

## CHRISTMAS SURPRISES: SURPRISED BY JOY (Luke 2:8-20)

Have you ever noticed that our expectations of something rarely match our experience of that something? For instance, all your friends brag about a certain restaurant. You go with high hopes, but it doesn't come close to being as good as you thought it would be. Often, there seems to be a disconnect, a gap between our vision of the ideal and our experience of the real. More than any other time of the year, this seems to be the case at Christmas. One man said that while we expect to have a Christmas like a Norman Rockwell painting, one that is warm and evokes pleasing memories from the past, it instead turns out to be more like *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*.

I remember when my kids were younger, I took them on a drive to see Christmas lights. I was expecting to hear "oohs" and "aahs" as we drove through those neighborhoods with the best light displays. Soon, however, I got the distinct impression they would rather be at home playing video games. What I was expecting and what I was experiencing were not the same.

Some of those same feelings must have been present at the first Christmas. In Luke 1, after being visited by the angel Gabriel and hearing what God was up to and how she was going to be the mother of the Messiah, Mary launched into what we call Mary's "Magnificat." It was a song of praise in which she rejoiced both in God's mercy and His might. It is a beautiful song of adoration.

Then, in chapter 2, Mary gives birth to Jesus in that Bethlehem barn because the inn is plum full. Can't you just imagine Mary and Joseph's trek to Bethlehem while she is 9 months pregnant. A weary Mary asks, "Are we there yet?"

Joseph answers, "It's just over the next hill."

Mild Mary, who is full term and having contractions, replies with a tone of voice that implies, "Don't mess with me." She says, "That's what you said three hills ago." This is not what she was expecting when she said to Gabriel, "Let it be done to me as you have said," because he did not say anything about this.

Consider the Magi, the Wise Men. They believed the appearance of a new star heralded the news of a newly born King. At great expense and effort, they make a long trip to Jerusalem. When they arrive, they are excited, but no one else seems excited about the birth of a king. The only one who seems to show any interest is King Herod, but they learn later that the only reason he is interested is that he wants to do away with any rival to his throne. I don't think that is what they expected when they left home.

When you closed the books on Christmas 2019, you did not expect that the next Christmas would take place in the tenth month of a world-wide pandemic. Back then, you had not yet heard the term *socially distance*. You were not familiar with the term Covid-19 nor corona virus. This is not the Christmas you expected.

The CDC claims that 31% of Americans have reported dealing with anxiety and depression at some point over the last ten months. According to the *Journal of American Medical Association*, there has been a three-fold increase in the rate of depression among U.S. adults this year.

Just possibly, some of you find yourselves dealing with something stronger than a case of momentary blues. I want you to know that profound unhappiness or depression is not a sin. It is not something you chose. Instead, it is an involuntary response to the difficulties of life. I also want to impress upon you that Jesus and His church are present. We want to walk beside you, pray for you, and encourage you.

You may feel there is a considerable distance between you and joy, real joy, but I am here to say that it may be closer than you think. This season, we have been looking at Christmas Surprises. I am borrowing the title of C.S. Lewis' autobiography as the title of this message: "Surprised by Joy." Let's look at Luke 2:8-20.

I am not sure there was a great deal of career satisfaction experienced by men whose job it was to watch over dirty and mentally-challenged sheep. These shepherds in our text were doing what they had been doing, night after night, year after year, watching their sheep, protecting them from ne'er do wells who might steal them or predators who might eat them. Rarely, did anything out the ordinary occur. On some clear night that might be blessed to see a meteor shower, but I'm sure most nights would blend into the next.

This night, however, was different from all the others. It would be one they would tell and re-tell the rest of their lives. This was the night they were addressed by a singular angel, and then the sky above them was filled with a host of angels. Nowhere in the Bible does it actually say that angels sing, but I would like to think that they do. And if they do, God might have sent heaven's best choir to entrance this rough audience. Those men would never forget what they heard, what they saw, and what they felt that night. That night, they were surprised by joy.

And when you aren't looking, when you least expect it, like in a pandemic, God just might surprise you, too. I want you to notice four things.

### **This Surprising Joy Counteracts Our Fear**

Look again at vv. 9-10. It seems, almost without exception, that whenever an angel addresses a human being, the first words the angel speaks are, "Fear not." I wonder if they are taught that in angel, basic training. "Now, remember angels, if and whenever you are ever given an assignment to deliver a message to a human, you will find that him, her, or them will cower in their sandals and their knees will knock when you appear; so, be sure to tell them, 'Fear not.' That should do it."

I'm not sure how helpful that really was. It is kind of like saying, "Calm down," when someone is melting down. It may be good advice, but it is not particularly helpful advice.

I think the angels were saying, "I know we look big and scary to you, but we mean you no harm. You're safe with us."

I suppose it may be possible to be joyous and fearful at the same time, but that seems unlikely. Let me give you my unauthorized translation of v. 10. The angel is saying to the shepherds, "Guys, don't be afraid because, listen up, I have some joyous news for you. In fact, this news is going to bring joy to everybody you know and even those you don't."

Let me give you the names of some daytime television shows that ran for decades but no longer exist. Some of you may remember: *As the World Turns*, *Guiding Light*, *One*

*Life to Live, Search for Tomorrow.* Still today, you can watch: *Days of Our Lives, General Hospital,* and *The Young and the Restless.*

What do we call such TV shows? We call them soap operas. They got their name from the fact that the advertisers of these shows were soap companies who sold their products to the mostly female audience who watched such shows.

In 1949 a new cleaning product was introduced and was one of the products that was advertised on several of these daytime dramas. That product was a dishwashing detergent called Joy. Back in the 1950's, their famous slogan was, "Grease to shine in half the time." Joy was owned by Procter and Gamble until just last year (November, 2019) when a new company named JoySuds LLC bought the rights to that product. You can still buy it today.

I bring that up because just like Joy dishwashing detergent cuts through grease, the joy God offers cuts through our fear and depression and leaves us feeling clean on the inside.

In the last line of Psalm 16, David wrote: "You make known to me the path of life; in Your presence there is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11).

John used the word joy eight times in his gospel account, but the last seven times that word came from His lips were on the night before He was crucified. Each time that word was spoken by the Lord to His disciples. He knew they were going to face dark and difficult days, but at the same time, they could be recipients of His joy.

Jesus told them in John 15:11, "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

Has fear been rising up in your heart? Let God give you His joy. It will combat and counteract the fear you've faced.

### **This Surprising Joy Is Based on Good News**

The angel was clear regarding the origin of this joy. He said, "I bring you good news of great joy." Joy is possible because we have been given good news. What is that news? It is found in v. 11. "A Savior has been born. He is Christ the Lord." *Christ* is the Greek name for the Hebrew term, *Messiah*. In John 1, Andrew met Jesus. Then, he went and found his brother, Simon Peter and said to him, "We have found the Messiah," and John added the explanation, "which means Christ" (1:41). Both words mean, "the anointed One."

Unlike the Jews who are still waiting for their Messiah to come, we have heard and believed the good news that our Messiah has already come. He was born in Bethlehem more than 2000 years ago.

Christians have additional good news. We call it *the gospel*. Our gospel means "good news." This extra good news is that Jesus, the Son of God, died to pay for the penalty of our sin. Three days later He rose again. He is alive today. All who place their trust in Him as Savior and Lord are given new life, abundant life, and eternal life. This Jesus has won the victory over sin, death, and hell.

That is good news, and that is our source for true joy.

What did the shepherds do with this good news? First, they heard the good news. Next, they checked it out. Look at vv. 15-16. They wanted to see it and Him for themselves.

The joy of the Christian life is not truly experienced until you personalize it and appropriate it to your own life. It is wonderful that God forgives sin, but it is more wonderful when I know that Jesus has forgiven my sin. It is great that God answers prayer, but I feel the greatness of that fact all the more when I recognize that God has answered my prayer. It is a marvelous thing that God gives people hope, but praise the Lord, when He has replaced my despair with His hope, that's when the Christian life becomes exciting. Otherwise, we are just dealing with cold facts and we lack the abundant life He means for us to enjoy and live.

Once the shepherds heard the good news and then saw the good news, what did they do next? They shared the good news with others. Look at vv. 17-18.

We would do well to follow their example. Hear the good news from a reliable source. See the good news for ourselves. Share the good news with whomever we can.

I once was a member of a church that had as their church slogan, "Share the Joy." We must not keep this good news to ourselves. The angel said he brought good news of great joy that was for all the people. That means we need to share this news with all people. We are to share the good news with people who are like us, who are not like us, and even with people who don't like us.

Some years ago, on the day after Christmas, Pope John XXIII, visited one of the worst prisons in Rome. It was the first time in 90 years that a Pope had visited a prison. As he greeted the prisoners, the Pope explained, "You could not come to me, so I have come to you."

That is why Jesus came. We could not come to Him, so He came to us. People need to know that, and how will they know that good news if we don't tell them?

### **This Surprising Joy Makes Peace Possible**

That one angel who spoke to the shepherds was suddenly joined by a whole host of angels, an unnumbered multitude. Look at vv. 13-14. While joy replaces fear, it joins hands with peace. Both are birthed by the good news. Only a joyous people can be a people who are truly at peace—at peace with God, at peace within themselves, and at peace with others.

In recent days, a number of large, American cities have been rocked with unrest and rioting. Some of the rioters have held signs that warn, "NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE."

Christmas teaches us, "No joy, no peace." The two are a package deal. You need one to have the other. When you have joy you have peace, and when you have peace, you have joy. When one is present, the other is close by, and when one is absent, the other is nowhere to be found. Joy and peace are like two sides of the same coin.

True joy & peace aren't contingent on the circumstances. In fact, they are rugged enough to rise about difficulty and obstacles.

I've seen the following story recently on Facebook. Maybe you've seen it. Regardless, I believe it is worth hearing again. One of the most popular poets in American history was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He was dearly loved on both sides of the Atlantic during his lifetime.

He lost his first wife several weeks after a miscarriage. She was just 22 years-old. Some years later, he married again. Her name was Francis, but she went by Fanny. She and Henry had six children together. They were married for 18 years, and Henry loved her deeply.

In 1861, the year the Civil War began, tragedy struck the Longfellow home. Fanny was sealing envelopes with hot wax when somehow a flame caught her dress on fire. Henry tried to put out the fire, injuring himself in the process, but Fanny was too badly burned. She died the next day. He was heartbroken.

In March of 1863, his son, Charley, ran off and joined the Union Army to serve his country. He did so without his father's permission. In November of that year, Charley was shot from behind. The bullet entered his back, nicked his spine, and exited his shoulder. Charley survived, but he endured a long and slow recovery.

In December of 1863, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem that was eventually set to music in 1872. We have a portion of that poem in our hymnal. We know it as, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." Listen to what Longfellow wrote:

I heard the bells on Christmas Day  
Their old, familiar carols play,  
And wild and sweet  
The words repeat  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,  
The belfries of all Christendom  
Had rolled along  
The unbroken song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till, ringing, singing on its way,  
The world revolved from night to day,  
A voice, a chime,  
A chant sublime  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth  
The cannon thundered in the South,  
And with the sound  
The carols drowned  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

It was as if an earthquake rent  
The hearth-stones of a continent,  
And made forlorn  
The households born  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;  
“There is no peace on earth,” I said:  
“For hate is strong,  
And mocks the song  
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!”

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:  
“God is not dead; nor doth he sleep!  
The Wrong shall fail  
The Right prevail,  
With peace on earth, good-will to men!”

Let the truth of that last verse carry you through the dark times and hard times you must face.

### **This Surprising Joy Aids Us in Worship**

Look at vv. 19-20. Mary worshiped quietly, and the shepherds worshiped loudly. It is much easier to worship when your heart is filled with joy. Whether your worship is contemplative or jubilant, joy will help get you there.

While joy is necessary, it is important to understand that you can't pursue joy directly. Whenever we make joy the object of our search, it always eludes us.

In his book, *Hometown Tales*, Philip Gulley offered a good description of how joy arrives. It is my observation that most people are either dog-people or cat-people. Some are both. If you are a dog-person, you may not agree with Gulley's claim: “The quality of any given place increases exponentially if there's a good cat in the picture. You should be so lucky as to have a cat take a liking to you.”

He went on to write:

Joy visits when we least expect it—we're ten years old and drinking deep from heaven's bottle, or life has bottomed out and Jesus drops in. Cat-feet quiet. It isn't that God withholds it; joy is always looking to climb into our laps. It's just that joy needs silence and thus seldom settles into the lap of a noisy person. It's only when we stop talking long enough to whisper grace that joy has a way of rubbing against us, curling in our lap, making its presence known.

At our house, we have a dog and a cat. Most dogs will come to you if you call his/her name. In my experience, most cats won't. If you call a cat, that means it's your idea, and the cat won't come unless it is his or her idea.

Our cat is named Micah. If I am sitting on the couch and call Micah to come sit in my lap, he will look at me momentarily, lose interest, and then walk away. But if I ignore him, eventually, he will show up out of nowhere, and climb into my lap, just as Gullely described, “cat-feet quiet.”

Joy acts the same way. Call its name, run after it, pursue it, and it will vanish. But, if you will just love God without making a show of it, His joy will find its way into your lap.

In this busy, hurried, and harried world of ours, I invite you to sit down. Be still. Breathe deeply. And if you listen intently, you just might hear the angels singing. And when you least expect it, joy will sneak up on you, surprise you, and nestle close.

Earlier, I said that our expectations rarely match our experience. I know of one time when our experience always outstrips our expectations. Paul speaks of it in his letter to the church at Ephesus. Let me read to you from Ephesians 3:20. “Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power a work within us.” When God is in the equation, your experience will be so far beyond whatever you managed to expect.

Brothers and sisters, let your imagination run wild in regard to the joy, and peace, and strength God can provide you. Then, let Him God take over and outrun everything you dared to hope.