

News of Great Joy!

Luke 2:8-14

Justin Deeter – December 24, 2017



Christmas awaits us tomorrow morning! It's hard to believe the day is now upon us. Though many will be opening up gifts beneath the tree tomorrow, as Christians, Christmas is a day to remember the astonishing miracle of the incarnation—that God became one of us! Christmas is a time we have set aside to ponder the mystery of the birth of God's own son. As we have prepared our hearts for Christmas, we've participated in the tradition of advent.

On the first Sunday, we reflected on the idea of *hope*. We went to 2 Samuel 7 and looked at the incredible covenant God made with David, that he would have a permanent dynasty. Even in the rocky history of Israel, the people continued to cling to hope of the coming of that king. The true king would come, as the son of David, Jesus was born to the Virgin Mary.

On the second Sunday of advent, Grayson helps us ponder the theme of *peace*. He took us from Genesis to Revelation to show how Jesus' arrival brings peace upon the earth, and how that peace should be evident in our life together.

On the third Sunday of advent, Trámond stirred our thoughts to the theme of *love*. Taking us through John 3:16, he helped us celebrate the great love of God for us as God gave us his only begotten son.

On this fourth Sunday of advent, we reflect on the theme of *joy*. We will light the fifth candle, the Christ candle, tonight at our Christmas Eve service.

As we think about joy, we will look to Luke 2:8-14, the angel's joyous announcement of Christ's birth to the shepherds. As we do, I pray that God will fill your heart with great joy this Christmas! However before we dive into the text itself, let me share a few words about the idea of joy itself.

A Word about Joy

Joy is a fascinating emotion in the Christian life. On the one hand we are commanded to be joyful. The psalms are filled with such commands, "Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!" (Ps 97:12). The apostle Paul gives us the same command, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice" (Phil 4:4). Interestingly, we are commanded to have joy no matter our circumstances, even in difficult times of trouble. Paul describes the Christian life as a paradox as "Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor 6:10). Elsewhere Paul said, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake" (Col 1:24). James wrote, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds" (Jm 1:2).

So the Scriptures command us to be joyous, no matter what our circumstances look like. However, most of us know that our emotional life is incredibly complex. Even great men and women of God can go through profound times of depression and sorrow. Often times we don't feel like being joyful. Perhaps for some of us, 2017 has been an incredibly difficult year. Tragedy has struck our lives, and we are still trying to pick up the pieces and shambles of life as we knew it. Disoriented and discombobulated, we trudge through our grief stricken stupor, struggling to fake a smile, let alone to be truly joyful.

As Christmas awaits you tomorrow, are you filled with joy? Or, if you would be honest with yourself, your struggling to fight for joy. You wish to be joyful, even long to be joyful this Christmas season, yet joy alludes you. As soon as you seem to grasp it, joy oozes through your fingers. If that's you, I want to encourage you that you are not alone.

I believe the chief reason of this dilemma occurs due to a mistaken understanding of what joy truly is. Most of us have settled on a far too superficial definition. We've turned joy into glib emotion demonstrated by plastic smiles and insincere positivity. We've confused joy with a parade of self-righteous hypocrisy that we put on for one another. However, the Scriptures are clear: it *is* possible to be sorrowful *and* joyful. You see, the opposite of joy is not sorrow, but despair. You can be both sorrowful and joyful. You cannot be both joyful and in despair. Despair is the absence of hope, the nonexistence of peace, the depletion of love. Joy, even in the midst of suffering, possesses the certainty of hope, the calmness of peace, the filling up of love.

So how then do we find joy as we approach this Christmas? Well, I believe the answer to that question rests in the previous Sundays of advent. Joy is not a fickle emotion dependent on our mood, but a deep seated conviction birthed by

the astonishing arrival of Jesus Christ. It is the good news of Jesus that produces a deeply rooted joy that sustains through every challenge in life. In light of the glorious promise of the gospel, our tears do not become obstacles to joy, but the nourishing water upon which joy flowers. As Psalm 126:4-6 states, "Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy." As this psalm indicates, suffering and tears are catalyst of joy. They are seeds planted that will one day bear fruit of exquisite joy.

So what's the answer to those struggling with joy they Christmas? The same answer to every ailment the Christian faces, look to Christ! Contemplate on the mystery of his birth, the overwhelming gift of God's own son for us. As we ponder upon the incredible hope we possess, the satisfying peace provided, and the sweetness of God's love, joy will spring forth from our dusty hearts.

So let's dive into God's word from Luke 2 to further examine the joy of Christmas.

1. The Messengers of Joy

First, we will consider the messengers of joy. While the humble shepherds kept watch over their flock, they awoke with a startle that night as they beheld the radiant glory of the angel that appears to them. The blinding light of the angelic being frightened the shepherds, filling them with great fear. Imagine what it must have been like that night! It was an ordinary, rather boring evening of camping out in the fields attending to a bunch of smelly sheep. Little did they know they would be the recipients of a heavenly announcement from heavenly messengers!

Though the Bible often speaks of angels, the Scriptures do not give us a lot of information about them. We know that they are creatures that exist to serve and do the will of God. One of their primary functions is to give worship and glory to God. We see a particular type of angel, the seraphim, perform this function in Isaiah 6. There in the throne room of God, the angels sing in honor to the Lord, "Holy, holy, holy!" As Isaiah partook these Angelic creatures swirling around in the thick fog of glory that covered God's throne room, he was overwhelmed with his own wretchedness. Yet, he heard the sweet tongues of the angelic choir worshipping the Lord.

Yet with Jesus, we see that the angelic hosts leave the light of heaven to bring their song into a dark field outside of Bethlehem. The intensity of heavenly worship splashes over into our world, because the king has come down from heaven. God has become a man in the person of Jesus Christ. The son became incarnate, and as he was born into the world his angels came to herald his birth and sing in worship to the new born king. The throne room of God has expanded. God has tabernacled himself among us as the Son enters into the world. Heaven and earth collide in the arrival of Jesus, and for a brief moment we see the transcendent worship of heaven appear before these shepherds.

As Peter opens up his first epistle, he unpacks the blessings of the gospel that Jesus brings to his people. God has brought mercy to his people, as we are born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Christ, and we've been given an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading kept in heaven for us! Peter then tells us that these truths are so precious, that this Gospel is so captivating, that the angels in heaven long to peer into them. The incredible love and grace that God has for humanity astounds them. After all there is no redemption for angels. When Satan rebelled against God he took about a third of the heavenly hosts with him. These fallen angels, what we now call demons, have no chance for redemption. Jesus did not come to atone for the sins of angels, but for the sins of humanity. God has chosen to uniquely pour out his love upon humanity, so that we might be united to God in Christ and have fellowship with him!

The great climax of universe was now before these angelic hosts. The great plan of God's redemption of humanity, planned out before the foundation of the world, was now coming to pass. Immanuel has come. The messiah has arrived. God becomes a man, in order to die for humanity and save them. The angels arrived to herald this good news, and to fill the sky in climactic praise. Luke tells us that multitudes of angels appears singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" Truly this was a glorious event that captivated the praise of these angelic hosts!

Does the arrival of Jesus capture your praise? If the angels, who are distant participants to this event, are filled with such joyous praise, how much more should we, we who receive the benefits of Christ's coming? Jesus' arrival brings hope, peace, love, and joy to you. If these angels were filled with such great joy at the first Christmas, shouldn't our hearts be filled with joy as well?

However, the joy of the angelic hosts emerges from the news they came to share with the shepherd. So, now that we've considered the messengers of joy, let's, secondly, turn to the announcement of joy.

2. The Announcement of Joy

As the angel first appeared to the shepherds, he said, "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. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:10–12, ESV).

The angel begins by instructing them not to fear! The message he brings should not elicit terror, but joy! As the angel calms the alarmed shepherds, the message becomes clear. The Christ is born! The promised messiah has been born in the city of David, and he will be a savior. If you think back to the first week of advent, when we reflected on the idea of hope, we talked about the intense longing Israel had to see the promise fulfilled that God made to David. After that promise for an eternal dynasty, the expectation intensified in longing for a messiah to come. These Jewish shepherds were raised with this long awaited expectation. As they waited, they wondered if the messiah would arrive in their generation. Now, an angel hovers above them announcing the arrival of the Christ! With this announcement, the shepherds' heart leaped for joy. The coming of God's king always brings joy! The promised king has arrived. As Jesus the king arrives, so too does the protection, forgiveness, and blessing of God!

Not only does the angel inform them of Jesus' birth, but then the angel tells them where they can go find him! The angels give a sign to find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a manger. God calls us to faith in his son, but he does not do so without evidence. The proof of God's redemption and love for us is found in the person of Jesus Christ, someone that can be seen, held, and touched. Though Jesus now sits at the right hand of the father in heaven, we have the eye witness testimony of those who held the baby Jesus in Bethlehem, but also the testimony of those who carried his corpse off of the cross and those who embraced him after his bodily resurrection. God's promises to us are not abstract, but concrete. They aren't imaginary, but real. See him, touch him, and hear him. The incarnation of God in the physical person of Jesus Christ reveals the tangible promise of the Gospel. The good news of Jesus, should stir great joy within us. So yes, the angel's message is one of great joy, but that joy is found in a person, a real person, upon whom the shepherds are invited to go see that very night!

As Christians, we must understand that our joy has a source in a real person, the God-man Jesus Christ. The solution to your joyless Christmas is not to look in

on yourself trying to figure out what's wrong with you, that's the rubbish of pop-psychology. If you want joy look to a person, the only person who brings joy to our hearts—look to Christ! The antidote to your spiritual depression will not be found by further excavating the hollowness of your heart, but by beholding the glories of Christ. Set your mind upon Christ. Look upon him with the eye of your soul. Be transfixed by his incredible love for you. As you go to him, the joy of the gospel becomes concrete and tangible. So come, taste and see that the Lord is good. Come and treasure the Lord Jesus Christ.

So we've considered the recipients of joy and the announcement of joy. Let us now consider, thirdly, the recipients of joy.

3. The Recipients of Joy

Who are the recipients of this joy? Well its you and me! But its not just you and me, this is good news of joy for *all* people. This great savior who brings hope, peace, love, and joy brings it for all who people. As the choir of angels appears, the content of their song is very important! "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:14, ESV).

The arrival of this Jesus brings peace upon the earth, but it brings it in two dimensions. **First**, God brings peace vertically. Jesus introduces peace between God and men, which of course presupposes that without Jesus, there is enmity between God and man. Though God abounds in love, his justice ignites as humanity rebels in sin. The holiness of God burns against such wretched people like you and me. However, the advent of Christ signifies the arrival of peace. Jesus reconciles us to the Father by paying the penalty for our sin and gifting us with his righteousness. When the angel says that God is "pleased" with the earth, that doesn't mean that God by passing our sin as if they don't matter. Rather, the angels sing about God's delight upon his human creatures. That the love of God extends so lavishly for us, that he would send his only begotten son into the world! Anyone who believes upon Christ will be saved. Anyone who calls upon the name of the Son of God as savior and Lord will receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life. The relationship will be mended and restored. So the first dimension of the peace that arrives is vertically, between us and God.

The **second** dimension of peace is horizontal, meaning that Jesus brings peace with one another. Human beings can be hateful towards one another.

People abuse one another, take advantage of one another, gossip about one another, slander one another, attack one another, and even murder one another. Yet, the arrival of king Jesus brings joy because he brings peace with one another. As the king arrives, we will beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks. As the reign of Christ encompass the earth through his church, the community of love and peace shine like a city set upon a hill. The church is the embassy of the kingdom in a foreign world. We are to be a bastion of peace for the world, as we live under the reign of our King.

However, the angels make it clear that this joyous peace is meant for all people. The gospel supersedes our human enforced categories of division. Jesus tears down the dividing wall of racial hostility, between Jew and Gentile, black and white, hispanic and asian. Jesus demolishes any division between male and female, young and old, wealthy or poor, republican or democrat, American or Chinese, African or Australian. The message of Christmas is a message for all people—the savior is born, repent and believe in Jesus!

This is one of the reasons that we must commit ourselves to missions, not just by giving and praying but by going. Of course, we are taking up the Lottie Moon Christmas offering. I pray that you might give generously to that offering so that we can fund more missionaries through the International Mission Board. However, may we all commit to spreading the good news of Jesus to all people!

As one's who have received this great news of joy, we must share this joy with all people. As wonderful as the Lottie Moon Christmas offering is, you can't just outsource missions to paid professionals. You can't delegate the Great Commission to other people. Each of us has a responsibility to take the message of joy to our neighbors and coworkers, our friends and family. May the joy of Christ's coming compel us to go and tell others about the arrival of the messiah.

Final Thoughts

It's no mistake that the angels message was sent to shepherds. Shepherds are nobodies. They were on the bottom of the social totem-pole, yet this was the audience God chose to make the announcement of his sons birth. This shows us the breadth of God's love, which subverts all earthly categories of greatness. You may feel low this morning, struggling to find joy this Christmas. If so, ponder upon Luke 2, and remember the astonishing truth that Christ has brought joy for

you. He *is* joy. Look upon him, consider him, behold him, and you will find the joy that you lack.

Set your mind on how God became low, humiliating himself, by taking human form. Consider how Jesus chose to identify with you, becoming one of us. Dwell on the hope of Christ, as he brings promise and blessing into your life. Dwell on the peace of Christ, as he reconciles you to the Father by paying your sin. Dwell on the love of Christ, as God displays his love for you by sending his own son to die for you. As you contemplate these truths and look to Christ, you will find that joy will rage in your soul. This good news of joy is *for* you.

If you do not know Christ, I pray that you will call upon him this day and receive forgiveness and joy this Christmas.

If you do know Christ, may each Christmas bring you greater joy as you look upon him. With each day we get closer of seeing the face of Jesus, the savior born unto you in the city of David, who is Christ the Lord. Joy is not a message, but a person. So whatever life befalls you, do not fear for joy has come.