

Great Joy!

- Luke 2:8-14
- Maybe some of us can relate to this story. A father and mother were barking out orders to their children as they prepared to have everybody over for a large Christmas Eve family gathering: "Stop picking on each other! Pick up your things! Put away those toys!" Their 4-year-old daughter had been underfoot all day, so they sent her to the next room to play with the Nativity set. In a few minutes they overheard their daughter yelling at the plastic wise men: "I don't care who you are, get those camels out of my living room!"
- Sometimes our lives are messy, aren't they? Maybe a lot of the time? Everybody in here has some kind of mess that you are dealing with. Everybody knows someone who is facing a health crisis, or enduring a chronic illness, or waiting for a diagnosis. Everybody here knows a marriage or a family that is in trouble. Everybody here feels the stress of living in a broken world, dealing with family members and co-workers and neighbors who not only don't understand why we want to follow Jesus, but sometimes are actively trying to get us to stop following Him. It's a mess. Sometimes we say things like, "I could enjoy life if I didn't have *this* to deal with...." Or, "I wish I could enjoy Christmas, but that's not possible, not with this mess going on in my family." But the truth is the mess that is our lives is actually the reason we have Christmas in the first place. God sent Christ for our joy in the midst of our chaos. The shepherds heard it clearly from the angel: "I bring you good news of great joy!" I appreciate Micah's good word on joy last Sunday and will continue with that theme this morning.
- First, let's acknowledge that this was not just ordinary joy, which is wonderful, this was GREAT joy. The Bible talks about joy more than 200 times, and it is given to us in Christ every day. We know that everyday joy comes to us when we taste his goodness. In laughter around the dinner table. In a smile. In completing a task or in using God-given abilities to bless others. There is joy in giving and there is joy in receiving, which we experience at Christmas. But because we were made to live forever, we long for joy that will last, that is not connected only to that which is finite. That is where "good news of great joy" comes in to satisfy us.
- A reference to great joy is rare in Scripture, showing up only a handful of times. The people of Israel rejoiced with great joy when their beloved King David's son, Solomon, was anointed as his successor. (1 Kings 1:40). In Hezekiah's day, there was "great joy in Jerusalem," when the Passover was properly celebrated for the first time since Solomon was king. (2 Chronicles 30:26). And finally, when the wall was rebuilt by Nehemiah, the people rejoiced with great joy, so great that Nehemiah said, "the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away." (Nehemiah 12:43) It is interesting that great joy in the old covenant arrived because of a king. And because of a sacrifice. And because of a city. All finite, but each one pointing to the infinite. **Each of these point to the King who came to sacrifice his life so that the city of the living God could be prepared for us, his people!**
- "I bring you good news of great joy." This story reminds us that Christmas invites us into great joy. Not as a place to visit once a year and wistfully long for through 12 long months until it comes around again. No! Great joy is how God works in the world. Everything God has done, from the Garden of Eden to the Garden of Gethsemane, from the creation of the world to its re-creation, is for God's great glory and for our great joy! And even with all the trials and suffering we experience, God gives us *everyday* joy to deepen the experience of great joy. The joy I feel when I pick up one of my grandchildren and give them a hug points me to the great joy I have in the Son who loves me and picks ME up every day because I am his. The joy we feel when we hear a dear brother or sister in the Lord has been pronounced "in remission," points us to the great joy we have in Christ who has pronounced us forgiven! Forever healed of the most deadly of diseases, a sinful heart!
- Richard Foster writes, "Celebration is at the heart of the way of Christ. He entered the world on a high note of jubilation: 'I bring you good news of great joy,' cried the angel. He left the world bequeathing his joy to the disciples: 'These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.'" (*Celebration of Discipline*)

- The good news of great joy was and is for all people. No one needs to miss it. Look, there are times when we need to “petition the government for a redress of grievances,” to quote from the First Amendment. We have that right. But the good news of great joy? You don’t need to petition anybody, especially not Congress, for that! It has come to you, it is, and it will never end! You simply need to reach out and take hold of the one who has taken hold of you. That’s what the shepherds did.
- They did not settle for just seeing and meeting Jesus the Messiah. When they got to the manger and saw that it was exactly as the angel had said, they could not keep silent. First, they told the story to those who were at the birthplace. I can imagine Joseph asking when the men arrived, “How did you know we were here?” And the shepherds excitedly telling the story of the angel’s announcement. Mary and Joseph looked at each other perhaps and said at the same time, “The angel came back.”
- Lee Eclov writes, “Surely the shepherds asked if they could hold the baby. The Lamb of God would first be held and handled by those who knew how to appreciate and care for a lamb. They must’ve lingered as long as they could—looking, marveling, and worshiping. But the break of dawn started poking through the cracks in the stable door and the shepherds knew it was time to go. People must have been puzzled at the sight of shepherds at that hour. They were supposed to be out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks. But for once those shepherds weren’t thinking about their sheep. They had news that they couldn’t keep to themselves any more than you can hide a smile when your heart is bursting with joy.”
- Luke tells us, ***and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.*** Who did the shepherds tell? I have to believe that the shepherds, after seeing the Savior with their own eyes, went to at least their friends and family. Most certainly. But maybe to the whole city! And maybe this is why God chose shepherds in the first place, because he knew they would not be sidetracked by less important things at that moment, like raising sheep.
- Good news of great joy. The shepherds finally returned to their sheep, but they were different men now. Francis Schaeffer wrote years ago, “Can you imagine one of the shepherds remarking, ‘It’s very nice that I’ve seen an angel, and it is nice I have seen the Christ, the Messiah the Jews have been waiting for, for so long. It’s nice that I’ve believed in him (unlike some of the other people in Bethlehem) and that I’m going to be in heaven. But really, in practice, it’s not going to make any difference at all in my life.’” No! These shepherds had seen and held the great I Am. Their lives were forever changed. And Mary? She “treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.”
- What do we do, then, if we are not joyful? What if joy seems like an impossible thing to attain to right now? You may be able to come up with a list of 50 reasons why you just cannot be joyful, cannot rejoice, cannot feel joy right now. What to do? As we have seen, the Bible’s solution to a lack of joy is surprisingly vertical. We look up, to the One who gives us a reason for joy and the One who is the source of joy. Jesus told his disciples before he went to the cross, “You have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.” (John 16:22). He understood that there would be great sorrow in his absence and great joy in his presence. The only way that promise can be true is if Jesus is the source of our joy. I have good news of great joy. Jesus is with us. He is here. And no one can take him from us. Ever.
- We don’t need smaller problems in order to live joyful lives. We need a bigger God. And we have one. He ***is*** “good news of great joy!”
- Prayer
- Communion