

Joy and Shepherds

Advent #3

Acts 5:40-42

This morning, we lit the third candle of Advent. It is known both as the Joy candle or the Shepherds' candle. It may at first sound strange to us that the themes of Joy and Shepherds should go together. However, if we were to go back to the story of the Shepherds to whom the angels appeared, we may see the clear connection. I'm sure you remember from the sermon I preached in July concerning the announcement of Jesus' birth to the shepherds; you will remember that I said there was a lot of strangeness to the event.

The shepherds did not receive much respect in the Jewish community. Even though animal sacrifice was at the heart of their worship, the Jews did not want to be in contact with the people who cared for and raised the animals they used in sacrifice. You remember that since the shepherds constantly came in contact with blood and other substances that would make them ceremonially unclean, if they were to touch someone who was clean, that person would also become unclean. And so people would avoid them like the plague. Add to that they stank because of living in the field and being around animals all day and night, no one wanted to be around them for any unnecessary reason. Needless to say, shepherds found themselves on the lowest rung of the social ladder.

What made matters worse is that even though the shepherd's life was dedicated to raising animals for temple worship, since he was unclean most of the time, he couldn't participate in the temple worship. Can you even imagine the tragedy of his life? He felt alienated from society and alienated from God.

And then one night, this shepherd was laying out in the pasture with other shepherds, looking up at the stars, when all of a sudden, an angel, bigger and brighter than life appears before him. Their first response was to be gripped by fear. These shepherds had to fight off wild animals who tried to kill and eat the sheep. They had to fight off thieves. These were pretty brave, life-hardened men. And yet, an angel appears and they are paralyzed with fear. What would an angel want with them? Since they hadn't been to temple lately and since they were ceremonially unclean, this message from God could not be good. However, they couldn't be more wrong. In fact the angel tells them to stop being afraid because he has a message from God for them. The message is one of joy. The long anticipated Messiah was born and they were invited to go see Him. What made the message even more joyful was that these social and religious outcasts were to be one of the first to be invited to see and worship the Messiah. Other angels then appeared and started singing, "Glory to God, in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those who He favors!" Obviously He favored these poor shepherds. We know they immediately went to Bethlehem, found Jesus, and worshiped Him. The shepherds were invited to come near to God, and they did. They worshiped God and left full of joy.

They were filled with joy because no matter what their social or religious status, they were invited to meet Jesus and they did.

You know, the word pastor in Greek is literally shepherd. We pastors are to be considered shepherds of our flock. Sometimes I may not fit your idea of what a shepherd ought to be. Let me give you a little insight in to how this may have happened. In seminary, we had a professor who was raised on a farm and he was extremely talented at explaining the Bible through life experiences. Since we were in training, and close to the Wisconsin boarder, he encouraged us to go and take a lesson in pastoring by watching real live shepherds in action. So a couple of us went to Wisconsin and observed this guy driving a group of sheep across a field, beating them with a stick and yelling at them. One of my friends yelled at him, "We thought shepherds led their sheep gently and lovingly." The guy looked at us with a menacing look and said, "I'm not the shepherd, I'm the butcher."

Maybe that's why some time I get this pastoring thing mixed up.

Why is it that we should be joyful? **NO MATTER WHAT OUR SOCIAL STATUS OR RELIGIOUS STATUS, WE ARE INVITED TO COME TO JESUS.** Let me once again invite us to use this Advent season as a time in which we reflect on the spiritual side of life. Let's use this time to allow God to draw our attention away from worldly things and to focus on what is really important in life.

If we were to think about the things that bring us joy, our thoughts are usually drawn to our husbands, our wives, our children, grandchildren, houses, cars, jobs, etc. And it is good to thank God for these things and to rejoice. If we or a loved one was sick, and God healed us, we rejoice. We are glad. If we get a job we have prayed for, we rejoice.

But I chose a strange text for this week's theme of joy. The background of this text is this. Peter and the other disciples were out in public preaching the Gospel and did many miracles. Many people were gathering around, giving their lives to Christ in faith, and many were being healed. The Jewish religious leaders were becoming jealous and worried that the Christian church was growing so quickly. So they had the disciples arrested. But during the night, an angel came and let them out. The angel commanded them to go to the temple and start preaching the next day. At daybreak, the disciples went to the temple and started preaching, teaching, and healing all over again. The leaders got word that the prison cell was empty and the disciples were back at it again in public.

And so this time in a panic, they sent out guards to once again arrest the disciples and to bring them in. The disciples must have been gaining ground because the council members said:

“28 ‘We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,’ he said. ‘Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood’” (Acts 5:28 / NIV).

That is very interesting that the religious leaders should say that the disciples' preaching was trying to make the council responsible for Jesus' blood. Why is this interesting? Listen to their own words in response to Pilate as Pilate tried to release Jesus:

“24 When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood,’ he said. ‘It is your responsibility!’

25 All the people answered, ‘Let his blood be on us and on our children!’”

26 Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified” (Matthew 27:24-26 / NIV).

This crowd incited by and including the council members willingly and publicly stated to let Jesus' blood be on their hands and their children's hands. And now they are upset that just preaching truth is bringing that curse to reality. They were so enraged; they wanted to kill the disciples on the spot. A Pharisee on the council named Gamaliel, however, prevailed with a cooler argument. His argument was that if their message was truly from God, they couldn't stop it. If it wasn't from God, it would lose steam and die out. Here we are 2,000 years later, with the true message of salvation in Jesus alone and the message has not lost steam nor has it died out. It is here and alive at Devon Church.

The council could not stomach letting them off scot-free. So they had them flogged and then released. This was probably 39 lashes. Listen to what it says:

“His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go” (Acts 5:40 / NIV).

The disciples were arrested, threatened, beaten, and threatened again for preaching the word of God. Angels came to preach the Gospel message to the shepherds and it brought great joy to the shepherds. The disciples were like angels, preaching the message of salvation to the crowds. People were getting saved and finding peace in Jesus.

How would you respond if you were doing something very good for people, and then the police came and arrested you, threatened you, and beat you? Would you be angry, discouraged, depressed? Would you be calling your lawyer?

Let's see how the disciples responded:

“41 The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. 42 Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 5:41-42 / NIV).

The disciples rejoiced. Huh? They rejoiced. They were filled with joy. They had just been arrested, jailed, threatened, and beaten. And yet, they are rejoicing.

Please hear their reasoning. They were filled with joy because God counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the Name of their beloved Lord and Savior Jesus. It wasn't being successful that made them happy. It wasn't having their wives or girlfriends love them that made them happy. It wasn't fame or wealth or anything worldly that made them happy. They were filled with joy because God looked at them as worthy to suffer for Jesus. Is that the way we look at life? Is that the way we approach suffering? Do we find joy in the love and acceptance of God? God wants everyone to find this type of joy. There is a great deal of joy in knowing that we are right with God. There is no excuse for anyone to not be in a right relationship with God.

NO MATTER WHAT OUR SOCIAL STATUS OR RELIGIOUS STATUS, WE ARE INVITED TO COME TO JESUS.

There may be someone here this morning that thinks that they are not good enough to be loved by God. The Christmas message is for you. The whole point of Jesus coming to earth was so that in His death and resurrection, salvation is open to all. In fact the only person we know for sure is in heaven is the thief on the cross. Jesus said to him, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus reached out and touched those people that society and religion looked down on. Jesus wants to let you know that He came to die for you so you could be right with God.

Now back to those of us who are saved and know we are children of God. As children of God, we read our Bibles, don't we? We believe that every word in the Bible is inspired by God, don't we? We believe we need to obey the Bible, don't we? Of course we do. So let's look at a passage from our Bible. It is found in the letter of James:

"2My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4 / NRSV).

Did I read that right? Whenever trials come my way, I'm supposed to consider it nothing but pure joy? I'm not sure I like that. What kinds of trials am I supposed to consider it pure joy? Trials of every kind. Let's stop and think about this. People treat me unfairly and I'm supposed to consider it pure joy. I get sick and I'm supposed to consider it pure joy. I lose my job and my money and I'm supposed to consider it pure joy. My boyfriend or girlfriend breaks up with me and I'm supposed to consider it pure joy. My husband or wife divorces me and I'm supposed to consider it pure joy. Actually James said, "Nothing but pure joy."

It's hard for us to understand because we have placed our happiness in the things of this world. This world is going to pass away. The most important thing in this world is being right with God and knowing that we are right with God. It is coming to know who we truly are in Christ. Our primary goal in life, our only goal in life is to live out our identities in Christ. He has a plan for us and as submit to Him, He will work out His plan in our lives. Jesus suffered all kinds of different hurts. He suffered emotional pain when betrayed by His friends and doubted by His family. He knew what it was to be betrayed. He physically suffered like none of us will suffer. He was publicly humiliated. To become like Jesus is to go through suffering.

James says that is how our faith is strengthened and how we learn to become strong. We become complete and mature in our faith. This is what Christian love is all about.

The shepherds rejoiced because God invited them to meet His Son Jesus. The disciples rejoiced that God valued and trusted them enough to suffer for Jesus. Here is the question we must ask ourselves during this Advent season. Can we learn to take joy in all things because in all things, God is working in us to perfect us and to make us complete? Do we believe that? NO MATTER WHAT OUR SOCIAL STATUS OR RELIGIOUS STATUS, WE ARE INVITED TO COME TO JESUS.

During Advent, I want us to reflect on the Second Coming of Jesus as well. There are a couple of things we need to keep in mind. Jesus was pretty clear about the fact that as the time for His return approaches, the world will become more anti-Jewish and anti-Christian. Christians and Jews will suffer and the persecution against us will intensify day by day. If we faithfully preach and live the Gospel like the disciples, a great deal of suffering is headed our way. Legislation is passed every day that is directly antagonistic to Christians. Sadly, many Christians are all too willing to go along with many of these laws.

There will come a time when Bible believing, truly evangelical Christians will become outcasts. We will be like the shepherds. I hope that's true because when Christ arrived the first time, the shepherds were one of the first to know, see, and interact with Him. When we hear Jesus shout from heaven and the trumpet sound, we who have been faithful will be one of the first to meet Him and embrace Him. That's a great deal to be joyful for. NO MATTER WHAT OUR SOCIAL STATUS OR RELIGIOUS STATUS, WE ARE INVITED TO COME TO JESUS.

Are we ready? Are we joyful? I see too many Christians who don't express joy. We of all people ought to be joyful in all circumstances because Jesus has saved us, has written our names in the book of life, and will come for us. We should be living life as if we had rose-colored glasses on. I don't know who wrote this story, but I think it is a great description of who we should be and how people should perceive us.

"One day two little boys were playing, and one asked the other, 'Wouldn't you hate to wear glasses all the time?' The other little boy responded, 'No-o-o-o, not if I had the kind Grandma wears. She sees how to fix a lot of things, and she sees lots of nice things to do on rainy days, and she sees when folks are tired and sorry, and what will make them feel better, and she always sees what you meant to do even if you haven't gotten things just right. I asked her

one day how she could see that way all the time, and she said it was the way she had learned to look at things as she grew older. So it must be her glasses.”

It seems to me that this is a good test to check if our Christianity is authentic Christianity or built on a false Gospel. As we chronologically grow older and as we spiritually grow older, we should be becoming more like the boy’s grandmother in the story. Only it isn’t our glasses, it is our risen Lord Who is working in us through His Holy Spirit. Paul put it like this:

“4Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! 5Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon.

6Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. 7If you do this, you will experience God’s peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:4-7 / NLT).