

ADVENT SERMON SERIES
FROM HEAVEN ABOVE
(3) THE GIFT OF JOY

Isaiah 55: 10-13

Luke 2:1-14

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(with material from Dean Nadasdy, used by permission)

December 17, 2017

SCRIPTURE

¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. ¹² For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. ¹³ Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off (Isaiah 55:10-13 NRSV).

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” (Luke 2:1-14 NRSV).

MESSAGE

People ask. "How can I experience joy this Christmas?"

Among Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's many plays is *Emperor and Galilean*. Written in 1873, the play depicts the life of Julian, who ruled the Roman Empire in 361-363 AD. Julian tried to replace the newly established state religion of Christianity with the old worship of the Greek and Roman gods. In an 8-hour play (no wonder it never gets produced!) Ibsen tracks the emperor's degeneration from a young Christian to a pagan Caesar.

At one point in the play Ibsen has Julian say:

"Have you looked at these Christians closely?...They brood their lives away; unspurred by ambition; the sun shines for them but they do not see it; the earth offers them its fullness, but they desire it not; all their desire is to renounce and suffer, that they may come to die"¹

This description of dour Christians lingered perhaps with Ibsen himself, and today critics of the Christian Church frequently point to our lack of joy. Millennials charge Christians with being quick to judge, ever ready to tell people what they're doing wrong. Dean Nadasdy tells about a woman he knew who described her pastor as "so solemn he looks like he just stepped out of a Nyquil commercial." It is unfortunate that to some even at Christmas we Christians may look more like Ebenezer Scrooge than an angel with "good news of great joy." It is no wonder the New Testament calls on us to "rejoice" no less than 73 times. We seem to have difficulty getting the message.

How can we experience joy this Christmas? For that matter, how can we live a more joy-filled life? To do so we need a healthy, biblically informed view of joy. Joy is dependent on God and independent of worldly circumstances. It is not passive but actively affirms that God is at work. It is a gift from God and we must guard it against unhealthy lifestyles. It is the contentment that comes from knowing that:

"... he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).

In the original language of the New Testament (*koine* Greek), the words grace, thanksgiving and joy all have the same root. I do not believe this is merely a coincidence. The more we understand grace, the more we respond with thanks. The more we respond

¹William Barclay, *In the Hands of God*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966, p. 66.

with thanks the more we experience joy.

Grace refers to God's unmerited favor. All of God's gifts to us are undeserved, especially the gift of salvation. In spite of our sinfulness, God gave us his own Son to be the means by which we are forgiven.

A genuine experience of God's grace will cause us to respond with gratitude. As a result of our gratitude, we will want to grow in our commitment and in our desire to please God.

As we grow in our desire to please God we experience real joy. This is not a happiness based on circumstances or "luck" but rather the joy of a growing, personal relationship with our Lord. The Bible clearly teaches that believers will experience trials and challenges in this life but we can rejoice in God who will never forsake us and who ultimately triumphs over sin and death and raises his children to everlasting life.

The angel said:

"I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10).

This was no ordinary birth announcement that first Christmas. This was a sin-crushing, death-defeating universal news alert:

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

It was news of great joy! The joy was so contagious that the shepherds, the first to hear the news, couldn't stop talking about it. This is joy in the Lord. This joy responds to all God is and all God has accomplished. It is a relational joy that goes way beyond worldly good fortune. This joy is eternal.

This joy flies in the face of Ibsen's Julian who saw Christians as a brooding, sorry lot. This joy shines through the carols of this season, the notes we write on Christmas greetings, the works of charity we offer, and the tears which fall as this great good news of a Savior touches our hearts.

You *can* experience joy at Christmas and throughout the year. Listen again to the words of the angel:

"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"
(Luke 2:10-11).

Does the prodigal life of a son or daughter cause you sorrow? The Christ child is born to bring hope to the lost and to answer the prayers of his people. Does the diagnosis that you didn't expect cause you sorrow? The Christ child is born to bring health and healing of body, soul and spirit. Does the death of a loved one cause you to sorrow? The Christ child is born to go all the way through death and the grave to provide the certain hope of eternal life for all those who believe in him. Christ is born to pierce through all the darkness of our lives, bringing the heavenly light of joy that will never end. Jesus Christ is our eternal joy and you can experience him at any time.