one of the great Psalms of Praise to God. The time was when he was praising God on the day the ark of God was brought to Jerusalem and placed in the tabernacle.

“For the LORD is great and greatly to be praised; He is also to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Honor and majesty are before Him; strength and gladness are in His place. Give to the LORD, O families of the peoples, give to the Lord glory and strength. Give to the LORD the glory due His name; bring an offering, and come before Him. Oh, worship the LORD

in the beauty of holiness! Tremble before Him, all the earth. The world also is firmly established, it shall not be moved. Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; and let them say among the nations, ‘the LORD reigns.’ Let the sea roar, and all its fullness; let the field rejoice, and all that is in it. Then the trees of the woods shall rejoice before the LORD, for He is coming to judge the earth. Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.”¹⁸

The psalmists join the chorus, “Sing for joy in the LORD, O you righteous ones; praise is becoming to the upright” (NASB)¹⁹ and “O clap your hands, all peoples; shout to God with the voice of joy.”²⁰

What does God’s joy look like in His people as they worship Him? People have many different ideas on that. I can tell you one thing, it looks much different than the scene in one church on a Sunday morning. A small boy was sitting with his Mom, turning around and giving a great big smile to everyone. He wasn’t saying anything or creating a commotion. He was just smiling at everybody. 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*.²¹

When you think about it, the shepherd’s response makes sense doesn’t it? 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,

“Now when they [the shepherds] had seen Him [Jesus], they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds” (verses 17-18).

They didn’t let any lack of detailed knowledge, ability to speak to others, 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 wall-to-wall-with-people 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. Nine days until Christmas. Advent is over half completed. How are we doing in living and speaking as Christ's witnesses? And, of course, the question is not just for this season of the year, but for all of our days and years. As Jesus has commanded us, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (ESV).²²

The sparkling presence of God's joy will lead us to be witnesses.

Conclusion.

"Joy To The World!" Christ has come, and as we come to Him *He replaces our fears with His joy.*

If you know Jesus Christ as your Savior, where are you spiritually, in your walk with Him today? Each of us, all of us need to know, accept and celebrate that the Savior born in Bethlehem died on the cross for us, gives us life forever with Him by His grace through faith, replaces our fears with joy, will return to earth from heaven for us, for the church. Wherever you are at spiritually today, however you feel today in the season with all that is going on, 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 fully 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.

¹ Matthew 28:8.

² Adam Hadhazy. *Fear Factor: Dopamine May Fuel Dread, Too.*
<<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/fear-factor-dopamine/>>. 14 July 2008. Accessed 23 November 2018.

³ Luke 2:10.

⁴ Luke 2:10.

⁵ Luke 2:9.

⁶ Ecclesiastes 2:26.

⁷ John 15:11.

- ⁸ Galatians 5:22.
⁹ Jeremiah 15:16.
¹⁰ James 1:2-4, NASB.
¹¹ John 1:14.
¹² 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.
¹³ John 6:47.
¹⁴ Romans 15:13.
¹⁵ 1 John 5:11-13, NASB.
¹⁶ James 1:2-4, NASB.
¹⁷ 1 Peter 1:6-9.
¹⁸ 1 Chronicles 16:25-34.
¹⁹ Psalm 33:1, NASB.
²⁰ Psalm 47:1.
²¹ Old story. Original source not known.
²² Acts 1:8, ESV.

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