

SERMON TITLE: "Good News of Great Joy"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 2:1-11
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: December 24, 2017, 10:00 a.m. at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I love Christmas music. Every December, I pull out my Christmas CDs and sing along while I'm baking cookies and wrapping gifts. If you were to quiz me on what year-round music is popular today, I'd probably bomb completely. But Christmas carols I know. And, even though I'm at every church service we have, I never get tired of singing the sacred music of this holy season. There's just something so wonderful about songs like "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" and "Gloria in Excelsis Deo." The feeling of "Joy to the World" is so uplifting.

And we need that joy, don't we? Just like the people of long ago, we need the light and salvation that Christ brought into the world. Through the melodies and lyrics of Christmas carols, we rise above the cold darkness of winter. We beat back the dreariness of depression. We join voices with others in relationships of support and nurture. Like the host of angels in the heavens above the shepherds, we Christmas carolers light up the sky with praises to God and the proclamation of good news for the people of earth.

This morning I'd like us to think about the Christmas story and the joy that it proclaims. In what circumstances did the Christmas characters receive the message of good news of great joy? What did that joy mean for them? And how can that good news of great joy be for all the people even today?

1—CIRCUMSTANCES OF FEAR

I suspect that most of us think that people who experience joy do so from an advantaged situation of well-being. We tend to think that the wealthy must be joyful because they have all the material needs of life. But most of the Christmas characters weren't people of great wealth. They were people of modest circumstances. Joseph was a carpenter, who made his living with his hands. At very

best, he might have been a skilled woodworker, who could attract a steady stream of clients. At worst, he may have been a struggling day laborer, barely finding enough work to feed himself and a family.

If not great wealth, then we tend to think that joy comes from having a stellar reputation. But the Christmas story tells us that Mary was a young woman who found herself in the extremely difficult circumstances of premarital pregnancy. Imagine the rumors that might have swirled around Mary's community. Luke chapter one tells us that Mary went off to visit her cousin Elizabeth in a different town—probably to hide some of the embarrassment. And the Gospel of Matthew tells us that fiancé Joseph nearly dismissed Mary to avoid getting caught up in the scandal.

If not great wealth or a stellar reputation, then we might think that joy could come from having an unshakable sense of belonging. But the Christmas story casts doubt on that theory too. Luke 2 tells us that Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem because that was Joseph's ancestral town. You'd think that might have been like a happy family reunion. Yet, even in his family's hometown, Joseph didn't seem to have a single relative or old friend who could take them in.

If not great wealth, a stellar reputation, or an unshakable sense of belonging, then we tend to think that joy comes from having superior social status. But the Christmas story tells us that the first public proclamation of the good news of Jesus' birth was to shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Even though providing necessities of meat, wool, hides, and animal sacrifices for the temple rituals was essential work, the rural shepherds were generally looked down upon by the townspeople of their day.

If not great wealth, a stellar reputation, an unshakable sense of belonging, or superior social status, then we might think that joy could come from having a benevolent and protective government. But Luke indicates that the reason for the trip to Bethlehem was so that the occupying Roman Emperor Augustus could register and tax the subjugated and oppressed people of Israel. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that, after Jesus' birth, a genocidal edict from King Herod forced the holy family to flee to Egypt

as political refugees. To the characters of the Christmas story, the government was an enemy, not a friend.

In fact—rather than great wealth, a stellar reputation, an unshakable sense of belonging, superior social status, or a benevolent and protective government—the most common circumstance in the Christmas story was fear. Over and over again, the message of angels to people was, “Don’t be afraid.” “Don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife,” said an angel to Joseph in a dream. “Don’t be afraid, for you have found favor with God,” said the angel Gabriel to Mary at the announcement that she would conceive a child. “Don’t be afraid,” said a radiant angel of the Lord to the shepherds out in their fields at night. “Don’t be afraid,” said these messengers of God because fear was the dominant circumstance in which the Christmas characters lived.

2--JOY

So, if fear was the consistent and underlying reality of their lives, how do we get to the good news of great joy? That, indeed, is the intervention of God into human circumstances. All by ourselves, we don’t have much power to change the miseries of our existence. But when God’s creative, inspiring, persuasive, and miraculous power touches our hearts and minds, new possibilities abound. In the Bible, whenever there’s an angel in a story, that’s a signal that God is doing and saying something important. In the Christmas story, God used the angels to introduce divine joy into the difficult human experience.

Matthew’s gospel tells us that the angel who appeared to Joseph in a dream told him that the child conceived in Mary was from the Holy Spirit and would save his people from their sins. Joseph and his neighbors might have had their opinions about how a baby *boy* is made, but Joseph’s *joy* wouldn’t be conceived by harboring shame, speaking condemnation, holding a grudge, finding fault, feeling betrayed, or running in fear from an awkward situation. In this particular case, at least, Joseph’s joy would be found by embracing this child as the one who symbolized forgiveness of sins for Joseph, for Mary, and for all their people. Even in the midst of scandal and rumors, heartache and confusion,

forgiveness would be offered and received. Joy could be found as reputations and relationships would be restored. Mary and her baby would belong to Joseph, he would belong to them, and they all would belong to God.

Similarly, the Angel Gabriel visited Mary with the news that she would give birth to a child who would rise to the throne of David. It took some time for Mary to move from being “much perplexed” to feeling the joy. But Luke tells us that, after Mary got over the shock of it all, she sang this song:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, . . .
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things (1:47-53).

The fears that Mary had about bearing a child, about the impoverishment of her family, and about the oppression of her people gave way to the joy that God was present in her baby. This child was God’s promise that God would overthrow the powerful and care for the hungry. The words of the prophet would be fulfilled. This son of David’s line would be called “wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace” (Is. 9:6). In and through her child, God would establish a benevolent government that would protect young women, babies, refugee families, and working class carpenters and shepherds.

And, so, of course, it would make sense that, first one and then a whole host of, angels would announce to the shepherds out in the fields, watching their flock by night, the glorious “good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” For those of low social status, it would be a huge improvement to switch things up, to know that a day was coming when the people of Israel would no more be ruled by an oppressive Roman emperor, but, instead, be led by God’s own Son, one who would offer hope for a better day and a better life.

This one who would forgive people of their sins and shine light in the darkness would ease the daily struggles of the lowly in tangible ways. God’s vision of a new humanity and a new kingdom

wouldn't just benefit those at the top. Quite the opposite! This child conceived by God's Spirit and born to Mary in the humblest of conditions was made known first to the troubled, to those who were afraid, to those who lived in difficult circumstances. This baby, proclaimed by the angels, would bring great joy to *all* the people.

CONCLUSION

I started out this sermon by telling you that I love Christmas music. I think that's true for most of us. The joyful melodies and lyrics of those special songs cheer our spirits and even help our achy bodies feel better.

There was an article in *The Standard Examiner* a few days ago about a bell choir that resides at the Harrison Regent. There was a picture of them playing at an event in Kaysville. From the photo, I could tell that they were ringing a set of colored bells like the ones we sometimes use for fun here at our church. The article made it clear that those senior living residents don't take their show on the road very often because that's pretty hard logistically. At their age, the Harrison Regent bell ringers have some physical limitations and challenging circumstances. So they need to keep things fairly simple. But the article also made it clear that the Harrison Regent bell ringers love their twice-weekly rehearsals and performances because the music they play is fun. The activity of making music together is sociable, and it improves their mental and physical health. They **enjoy** playing in their bell choir and are glad to share that joy with the other residents and guests who come to listen to them.

Like the Christmas story demonstrates, there are many difficult circumstances in our lives. Poverty, scandal, poor health, loneliness, low social status—you name the affliction that's a struggle for you. Then remember: God sent angels to Joseph and Mary and the shepherds. All was not lost. Their troubles were not the end of the story. A baby would be born to bring forgiveness, belonging, and an improvement in the social, economic, and political situation. God sent a message to them and to us: "Don't be afraid; for see—I'm bringing you good news of great joy."