

Good News of Great Joy

Luke 2:1-20

Over the next two weeks, as we look to Christmas morning next week, we're going to be in a series entitled, "Good News of Great Joy" taken out of our passage this morning in the second chapter of Luke's gospel. As we'll see in just a moment, this announcement of "Good News" and "Great Joy" was given to the shepherds out in the fields of rural Bethlehem to inform them that a child was born. And somehow, somehow, the birth of this child would be a turning point for all humanity.

Many, if not most, if not all of us know this story. We read it to our children every year, we read it in church, we hear it read by Linus on Charlie Brown's Christmas special. For many, the Christmas story and season truly is the most wonderful time of the year. "Joy" - whatever we think that word means - is seemingly abundant in the festivities, gifts, and family gatherings.

For others, Christmas is a deeply sorrowful time of year. "Joy" - whatever we think that word means - is difficult to find. We're reminded of the loss of a family member. Pangs of loneliness may take root. Current events, finances, or complicated relationships might make this season less "merry and bright" and more "depressing and dark."

Indeed, these do seem like particularly joy-less days for many. If you do consider yourself hopeful and happy, congratulations! The data suggests that you're now in the minority of people in the United States. An organization called The General Social Survey, which has been surveying Americans since 1972 has found that for the first time ever, more people say they are "not too happy" than "happy". Another national university study found that for the first time ever, 51% (a majority) of Americans would consider themselves pessimistic, rather than optimistic. The glass is officially "half-empty" - and that's not good.

But even more disturbing is the exponential rise of clinical depression, especially among young men, within the last few years. Just since 2020, rates have tripled! And the data suggests that these rates are roughly staying at these levels. Meaning, there wasn't just a sudden spike of depression during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 and now things are getting back to normal; rather, a deep joylessness is settling in the bones of our surrounding world.

Our world is desperate for Good News. Our world is desperate for Joy.

And if we're honest with ourselves, maybe some of us in this room, or joining online, even though we know the Good News, we're desperate for Joy. Whether we realize it or not, our hearts are echoing the words of King David in Psalm 51, "Restore to me the **joy** of Your salvation."

And if you've come here this morning, and need to hear what this Good News is all about, I pray that just like the shepherds in Bethlehem, you'll come running to meet the Savior, Christ the Lord, the fountain and source of all Joy.

And finally, for those who mature in Christ who genuinely have no lack of Joy, you who rejoice always - I'll echo the words of the Apostle Paul: "Again, I say rejoice!" May the reminder of the Good News and Great Joy today help you be a beacon of Joy for those around you.

With all that said, let's open our Bibles to Luke, chapter 2. Although we'll be focusing specifically on verse 10 this morning, there really is just something so beautiful/sacred/special about reading through Luke's entire account of Jesus' birth.

Luke 2:1-20

[1] In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus** (*remember this detail!*) that all the world should be registered.

[2] This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

[3] And all went to be registered, each to his own town.

[4] And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,

[5] to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

[6] And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.

[7] And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

[8] And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

[9] And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

[10] And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

[11] For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

[12] And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

[13] And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

[14] "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

[15] When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

[16] And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.

[17] And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

[18] And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

[19] But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

[20] And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Fear Not

The first words the angel of the Lord tells these shepherds is to “fear not.” Why is this? Granted, it was the middle of the night. Hearing any voice that you don’t recognize in the pitch black is enough reason to send you into a panicked frenzy. But there’s something that happens in the Scriptures when angels appear. A chapter earlier, the priest Zechariah has fear fall upon him when a heavenly messenger named Gabriel appears, and tells him that his wife Elizabeth will be pregnant with a son, who will later become John the Baptist. Gabriel also tells Mary not to fear when he appears to her. Angels appearing cause the prophets Daniel and Isaiah to fall trembling in fear. Whatever appearance or radiance angels have - it’s enough to scare the wits out of humans when we encounter them!

But this command to “Fear Not” is one of the most often repeated commands in the Old Testament. Yahweh God tells the people of Israel to “fear not” in the face of Exodus, Enemies, and Exile.

Most importantly, however, this command to “fear not” is repeated when God’s own presence was drawing near and meeting with humanity. When God meets with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - He tells them to fear not. When God is about to show His power before the Israelites, Moses tells them to fear not.

When God is about to do something big, He assures His people to fear not. For those who listen and obey: the promise of blessing, peace, and joy.

Behold

After the assurance to fear not, the angel of the Lord says to “behold”. This word is an exclamation. “Look!” “Listen!” “Pay attention!” “Something is happening!”

It is used all throughout Scripture, but especially in Isaiah, where the expectation and hope for the Messiah is dialed up at maximum volume. Throughout that prophetic book, written 150 years before this angelic announcement, there is a constant drumbeat that at one moment, Israel and all nations will “fear not” and “behold” something that God would do.

> Isaiah 43:19 - “Behold, I am doing a new thing!”

> Isaiah 40:9 - lift up your voice...fear not; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’ Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might.

> Isaiah 25:9 - It will be said on that day, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that He might save us.

Though there was and is much to fear in the world around us, God is asking each one of us to *fear not*, and to *behold* what He is doing. Are you paying attention? Are you looking and listening to the Good News of Great Joy that is happening all around you? To experience God’s great joy, we must be a people who *Behold!*

Good News

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you Good News...”

Good News. Or, as we often hear it: Gospel. You know what's interesting, the modern English word Gospel has become so compartmentalized that when we hear it, we automatically think it's specifically a Christian or "religious" word. And certainly, in our modern context, it is.

Funny enough, the only time the word "gospel" is used in a secular context, it's used to mean that someone truly believes something wholeheartedly. Like, "he takes everything his personal trainer says as gospel."

But, the angel's announcement of "Good News" would have been so much more scandalous and packed with meaning 2,000 years ago.

You see, we get our word Gospel from the Old German, or Old English "got-spel" - literally, "good news." And that is a translation of the Greek word used in our text: *euangelion*. It's where we get the word "evangelism" and "evangelical".

But here's where it gets so interesting. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, the word "*euangelion*" was almost always used in reference to politics, wars, kings, and empires.

Remember, I said to pay attention to the little detail that Caesar Augustus was the Roman emperor who declared a tax-census was to take place in Judea? Here's why.

If you know a little bit of history, Caesar Augustus was actually the first Roman emperor after decades of conflicts in-and-out of the Roman Republic. It was a chaotic time of war and strife, just a couple of decades before the birth of Jesus.

Out of the conflict, Caesar Augustus emerged victorious and he overtook the Republic, turning it into an Empire. His promise was to put an end to the years of war, and to establish the Pax Romana, or Roman Peace. Of course, it would only be Roman Peace if Rome was in charge, so the empire expanded its imperial control over the ancient world.

When towns and cities were conquered by Caesar's armies, they were given the "*euangelion*" of their new king. Listen to this inscription, first found in the middle of the marketplace in the ancient town of Priene (identical inscriptions were also found in several other cities):

The inscription I'm about to read was the heading of a new calendar that marked the birthday of Caesar Augustus as the start of the New Year for the Roman Empire. In other words, the rule of the new Emperor was supposed to shift all of time and history. It was a monumental announcement - a "*euangelion*":

"The Providence which has ordered the whole of our life...has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving to it *Caesar Augustus*, by sending in him, as it were, a savior for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order

everywhere...the birthday of the god [Augustus] was the beginning of the **gospel** (*euangelion*) for the world that came by him.”

Did you catch that? The current *euangelion*, the “good news” that all of Judea and the rest of the Roman Empire lived by in the year 9 B.C., was that the god-king Caesar Augustus was the savior, who created peace under the heavy foot of war and taxation, and who could reorder the historical calendar by his birth. The *euangelion* was that Caesar alone created the world of peace

But the angel had a new, different good news - the greater *euangelion*: that the true King had come, and was bringing His Kingdom to earth. That His birth would reorder all of time, not Caesar Augustus. That true peace would be established under His banner. Not through conquering and violence, but through serving and loving.

Which Kingdom do you want to live under? Which *euangelion*? Which kingdom announcement has brought true, lasting joy along with it? Caesar’s? Or Christ’s?

Great Joy

The angel’s announcement of good news makes it clear: that this coming kingdom of the baby born in the manger would bring with it “great joy” - and this is the crux, the **MAIN IDEA** of the message today if you don’t hear anything else:

that **Great Joy is the defining feature of those who live in Jesus’ Kingdom.**

The announcement that Jesus is the true, reigning, sovereign King of the Cosmos is indeed good news of great joy.

In the Greek, this “great joy” is literally the Greek word “*mega*” - it is **mega joy!**

And so the question before us is: what is **Joy**?

It’s interesting, at our Tuesday night Anchor gathering, I asked a few people how they would define Joy. There was a general consensus that Joy was a sort of deep contentment, as opposed to the feeling of happiness. You could put it like this, Joy is a *filling*, not a *feeling*. Or yet another way, happiness is *fleeting*, joy is *forever*.

I certainly agree. There is something more permanent to the great joy of this good news than a temporary moment of ecstasy or enjoyment. So, my instinctive reaction is to separate joy and happiness. Like, they are similar, but separate.

But, what if they’re not so different after all? What if King Jesus truly desires us to be joyful AND happy in His Kingdom?

As I was preparing for today’s message, Pastor Marco recommended a book by author Randy Alcorn entitled, “Happiness”. And in it, he makes a pretty compelling argument. That is, in the

original Greek and Hebrew languages of the Bible, the words that get translated into our English words “joy, happiness, rejoicing, delight, cheerful” and even “blessed”, are often used interchangeably! He traces, though, how in recent church history that there a clear distinction emerged between the two words, happy versus joyful.

But, he argues there should actually be little to no distinction between Joy and Happiness. Both are internal *and* external demonstrations of God’s intent for His people: happiness AND joy - in this age, and the age to come.

In his book, he echoes the famous words of Charles Spurgeon, “Those who are ‘beloved of the Lord’ must be the most happy and joyful people to be found anywhere upon the face of the earth.”

The reason being, those who are beloved of the Lord, trust in the promises of the Lord!

The biggest places in the Bible where we see these promises in a different light is when we understand that the word “blessed” can be substituted for the word “happy.”

Theologian G. Campbell Morgan once wrote of translations, ““I wish we were brave enough to write happy instead of blessed!”

Psalm 32:1 - “[Happy] is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.”

The Beatitudes in Matthew 5:

“[Happy] are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“[Happy] are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

“[Happy] are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

It seems to hit a little differently, right, using the word “happy” in those verses, instead of blessed. I think G. Campbell Morgan was right, it does take some bravery to write “happy” instead of “blessed”.

Why is that? Well, I think if we’re honest with ourselves, it might actually be easier sometimes to claim a deeper joy, or to look forward to a future blessing, than to be...happy.

This has been a convicting thought for me as I’ve been preparing this message.

Can I, can we, as a church community, actually exude happiness in the midst of a world of pain and anguish? Or do we only claim to have the joy, joy, joy, joy down (deep, deep) down in our hearts?

Now, please don’t misunderstand. This idea of Joy and Happiness marking the people of Christ isn’t one of faking it, or mustering it up. But it should be just as much external as it is internal!

Randy Alcorn writes, "Imagine if our churches were known for being communities of Jesus-centered happiness, overflowing with the sheer gladness of what it means to live out the good news of great joy."

Again, the Christian journey of Joy is not one that makes fantastical claims of reaching some sort of happiness nirvana. Nor is it one that makes the false promise that you will and should "feel happy" all the time, though some false teachers do make that claim - and go even further to say that if you're not, you're "doing it wrong".

Here is the beautiful thing. The Bible makes it absolutely clear that sorrow in this life is a reality. It doesn't sugarcoat that truth. Jesus tells his disciples, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament... You will be sorrowful." Jesus knew that. Jesus felt that. He is, indeed, the Man of Sorrows of Isaiah 53: "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief... he was despised, and we esteemed him not."

The King, from whom would come great joy, would experience great sorrow.

The King would experience the sorrow and brokenness of this life.

As the author of Hebrews writes, "for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."

The King knows our weaknesses, our temptations, our sorrows, and our pain in this present world.

And yet, as the author of Hebrews continues to write a few chapters later, Jesus... "who for the **JOY** that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

Jesus, the man of sorrows, endured the cross and weight of our sin and shame, to usher in His Kingdom of Great Joy.

And we recognize that the ultimate fulfillment of that Kingdom is still yet to come. That is the message of this Advent season: that the King appeared, and established His Kingdom of Joy in this present, fallen world, but He is coming back to make all things - ALL things - new!

This time we are living in now is what's often called, "the already-but not yet." The Kingdom of Great Joy is already here, but not yet in its fullness in this world of sorrow. It is the time in-between, Jesus first coming, and His second. There is Kingdom work to be done, for the sons and daughters of the King to proclaim the "*euangelion*" of Joy to the broken world we still find ourselves in.

As Pastor John Mark Comer put it, "The people of God live in the time in-between, 'hidden with Christ in God'. Advent contains within itself the crucial balance of the "now-and-not yet" that our faith requires. The disappointment, brokenness, suffering, and pain that characterizes life in this present world is held in dynamic tension with the promise of future glory that is yet to come.

In this Advent season, the Church lives its life in that dynamic tension between sorrow and joy. We live our life together with Jesus...because we live in this world, we feel sorrow. But because

we also live with one foot in the age to come, we also feel joy. Not sorrow OR joy, but sorrow AND joy. The more you mature in Jesus, the more you expand your capacity to hold both in dynamic tension.”

I love that. Our Good King has shown us that the Christian life is not about ignoring sorrow, but realizing that the more sorrow we face in this life, greater Joy is yet to come. Jesus told His disciples in John 16, “You have sorrow now, but... your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

Once again, Joy is the great promise of Christ’s Kingdom.

But, Joy isn’t passive. It must be active, cultivated, chosen, and sometimes, we must often battle for our happiness in Christ.

Unlike sorrow, which can be reformed into an even greater joy, there are so many things that can diminish our Joy.

Do any of these eat away at your happiness in Christ:

Discontentment: I don’t have what I want

Comparison: I don’t have what they have

Conflict: I don’t want them around

Bitterness: I don’t trust anyone anymore

Apathy: I don’t care anymore

Brother. Sister. Fight to claim what is yours: true joy, true happiness in Christ.

Don’t be near-sighted only to the problems of today, but set your eyes on the Good News of Great Joy.

Three practices that we must hold fast to both in maintaining and possibly reclaiming our joy:

First, is to **CELEBRATE**.

You know, Jesus’ Kingdom is marked by celebration. It is marked by holiness, yes, but also by happiness. Everytime we gather with the saints is a chance to celebrate the goodness of God.

Isaiah 51:11, “And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

You know, the habits of celebration we keep on this earth, are just a practice for the everlasting celebration in His forever Kingdom.

Singing together, Feasting together, Laughing together, Rejoicing together, being Happy together - these are glimpses into the future reality that awaits us! Let us make sure we’re practicing them now!

Second is **CULTIVATE**

In the same way there are pressures that can rob us of joy, there are practices that are a cheap counterfeit to giving us lasting joy. We must discipline ourselves to cultivate practices that focus our attention on the great joy that is ours. The beautiful thing is that in time, practices of discipline and duty become practices of delight.

The music we listen to, the entertainment we consume, the books we read, the people we listen to should be cultivating our joy in Christ, not distracting us from it, or even worse deceiving us that we can never have that joy.

The more we cultivate our practices of joy, the more that fruit of the Spirit will appear outwardly.

Third is **COMMUNICATE**

Intimacy is the key to great joy.

Foremost, is intimacy with Christ. Commune with Him. Prayer is our access to King Jesus. It is how we approach the throne of grace, until we see Him face to face.

If you are struggling in finding that joy, tell Him your burdens. He knows them well.

Communicate with the King. He will provide peace and joy. He is a good King.

Second is intimacy with each other. As we learned, Joy is an active process, but it is also a community process. Wise counsel, warm hospitality, worshipful prayer must all take place in the Kingdom of God.

All People

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy...that will be for all people.”

This is the best part of this Kingdom proclamation. The good news of great joy is available for all people. From the greatest of sinners, to those the world considers the least.

ALL have access into the Kingdom of Joy.

The only thing required of us is faith.

Ephesians 2:8-9 “For by grace you have been saved through faith.”

Faith is most often thought of as belief or trust. But you know what’s interesting, the most common way the Greek word for faith “*pistis*” was used in the ancient world - was loyalty.

We enter the Kingdom of Joy, not by anything we can do because it’s only by the King’s grace, but we enter the Kingdom of Joy by being loyal to the true King. Seeking first His righteousness, serving one another in love, and singing His praise - these are all signs that we are loyal to the King.

G.K. Chesterton once wrote, “Jesus promised His disciples three things—that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy, and in constant trouble.”

This Advent season, let us remember to be absurdly happy, absurdly joyful because of the Good News of Great Joy.