



## Rejoicing

Text: Luke 2:8-20  
Series: Advent #4  
Pastor Lyle L. Wahl  
December 23, 2012

Theme: **You can always experience God's gift of joy.**

### Introduction

In that brief video we saw earlier the people said,

“Life is crazy enough without December. Then it hits me like a natural disaster, like a storm that blows through my life once a year. The Christmas season.

“Now, I can see being filled with stress. That makes sense ... But you want me to be filled with joy? *Seriously?*”<sup>1</sup>

Yes, we know about the hectic pace and stress of the season. The extra layers of expectations and busyness can feel like a tornado or hurricane. The stresses and strains can drive us crazy. So the question, “*How can I experience joy this Christmas?*” You may be asking that question today.

So far this Advent we have looked at *Waiting* and *Preparing*. Now we turn to *Rejoicing*. We will be looking at Luke's familiar account of Jesus' birth in chapter 2. The important and exciting lesson is that *you can always experience God's gift of joy*. Yes, even in the busy, hectic, last two days before Christmas.

### Serious obstacles to joy.

All of us face obstacles to joy. Sometimes they can be very serious obstacles. The shepherds who received the news of Jesus' birth faced some serious obstacles to joy that night. Luke tells us that when the angel appeared to them, they were “terribly frightened,” or “terrified.”

Let me suggest that if you and I had been out on that field in the dark with them, we too would have been scared out of our wits. Picture a calm, dark night. It's the middle of the night. You are talking with your friends, trying to stay awake. All of a sudden the dark night explodes with light brighter than the sun. And, more than that, there right above you, in the brilliant glory of God, is one of His angels. And you are supposed to be filled with joy?

*Seriously?*

Especially for the shepherd because of their situation. They were “staying out,” or “living out in the fields” with their flocks. They may have been tending sheep that were specially raised for sacrifices at the Temple. Whether this was the case or not, their work required them to stay with their sheep constantly. This was no 9-5, 40 hour a week job. So, beyond their pungent body aroma, they were repugnant to most people because they could not keep all the ceremonial rituals and the detailed lists of dos and don'ts that were expected.

They might have expected a message of judgment, but not of “good news of great joy.” And so they could well have thought, “This appearance, this message must be for others, it can't be for us!” The shocking surprise, their position in society, and almost everything about them and their situation were obstacles to being joyful that night.

We are far and long removed from those shepherds, but we too can face serious obstacles to joy in this season of “good news of great joy,” this time of celebrating Jesus' birth. We know that Christians should be joyful in this season, and all seasons. Sometimes we don't, and others see that all too clearly. Oliver Wendell Holmes, who served on the U.S. Supreme Court, said “I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers.”<sup>2</sup> *Ouch! That hurts!*

And then sometimes we don't feel joyful, and so start feeling guilty and totally miserable about not feeling joyful!

Many things can be obstacles to joy. Our busy, hectic schedules. The seemingly countless demands and duties. Losses, losses of people we love, of valuable relationships, of a job. Memories of the past, failures, disappointments, terrible hurts. Then there are worries about the future, about marriage and family, education and career, children and grandchildren, retirement.

And of course there are problems in the present... problems at work. There is a book titled *Work Would Be Great If It Weren't For The People*.<sup>3</sup> We might be able to identify with those kinds of problems. Problems. Problems in the family, and between friends. Health problems. Then there are the disasters, injustice and violence that top the headlines and fill the news casts. We don't need to be reminded to think of the tragedy at Sandy Hook, Connecticut on December 14<sup>th</sup>.

Sometimes even the best-intended, delightful efforts of the season can be obstacles to joy. One lady writes,

“I was writing my Christmas cards while watching TV, feeling excited and in the festive mood. After about an hour (drawing holly and other little Christmassy doodles in each card), as I was writing the last card from the box of 30, it suddenly dawned on me that in every single Christmas card I had written ‘Happy Birthday.’”

What do you do? After being annoyed at herself and throwing all those cards out, she wrote them all out again (I guess with doodles and all) and, she tells us, “concentrated this time!”<sup>4</sup>

### **Significant clarifications about joy.**

Yes, the shepherds back then and we today can face serious obstacles to joy. To understand something of how to clear these hurdles, *to experience God’s joy in this season and always*, we need to look at some significant clarifications about joy. What is joy? Let’s start with what joy is not. There are many statements and analogies that try to draw the lines between *happiness* and *joy*. The fact is that the languages of the Old and New Testaments use the same words for both happiness and joy. As well, as good as some of those descriptions may be, they are not always complete or that helpful. What we need to see is the difference between true happiness or joy from God and the substitute from ourselves and our world.

True joy is not something that just happens to us. Having a better job, a bigger bank balance, a nicer home, a new vehicle or taking a great vacation can be very pleasurable. But those things are not, and cannot bring true joy. The happy, glad, cheerful feelings that brighten our days and lift our hearts because something nice, good, beautiful or wonderful happens are great, but not God’s joy. You see, *God’s joy is not a fleeting feeling*.

So what is joy then? I’ve worked on that for a number of years. Let me tell you where I am at this point. My working description of joy from Scripture is that it is *God’s gift of steadfast, delightful certainty*. Let’s walk through a few statements and pictures of joy which teach us that *joy is God’s gift of steadfast, delightful certainty*. First, the Bible tells us that God is the source of joy. King David wrote in Psalm 16, “...in Your presence [God] there is *gladness of joy*; in Your right hand there are *pleasures forever*” (11). Then God tells us that He gives His joy to His people. Ecclesiastes 2 says, “For to a person who is good in His sight [God] has *given* wisdom and knowledge and *joy*...” (26)

And God promises this joy to each and every one of His children. Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you so that My *joy* may be in you, and that your *joy* may be made full.”<sup>5</sup> Again, Jesus said, “you too have grief now; but I will see you again, and your heart will *rejoice*, and no one will take your *joy* away from you.”<sup>6</sup> Circumstances, obstacles can only steal our joy if we choose to allow them to do so. And once more Jesus tells us, “Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your *joy* may be made full.”<sup>7</sup> In Galatians chapter 5 the apostle Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit works in believers to produce this joy. It is part of the “fruit of the Spirit.”

We find testimonies in the Bible that this is true. Jeremiah, for example. “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.”<sup>5</sup> Here, as with Jesus’ statement in John 15, we see that God gives us His joy through the truth of His word, the Bible.

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.”

And because of that 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.”

So we see the truth in Nehemiah's words, “the *joy* of the LORD is your strength” (8:10).

Joy is *God's gift of steadfast, delightful certainty* that is based in Him and the truth of His Word. Do you sometimes doubt if this really can be true for you, at least where you are at? Go back to the angel's message in Luke 2 verse 10 again, “... I bring you good news of great joy which will be for *all* the people.” Now, without getting technical, let me suggest that *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!*

Experiencing it begins with accepting God's truth. The shepherds began by accepting God's message of joy as true for them, and so must we. Jesus is God the Son who became one of us to pay the debt for our sins with His death on the cross. We must accept that there is forgiveness of sin and life with God now and forever through Jesus Christ, and then actually place our faith in Him. As Jesus said, “Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.”<sup>9</sup>

As believers, as Christians, we are to do what the shepherds did after they accepted the truth from the angel. They discussed what they saw and heard. They went to check it out, and verified it as true. In short, they acted on the truth. They chose to accept, believe and live based on the “good news of great joy.”

### **Satisfying experiences of joy.**

So how do we feel, what is life like when we are filled with God's joy? What will the satisfying experiences and steadfast, delightful certainties look like? First, experiencing and growing in God's joy leads us to overflow 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.”

When you stop to think about it, what an unlikely choir! A bunch of rough, gruff, uneducated, ineloquent men. But there they are. They didn't stumble over the obstacles. God gave them His joy and, as a result, they were overflowing with praise to God.

They were far from the first or last to be called to this and to experience it. We can turn back to many places in the Old Testament. Chronicles 16 includes a song of praise and thanks when David had the Ark brought to Jerusalem. Part of that was

“... great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised ... 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.” (25a, 27-29a)

These people were filled with joy at it overflowed into praise. The psalm writers join the chorus, “Sing for *joy* in the LORD, O you righteous ones; praise is becoming to the upright” (33:1), and again, “O clap your hands, all peoples; shout to God with the voice of *joy*” (47:1). When you think about it, the shepherd's response was logical. When experiencing God's gift of steadfast delightful certainty, how can one but overflow with praise to Him?

Then too, if we are really experiencing and growing in God's joy we will be passing on this “good news of great joy” 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.”

These shepherds did not let any lack of detailed knowledge, ability to speak, or acceptance by others 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, as we experience and grow in God's gift of joy we will be proclaiming the good news to others. Luke chapter 15 records a series of parables Jesus told to paint some pictures of what God's love is like, of how it reaches out to those who need it. First was the parable of the one lost sheep out of a hundred. The shepherd left the ninety-nine in the open pasture and searched for the lost one. When he found it, he *rejoiced*, and then called all his friends to *rejoice* with him.

Next was the parable of the woman who lost one of her ten silver coins. She searched until she found it, and then called her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her. Finally there was the parable of the Father and his two sons. The younger one rebelled openly and left home. The father waited and watched. When the younger one returned the father *rejoiced* and threw a grand party so all could celebrate and *rejoice* with him.

God's joy and love in us will act in the same way. We will pass it on to others. Christ has found us and we have found Him. The angels of heaven have rejoiced and we rejoice. And this joy will cause us reach out to others to rejoice with us, to find Jesus, to join in the joy

of sins forgiven and life with God. In this season, and in all seasons, as we are filled with and growing in God's joy we will be telling others "the good news of great joy."

## Conclusion.

Yes, *you* can always experience God's gift of joy. Question: 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 now and forever with Him, who will give you the *gift of steadfast, delightful certainty*, why wait? Open your heart to Him now in these next few moments of quietness, and then talk with me or someone else about that before you leave here this morning.

If you have already done that, even if it was a long time ago, thank God again this morning 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, and as you want to. Determine to examine, receive and obey God's truth in His Word, and so grow in His joy. Determine to overflow with joy in praise to God and in passing on the "good news of great joy" to others.

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<sup>1</sup> *How Can I Experience Joy?* Dallas: Floodgate Productions, n.d.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. Cited in *The Gospel of Matthew: Chapters 1-10* by William Barclay. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, page 139.

<sup>3</sup> Ronna Lichtenberg. *Work Would Be Great If It Weren't For The People*. New York: Hyperion, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Pam. "Your Christmas Disaster Stories Revealed." *Stylist.co.uk*.  
<<http://www.stylist.co.uk/christmas/your-christmas-disaster-stories-revealed>>. Accessed 20 December 2012.

<sup>5</sup> John 15:11

<sup>6</sup> John 16:22.

<sup>7</sup> John 16:24.

<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah 15:16.

<sup>9</sup> John 6:47.

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