

Sermon – December 15, 2019
The Cast of Christmas – Shepherds: Hope and Joy
Crown of Life Lutheran Church, Rigby, ID
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Today we continue our Christmas series titled “The Cast of Christmas”. During the first week, we experienced the anticipation of the prophets, the second week we experienced the joyful proclamation of the angels. And today, we will experience the journey of the shepherds and the hope and joy they expressed.

As we think about that word HOPE ... don't you think the shepherds eventually drew the same conclusion as you and I do about the reason for our HOPE this season, which is also our foundation for JOY.

We should think of JOY as tuning in to what God is doing around you, seeing the world through his eyes. Anyone can find happiness for a while ... happiness that depends on what is happening to you.

Joy is different ... joy goes deeper. Joy can creep up on you and surprise you in unexpected places.

You see, the opposite of joy IS NOT sorrow ... it is unbelief

So, let's ask the question ... “What is needed for joy?”

To help us better understand JOY, I want to share a story that Max Lucado tells about Robert Reed:

Robert said "I have everything I need for joy!" But his hands are twisted and his feet are useless. He can't bathe himself. He can't feed himself. He can't brush his teeth, comb his hair, or put on his underwear. Strips of Velcro hold his shirts together. His speech drags like a worn-out audiocassette. Robert has cerebral palsy.

The disease keeps him from driving a car, riding a bike, and going for a walk. But it didn't keep him from graduating from Abilene Christian University with a degree in Latin. Having cerebral palsy didn't keep him from teaching at St. Louis Junior College, or from venturing overseas on five mission trips.

And Robert's disease didn't prevent him from becoming a missionary in Portugal. He moved to Lisbon, alone, in 1972. There he rented a hotel room and began studying Portuguese. He found a restaurant owner who would feed him after the rush hour, and a tutor who would instruct him in the language.

Then, he stationed himself in a park every day, where he distributed brochures about Christ. Within six years he led seventy people to the Lord, one of whom became his wife, Rosa.

You could say that his shirts are held together by Velcro, but his life is held together ... by JOY.

We all realize that the first Christmas present was significantly different. We heard in last Sunday's Gospel lesson that the Angels announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds in their fields. They said, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah,

the Lord...” (Luke 2:8–12).

So today, Dr. Luke continues the story...

“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” (verses 16–18).

This Christmas present was SO different.

The problem with toys and other things we may get at Christmas is that we look to them for HOPE and JOY, and eventually the principle of diminishing returns kicks in.

With toys and the other things we LOOK TO for hope and joy, we find that the more we go back to them, or think about them, the LESS joy it brings ... thus, diminishing returns.

Even if you had an incredible once-in-a-lifetime experience, like shooting wild pigs in Texas, you can only hold onto it for so long. As you tell the story and recount the experience, the excitement of the experience will eventually fade.

An amazing gift will only bring happiness for so long. Eventually, it just becomes part of the mass of stuff that you have.

But the first Christmas gift is a different sort of gift altogether. The shepherds show us that encountering Jesus is a different sort of experience.

It had such an impact on the shepherds that they HAD to spread the word after they had seen Him. They HAD to talk about it. This was a lasting hope and joy that they could not contain.

Then, three decades after that encounter, Jesus gave us insight on this sort of hope and joy for our lives when He said...

“I have told you this so that my JOY may be in you and that your JOY may be complete” (John 15:11).

We all experience joy at some point, but how many of us would say our joy is complete? There are about 250 passages in the Bible that deal with JOY. If you read all of them, you’ll find the Bible doesn’t just encourage joy, but it commands us to have it.

In fact, the Bible commands us to rejoice twice as many times as it commands us to repent. We aren’t just given permission to laugh, or to have some fun times; God wants your life to be constantly overflowing and filled with joy.

That being said ... is that how you would describe your life today ... a life constantly overflowing and filled with JOY?

Think about the shepherds’ joy ... it was entirely a result of what God had done. And we are told that their joy grew as they MET Jesus.

Joy begins for us in the same way it began for the shepherds. Our JOY begins when we meet Jesus.

Very few things last forever. But an encounter with Jesus remains and grows through all eternity.

Meeting Jesus never stops giving us hope ... and opportunities for joy.

With that foundation in mind, let's zero in on a few basic themes that stem from those 250 passages about JOY.

While our foundation for joy comes as a result of what Jesus did for us, we find that embracing daily joy has little to do with WHAT HAPPENS every day.

In fact, according to many passages in the Bible, HOPE and JOY are more of a mind-set or posture for living that comes from WHAT Jesus did at Christmas rather than simply having a feeling.

It's an undeniable theme concerning joy in the Bible ... so now, we just need to Embrace the Hope and Joy that Jesus has given us.

The apostle Paul clearly demonstrates this truth in Philippians 4...

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near." Philippians 4:4-5

One important part of walking in hope and joy is simply to CHOOSE to rejoice in everything. Much of the hope, joy, and rejoicing in the Bible isn't really connected with circumstances.

It's connected with a decision ... a choice. In fact, one of the keys to a life of joy is to rejoice EVEN WHEN your circumstances are disappointing or painful.

Take, for example, the amazing prayer of the prophet Habakkuk. The prophet prays to God when Israel is in a state of terrible disarray. Wickedness and idolatry ruled the land, and the Assyrians were threatening to overwhelm Israel.

As I read his prayer from Habakkuk 3:17-18, pay attention to both the circumstances the prophet is facing, as well as, his response...

"Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior."

There's not much more that could be going wrong in Israel. Yet, Habakkuk's response is to REJOICE.

He chooses to not just rejoice, but to be joyful. That's amazing. Normally, good things happen, and then we feel happy. We feel joy, and then we might rejoice.

The Bible says, "That's well and good ... but actually it works the other way around. You start with rejoicing, and then you feel joy."

Like the shepherds, we always have a reason to rejoice, since Christ has come! Joy flows out of rejoicing.

Here's a practical example. I don't think anyone likes feeling embarrassed. We all hate making a mistake or doing something foolish.

When that feeling comes, the first thing we want to do is run from it; we try to forget it. We try to replace it or defend against it. In fact, most of us will do whatever it takes to not feel embarrassed.

The next time you feel embarrassed, try this. When embarrassment comes, don't expect to enjoy it, but choose to rejoice in it.

We can actually thank God when we feel foolish because it's a chance for our ego to be challenged and broken.

So instead of running away from it, or pushing it down, try giving praise and thanks to God. How about this prayer...

That approach can change the way we go through all sorts of failures. We will never desire to do or say foolish things, but maybe for the first time we can have joy in the midst of them.

So, we can conclude this section with the thought we started with ... like the shepherds, we to conclude that Jesus birth is the Reason for our Hope and the Foundation for our Joy._

Now, the next point I want you to think about is the idea that Hope and Joy Can't Be Taken Away.

Do you remember this famous passage from Romans 8:28?

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

And here is the key to the power in that verse...

"All things" is not SOME things.

"All things" is not MOST things.

"All things" means ALL things.

So, no matter what you go through, you can be absolutely certain that one of two things is happening ... either God sent it, or God is going to use it.

I admit that God sends things that aren't quite what we ask for. I also think there are tragedies and pain that God doesn't send. But if you love Him, you can be sure that He is using it somehow and in some way for your good, because He is mindful of you and watches over you.

Thus, we can always have HOPE. We can always rejoice. And one of the eventual outflows of rejoicing is JOY.

Do you remember what the big sin was that the Israelites fell into when they were wandering in the desert after they escaped Egypt? Well, there were actually at least two. One was "idolatry", of course. But the more common one was "complaining".

And their complaining made God angry. Some of us need to be reminded that complaining and grumbling can be sinful.

For example, grouching and complaining about your boss, about your relatives, about your friends, about your pastor, about our Police Chief ... is a sin.

It is incredibly dishonoring and divisive. Just as rejoicing restores your joy, complaining STEALS your joy.

How many of you know people who complain a lot? I suspect we all do. How many of those people would you describe as hopeful, happy, joyful people, whom you just love being around?

Complaining doesn't help. It hurts. So, if you complain a lot ... stop it!

Complaining is actually a declaration of war against your own joy. So, part of the solution to this problem is Don't Settle for Anything Less than HOPE and JOY.

There's another undeniable theme connected to our continued hope and growing joy that's found throughout the Bible. It's most clearly seen in Psalm 51.

This Psalm was written by David after he had had an affair with Bathsheba, and arranged for her husband to be killed. In verses 3 and 4, David says,

"My sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."

I think the high point of this psalm is verse 12, where David prays, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation."

The first thing to notice is that David brings his life back into alignment with God's truth ... with God's Word.

Our sin almost certainly will bring temporary pleasure, or perhaps even a little happiness. But we all know that in the end, our sin will STEAL our hope and CRUSH our joy. David also wrote these words in Psalm 19:8...

"The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes."

Do you want your eyes to light up? Do you want to come alive?

Do you want to have an unshakable hope and joy? Then, do things God's way.

I think we too easily forget what it is the angel was announcing to the shepherds.

I think we too easily forget what it means that the Savior has been born for us.

The truth of eternal life alone - if we really understand what it means for us - is more than enough to give us cause to rejoice in EVERY SINGLE SITUATION.

No matter what we go through, we can factually declare, "Yes, but one day I will be in heaven with Jesus."

It may sound a little silly to you or even Pollyannaish, but heaven is our REAL hope ... and a source of our REAL joy.

Salvation includes heaven, but salvation is more than heaven.

Salvation means we are God's child today.

Salvation means we are part of God's family today.

Salvation means we are always on God's mind, having God involved and working in everything we do.

To be in Christ means we have a standing offer and the ability to be in God's presence.

To believe in Jesus is to always have His Spirit, His insight, His help, His comfort, and His strength in every circumstance.

Our JOY is stolen when we forget what Jesus's arrival on earth means to us.

When you think of Christians, do you see people who are full of hope and joy? People who are making the most out of every moment? I sincerely hope so.

Life can be hard, but we KNOW the secret the shepherds held. The Savior has come. And in Him, we are saved.

In Him, we win.

The amazing thing is, no matter what happens, that can never be taken away from us. Jesus tells us...

"If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

So, let's live like we're saved. Let's live like we're loved.
Let's live like we are free.

Every moment is a chance to sing our praises to our amazing King. Every moment is a chance to rejoice in our life.

Every moment is an opportunity to be filled with and to overflow with JOY.

Let your strength arise. Let your hope arise. Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say, rejoice!
Amen