

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church - December 16, 2018

Advent 3 – The Sunday of Joy

Hymns: We Light A Thousand Candles; 122 - O Come O Come Emmanuel;

138 – While Shepherds Watched; God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen

Scripture: Luke 2:8-20; John 15:9-12

Sermon: “Great Joy” – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

Luke 2:8-20 (NIV)

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

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”

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.”

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

John 15:9-12 (NIV)

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

It was a hard life, being a shepherd. Long weeks away from home, in search of pasture and water. Long days in the winter drizzle, longer days in the broiling summer sun, long nights in the shivering Bethlehem cold, one eye open for stragglers, one ear open for wolves, tired body trying to find a not-too-uncomfortable place to lay. Job one was keeping the sheep together and healthy; job two was keeping them away from farmers’ fields and crops; job three was walking, walking, walking, trying

not to break an ankle, a leg, a neck on the steep, rocky hillsides; job four was chasing lost sheep, chasing hungry jackals, chasing lurking bandits, and on, and on, until way down the line, Job 113, was maybe finding a moment's rest, a moment's peace and quiet, a moment with wife and family. It was a hard life, being a shepherd. Other than the seasons, nothing ever changed.

And then one night...

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

Just a couple of sentences. Ten seconds to read. But ten seconds in which the world of the shepherds would be forever changed. Ten seconds in which their world of sun and wind and dark and cold and rocks and sheep expanded to include heaven itself.

The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid."

"Do not be afraid." Easier said than done; tough as these shepherds were, this was utterly beyond their experience. Let's face it; having an angel appear from out of the night sky, with the Glory of the Lord shining round about, is beyond pretty much everyone's experience, beyond everyone's ability to cope.

"I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

Good News – for the shepherds, as for most people back then, as for most people in our world today, Good News was in pretty short supply. For the shepherds, in Roman-occupied Israel, under the kingship of the paranoid homicidal Herod, where crippling taxation, random violence, and hand-to-mouth survival was the daily reality, Good News meant nothing horrible happening that day. No hailstorms. No jackals. No broken ankles. No swords. That was Good News.

But the angel was speaking of something more – of "*great joy for all the people.*" When last had the shepherds known "great joy?" When last had anybody? And the source of this joy – a Saviour? A Messiah? A Lord? Even the shepherds, on the very edge of society, knew of the promises – the promise that someday, God would have his own. That someday, all the misery of the world would be made right; the tyrants brought low; the oppressors vanquished; the poor finally given a chance.

But it seemed like a promise that would never come true. And yet – *“Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”*

They were still trying to process this with their dazzled shepherd minds, when the angel added another piece of news:

“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

“A Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord... wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” These two statements didn’t seem to fit together. A Saviour, Messiah, the Lord, wrapped in gold raiment and lying in an ivory cradle in a palace’s splendour – that would make sense. But, *“a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”* That’s something the shepherds had seen before. They had seen the mothers of the poor, sent to the stables to bear their young, like any other animal. They, themselves, sons of shepherds, had likely been born in a stable. Their children, too. Laid in a manger. This is the Messiah?

And the wheels of their overwhelmed brains are still grinding slowly away, trying to absorb this news, when:

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”

How are you, as a first century shepherd, expected to process any of this? How are you expected to understand this sudden intrusion of heaven, this lifting of the veil, this co-mingling of heaven and earth? One angel, and they were terrified. Now, a great company of angels. Praising God. Bursting into songs of glorious wonder. Did the shepherds stand and stare, stupefied? Did they fall to their faces and cover their heads with their cloaks in terror? Did they cling to each other for whatever support they could find? How are you, as a first century shepherd, expected to process any of this? How could anybody? All Luke says is:

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.”

The angels leave, and it is just sky, and stars, and rocks, and sheep. And the light of the angels no longer there, and the sound of the angels no longer singing. A

different darkness. A different silence. A darkness and a silence filled with promise, filled with hope. A world filled with the distant rumble not of thunder, but of joy.

And so it is to Bethlehem they go, it is to Bethlehem they run, leaving one of their number behind to keep an eye on the sheep, the one who thought his knees were still shaking too much to run anyway:

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

Probably amazed that the shepherds had anything to say at all. I can almost imagine it; sleepy Bethlehem waking up in the chilly dawn, looking out their windows, sweeping off the steps, off to the well with buckets and jars, and here, coming down the street, a group of shepherds of all things, an uncommon sight in town, and as they walk, the shepherds stop and tell anyone who will listen what they had heard, what they had seen, speaking with words like Angel, Saviour, Messiah, Lord. *“And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.”* Amazed, too, as they looked upon the faces of the shepherds, and saw, of all things, Joy.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God.” Not normal behavior for shepherds. Cursing, muttering, complaining, grumbling, or just plain obstinate silence, that’s normal. But, *“glorifying and praising God;”* well, something’s changed. Everything’s changed.

Everything? Same rocky ground. Same milling sheep. Same morning damp. Same aching bones. Same sun breaking through the haze. Same jackals slinking over the hill. Same threadbare cloak. Same stiff sandals. All the externals are as they ever were. It was still a hard life, being a shepherd. It always would be. But everything’s nonetheless changed. For now, deep inside, there’s Joy. *“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.”*

Joy. “Great Joy.” “Mega Joy,” is the literal translation. We think of “Joy” as something which comes to us as a result of external circumstances. Winning the lottery. A bonus at work. An unexpected windfall. A lucky break. These bring

happiness, sure, but joy? Joy is more permanent than that. Happiness is a reaction to a situation. Joy is a transformation of heart and mind. Happiness comes and goes. Joy is there for the long haul. Happiness is the result of a change in external circumstances. Joy is a change in us. It is a change in our relationship with the world, with one another, with God, with life itself.

Jesus expressed this very idea to his disciples. He assured them of the Father's love. He assured them of his love for each of them. He commanded them to share this love with one another:

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.”

Knowing we are loved. Loving in return. Here is joy. Knowing we are loved by God. Loving God in return. Here is joy in its completeness. A joy entirely independent of external circumstances. A joy which perseveres, no matter what the world may bring. Not just any joy; “My Joy,” says Jesus. Great Joy. “Mega Joy.” For when we know God's love, we know that there is so much more than the world which we see and experience. We know, beyond our most ordinary or desperate of circumstances, that just out of sight, just beyond our ability to perceive, there is a “*heavenly host ... praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.’*”

The shepherds found the Baby. They found the Christ-child. And in finding him, they found Joy. It was still a hard life, being a shepherd. It always would be. But everything was nonetheless changed. For now, deep inside, they found joy.

Not everything in your life is easy. Not everything ever has been, nor shall be. Yes, there is, and has been, and will be, good. And those good things, those good times have brought and will bring happiness. I pray there will be many such times in your life. Yet I know also that much in life is, and has been, and will be, hard. There have been disappointments. There have been struggles. There have been painful goodbyes. There have been illnesses. There has been grief.

But allow me to remind you of this: Everything's changed. Things may appear the same, but everything's changed. For, “*I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people... a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.*” And he loves you, and comes to bring his joy to you, and make your joy complete.

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

And so with shepherds and angels together, let us praise and glorify God, *“for all the things we have heard and seen;”* let us praise and glorify God, for Joy. Great Joy. Mega Joy! Amen.

“God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen.”

Our closing hymn is, “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen.” Try, for a moment, to get past the gender-exclusive language; “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlepersons” just doesn’t fit the music, but you’re welcome to give it a try. What I want you to notice is the comma. The comma comes after “Merry,” not after “Ye.” And that little comma tells us something.

Putting the comma after “Ye” implies the gentlemen in question are already “Merry.” You can imagine these folks, cider and mulled wine in hand, cheeks red with the cold, having a laugh at Christmas. But the comma comes after “Merry.” It’s 15th Century English, which we don’t speak any longer, and so to translate it with the comma in its proper place reads, “God grant you peace and joy.” You can imagine these folks too: people frazzled and worn, worried with the concerns of work and life, and the song is a prayer that they would have a peaceful rest, and a deep joy within. And the source? Not cider and mulled wine, but this:

God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen, let nothing you dismay;
Remember Christ our Saviour was born on Christmas day,
To save us all from Satan’s power when we were gone astray,
O Tidings of comfort and joy. Comfort and joy; O Tidings of comfort and joy.

That’s our source of joy; Christ is come to deliver us from the power of evil, and from our wandering, disappointed, sinful selves. Our future is changed; our hope is secure. God’s love has come to us in Jesus Christ. And so, we rest – we have peace – there is joy. “Now to the Lord sing praises, All you within this place.”