

JOY // Good News of Great Joy

It's an incredible reality that 2,000 years ago, God came down and entered into the human story as a little baby boy for a very specific purpose, which we will talk more about in just a bit.

Luke 2:1-11, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn Son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths and laid Him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you **good news of great joy** that will be **for all the people**. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.'" (ESV)

During this Christmas season, we've been talking about joy. Because joy is not only a primary theme in the Christmas story, but it's one of the primary themes of the entire Bible.

Now, I'm not a morning person. I'm not all that happy in the morning, I need my space, I need at least several cups of coffee. If you're happy around me and it's too early in the morning, I'm just going to need you to go be happy somewhere else.

King David wrote this in the Psalms:

Psalms 30:5, "...Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning." (ESV)

In theory, I understand what he meant. But in my experience, this just hasn't been true. More often, I'm joyful at night, and weeping comes in the morning.

Last week, I went to sleep with nothing wrong. No aches, no pain, nothing, and I woke up with a pulled muscle in my back, throbbing pain in my knees and in my left big toe. Just to clarify for everyone, I laid down on a soft, fluffy, feathery mattress for 8 hours and that was too much physical exertion for my body to handle. More often than not, when I wake up in the morning, it's not, "YAY," it's, "OW!"

But what King David is talking about here is a joy that supersedes your circumstances, or your aches and pains, or even the most difficult seasons of life.

Psalms 30:11, "You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness..." (ESV)

David is describing not only what God has done for him, but He's pointing us to what God has done for all of humanity in the person of Jesus.

That why the angel declares to the shepherds,

Luke 2:10, "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." (ESV)

GOOD NEWS

We hear the Christmas story, that it's good news of great joy for all people, but our experience in life is often bad news of impending doom for all people.

With everything unfolding overseas between Israel and Hamas, Russia and Ukraine, we have an election year coming up where everyone will surely treat one another with kindness, mutual respect, and dignity. Or bring it into your own world. At the frenzied pace our culture is running, the level of distraction we find ourselves in. Adulthood often feels like an invitation into a perpetual state of exhaustion. We love our children so much, but 90% of parenting is just thinking about the next time you can lie down again.

We bring these expectations with us, that life will go a certain way, and it rarely ever does, so it's not just exhaustion and overwhelm but this undercurrent of disappointment.

Even with Christmas, we build it up. We hope it's going to culminate in this incredible, unforgettable, hallmark moment. Yet, often times, as wonderful as Christmas can be, it never quite reaches that pinnacle that we hoped it would.

We bring these hopes and expectations with us in a world that is broken and painful, and at times incredibly difficult to navigate, and it's filled with bad news.

Even in the midst of all of the bad news, the good news is still good.

News is not advice. Advice is something you get so that you can improve your life. News is the announcement of something that has already taken place that impacts or changes your understanding, or your perspective, or even your worldview.

So, the angel shows up to these shepherds and says, *good news! Something has taken place, and this news, this announcement, this event that has taken place, will cause...*

GREAT JOY

The creator of heaven and earth has pursued you to the ends of the earth. The one who made the stars and holds the planets in their orbit, the one who designed every animal and every molecule in the human body, the one who created you to enjoy Him and the rest of the created

order, He came down, as a baby, subjected Himself to His own creation, in order to save us from a world broken by sin, selfishness, shame, and self-justification. To save us from a world riddled with bad news.

See, when we're talking about joy, we're not talking about putting on a mask and pretending that everything is okay when it isn't.

This is one of the main problems in western culture, especially in the South. We do our best to keep up appearances even when behind the scenes our lives are filled with shame and darkness, and pain. Ever since Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree, human beings have been covering themselves, hiding from God and from one another, terrified that if we're seen, if we're fully known, that we'll be cast out and rejected. We fear that if we're fully known, with all our faults, fears, and flaws, that we won't be loved. And so, we hide, we cover up, we pretend, we put on masks.

But the Christmas story is good news, not because you've somehow duped God into loving you but because God already knows all of your shame, all of your faults, and shortcomings, and things about you that you don't want anyone else to know about. He knows it all and came for you anyway!

The truth is, every person on the planet has developed all kinds of intricate and complex methods of coping, covering up, survival, and self-protection. Busyness, achievement, people-pleasing, codependency. Or we isolate and numb through substances, or technology, or even dead, empty religion. We use religious language and practices to hide from God.

The bad news is that God isn't fooled by your attempts to hide and cover up. He isn't fooled by the masks we wear. He isn't fooled by our fig leaves.

Hebrews 4:13, "And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account." (ESV)

But here's the good news. Whatever shame you're covering up, God already knows what it is, and He loves you anyway. He's not intimidated by the things that you think make you unlovable, or unacceptable.

But the Christmas story isn't that Christ left His throne, set aside all His rights and privileges, just to sort of begrudgingly tolerate you. The Christmas story is that He knows everything there is to know about you. He knows all of the good and the bad, all the great and terrible things, and He loves you anyway. He came down anyway. He lived and died for you anyway. He conquered death, hell, and the grave for you anyway!

That's why it's good news of great joy! Light entered the darkness, joy entered into our sorrow, grace entered into our shame and has extended an invitation to all of humanity, including you, to enter into an eternal joy that will never fade away.

Even the people who love you the most, as wonderful as their love is, it doesn't come close to the love of God for you. And the Christmas story, the birth of the Messiah, is proof! It's your assurance of the love of God for over your life!

That's why it's good news of great joy! And it is...

FOR ALL PEOPLE

What's interesting is God sends the angels to announce the coming of the Messiah. The announcement doesn't go to kings. It doesn't go to people in power, it doesn't even go to the religious elite, or cultural insiders. It doesn't go to military generals, or influential politicians.

Of all the people this announcement could go to, it went to dirty, stinky shepherds. The only lower class in the social order was lepers. They were despised by their culture, especially by the religious people, because they were viewed as ceremonially unclean. They couldn't wash often because of the unending nature of their work. They were so despised that their testimonies were inadmissible in a court of law simply because they were shepherds. They were despised by their culture and were told that they were despised by God.

Yet, of all people, God sends the angel, in a display of glory, to the shepherds. And they were terrified.

Luke 2:9, "...they were filled with great fear." (ESV)

The angel makes his announcement,

Luke 2:13-14, "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!'" (ESV)

This is a heavenly procession announcing the birth of the Messiah. It's like heaven is pulling out all the stops for this public proclamation. And when you think about the audience, it's not the colosseum, it's not in the great halls of the Roman empire. It's to a couple of stinky shepherds and some very confused sheep!

But if this great earth-shaking, world-changing announcement went to these shepherds, that means that no matter what shame or disappointment you're carrying, no matter what pain that has been inflicted upon you, no matter how many masks you've worn and are still wearing, no matter what methods of coping, survival, or hiding that you've developed, no matter how despised or distant you think you are from God, the announcement going to the shepherds means this announcement is for you too.

That's why it's good news of great joy for all people.

This is why the earliest Christian communities were known for being full of joy even when they faced horrific circumstances. (**Acts 5:41**)

This is why when the apostle Paul was imprisoned for his faith, he could rejoice even if he were to be executed. (**Philemon 3:1, Romans 15:13**)

Jesus' presence is with you, inspiring hope in the midst of hardship. And when you believe that Jesus' love has overcome death itself, joy becomes reasonable in the darkest of circumstances.

Isaiah 51:11-12, "And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. 'I, I am He who comforts you...'" (ESV)

In the birth of Jesus, this everlasting joy is made available to you, and it doesn't mean that the difficult moments aren't difficult, or the pain of life isn't painful.

The apostle Paul acknowledged his pain,

2 Corinthians 6:10, "...sorrowful, yet always rejoicing..."

Heartache, difficulty, shame, disappointment, they are no less real for the Christian than for anyone else. But because of the birth of Christ, we can rejoice in our sorrows because we know that sorrow doesn't get the final word.

The biggest news of 2023 is not Elon Musk, or AI taking over the world, or what's unfolding overseas. The biggest news is not what someone else said about you or even what you think about yourself. It's not the story of shame that's been hanging over your head for all these years. The biggest news of 2023 is this:

Luke 2:11, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (ESV)

Today, all over the world, the Church gathers for the lighting of candles as the representation of the light of Jesus entering into the darkness of our world, dismantling our shame, dispelling the darkness of the disease of sin, and bringing pervasive, everlasting joy to all who believe in His name. Repeatedly, throughout scripture, the themes of light and joy are intimately linked together.

Isaiah 9:2-3, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone... you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest..." (ESV)

Merry Christmas.