



Sermon – December 13, 2020
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Verses Covered This Week

Luke 2:8 - 21

Let me invite you to grab your Bibles. We're going to be in Luke chapter 2 this morning. Luke 2 beginning in verse 8. If you're with us for the first time, whether here in the room or online, welcome home. And I hope y'all enjoy Kids Praise as much as I do. Will you let them know how much you appreciated them joining us today? And they did an excellent job of leading us into worship this morning. And as we come to our text today, remember last week we were thinking through the peace of Christmas, the reality that we do not experience through the absence of problems, but the presence of a promise. And one of the things we did last week as part of our service is we took some time to write names on cards of people that we wanted to pray for this season. People that we wanted to lift up that they might experience for the first time the peace that can only come through Christ. And so what you're going to notice right behind me during the message is this prayer wall. Cami and I took some time this week to place each of your names in one of those slots and to pray for those people. And I want to encourage you to keep doing that today and to know, even before we enter into our message, that at the end of this time, during the response song, I'm going to invite you to come and join me down here at these steps. We want to take some time corporately to pray for those names that are written on these pages that they might one day be written down in the Lamb's Book of Life. And so be preparing your heart now for that time of corporate prayer to come.

But as we fix our eyes on Luke 2 this morning, the question before us is where should we find our joy this Christmas? So the world is going to tell us that if we want to find joy, joy comes through good luck. The happier our circumstances, the happier our hearts. The better things go for us, the better our attitude. Maybe that's when it shows up with your grades, or your favorite football team's ranking, or your job performance, or how your kids are behaving. It could show up in any different way. But the essence of the way the world sees joy is that our situation determines our satisfaction. And that's especially difficult during a tough year like 2020, right now during this COVID season. I came across a viral picture you're about to see on the screen. Some people put up the letters JOY to mark out Christmas, but the wind blew do the J and turned the Joy into Oy. Thought that was pretty fitting to capture the essence of this year. And it's even harder during this winter season. Everyone knows that these cold months are often the most difficult for our emotional well-being and perhaps even coming into Christmas, it doesn't feel

like the most wonderful time of the year for you. You might be gathered around the Christmas tree to celebrate this holiday and the person that always sits right over there isn't with you this year. Or when you're with family, it reminds you of the dysfunction, or you slowed down for the holidays long enough to look back on this year and realize all the discouragements that we're facing. And that's one of the reasons why in a mental health survey that came out this week, across the board American emotional well-being has declined in 2020. Virtually every demographic of our country is in a worse spot when it comes to joy than when they started the year, but with one exception. Do you know the only group that has a stronger sense of mental health right now than when this pandemic began? It is people who go to church every week. And Luke 2 is going to help us to understand the reason why.

As we turn our attention there this morning, what we're going to find is that the joy of Christmas doesn't come from good luck, but from good news. So look at what the text tells us here in this familiar story beginning in verse 8.

⁸And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this will be a sign for you: you will a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!"

Now how many of you, like my family, grew up watching the show Charlie Brown Christmas? That was made first back in 1965. And if you've been following along in our Advent reading, one of the things that you would have learned in the past week is that that almost never saw the light of day. It was produced, it was about to air, but the TV executives looked at him and said, "Nobody's going to watch this." And then the creative team around Charles Schulz tried to talk him out of including the part where Linus reads this exact passage. But he was insistent that it stayed. And as they say, the rest is history. When it first aired that night, 50% of all the homes in the United States that had a television watched it that day. And it's been watched over and over again. And as Linus is standing on that stage, remember that moment, reading these exact words from the King James Bible in that show, one of the things that he looks at Charlie Brown and says is, "That's what Christmas is all about Charlie Brown." He's reminding us this morning of this reality that the joy of Christmas is at the center of what Christmas is all about. And that's what this story of the shepherds is helping us to see this morning. Luke is writing and he tells this story about the first people to learn about the birth of Jesus. And as we look at this text, what we're going find today is that the joy of Christmas comes from the good news of Christmas.

So notice one of the dimensions of this joy that we see right here in the part of the passage that we just read. We're going to see first the unexpected joy of Christmas. So notice what happens. As this story to the shepherds plays out, there's several dimensions of this narrative that we wouldn't expect, including the unexpected audience of Christmas that we see in verses 8 and 9. So who was this unexpected audience? The text tells us in verse 8 that it was the shepherds who

were out in the field. Now for us, when we think about shepherds during Christmas time, we're thinking about our kids Christmas performances. And they've got the scratchy costumes that they're pulling at the whole time and they've got the little staff and they look so cute and respectable. But there was a different picture of what shepherds were in that ancient culture. They had a bad reputation. They were not beloved. In fact, they rarely kept the ceremonial law and it was common for them instead to commit crimes of theft and to wreak havoc in other ways. They were on the margins. They were despised and rejected. But yet we find in the story of Scripture that shepherds play a pivotal role. You can think back to the Old Testament; the leaders of Israel are often described as shepherd to the people of God. Or you look ahead to the New Testament when the Bible speaks about pastors and church leaders, it speaks often of them as shepherds who are shepherding the flock. And of course, at the center of this imagery in the Bible is that shepherd boy, David. Who God comes and anoints. He sets apart to lead His kingdom and gives Him a promise that one day he will raise up a son of David who will restore the kingdom of God. And so isn't it fitting that this first revelation of the birth of this coming shepherd is to shepherds themselves. Now I don't know about you about how you would go about breaking significant news, but in our culture, you'd probably want a sophisticated public relations campaign. Maybe enlist some celebrity spokespeople. Try to figure out how to make things go viral on social media. And yet, when God breaks the biggest news the world has ever seen, He does it to a bunch of nobodies in the middle of nowhere. And as He speaks to this unexpected audience, think about what happens on that silent night. Do you see it there in verse 9? It tells us that the angel neared, the light appeared, and the shepherds feared. There was this sense of apprehension, uncertainty, or as Linus read to us on Charlie Brown Christmas, they were sore afraid. They were filled with this great fear. But what we will find is as the text moves on, they move from fear to faith. And that faith is grounded in what we see in verses 10 through 12 in the unexpected joy of Christmas.

So the angel responds to their fear and says, "Fear not." And this is the third time we've seen this phrase come up already in Luke. It appeared first in Zechariah and then to Mary and now them. And the question before us is: Why? Why should the shepherds not fear? Well it's because what the angel is going to show us is that they have been the first recipients of some unexpected good news. Notice what it says there in verse 10. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. So it speaks there of this idea of joy. What are we talking about when we speak of the joy of Christmas? Well what joy is is when happiness and hope come together in such a way in our lives that it produces an abiding contentment in the goodness of God. It's like when he tunes the melody of our heart to align with His grace so that we see His goodness no matter what circumstances befall us. And that's why Luke keeps coming back to joy over and over again in his gospel. Is that the heart that understands Christmas is a heart that is filled with joy. And one of the reasons that we should be filled with joy is because the unexpected scope of what God is doing at Christmas. Look back at what the angel says there. It is a good news of great joy for all people. Not just all the people of Israel, but all people. This is a message for you and for me. It was not limited as Israel would have expected at that time; to just the people of God of the Old Testament. It is one in which God is bringing good news of great joy for every one of us during this Christmas season.

What's the foundation for that good news? Look at the way the text goes on in verses 11 and it shows us, for unto you a born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord. So he comes to the shepherds, he speaks about the city of David, bringing up that shepherd imagery

again and he says, now there is one who is here. The one you have been waiting for. The one, as the text tells us, who is Savior, Christ, and Lord. Those are three of the primary ways the New Testament described Jesus and they are found right here in the first story of His coming. That word Savior comes in the original language from a word that means salvation or deliverance. One who will set God's people free. Jesus comes as our Savior, but He also comes as Christ the Lord. And if you were to look back in the original language, Christ and Lord are fused together in an inseparable way that appears nowhere else in the New Testament. And what Luke is conveying to us is that the angel is communicating that Jesus is not only the promised King, but He's the Lord of creation. And He is now here taking on flesh, being born in a cradle. So think about this. He reveals this news and then right after that in verse 12 he tells them that a sign will make this known. And I imagine if you're the shepherds you're saying, "How are you going to confirm this for us, God?" What do you think they would've expected that sign to be? Maybe a sword or a shield or perhaps as we learned about last week a horn of salvation. Some symbol of strength, of victory, of assurance. But instead, what's the sign that God gives? This will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. The King of this world was not born in a palace. The Priest of this world was not born in a temple. The Messiah of this world was born in a manger. And that is the sign that the angel gives to them and as a result of that, it overflows in an unexpected celebration that we see in verses 13 and 14. After this angel speaks, this host of heavenly beings, these angels appear. And look at what it says. They praise God saying, verse 14 tells us, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace amongst those with whom He is pleased." And one of the ways that COVID has effected this holiday season is for most schools and churches, you can't do that types of Christmas performances you typically do. And so for some of you grandparents and parents out there, you're really disappointed that you're not going to get that picture or that video of your child singing. And others of you are secretly excited that you don't have to sit through another one of these things. But whichever camp you find yourself in, there's a sense in which right here before the shepherds is the first Christmas performance in history. The angel is standing before them. And if that's not shocking enough, all of the sudden it's as if the heavens peel open and behind him are what is described as this host, this army of angels. In the original language this word host is one that's used for a military unit that is advancing against the enemy. And isn't it fitting, isn't it interesting that this host of angels are bringing a message of peace? Notice what it says there. Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace for those with whom the Lord is pleased. That's the foundation of the unexpected joy of Christmas. That when the glory of God takes on flesh and comes to earth, He brings about peace. And that peace rests upon, as it says there at the end of verse 14, those with whom He is pleased. That good will, that good pleasure from God rests only on those in whom He is pleased. Which raises the question for us: which whom is He pleased? And what we find throughout the Scripture is that we, on our own, cannot live lives that are pleasing to God. Our sin separates us from Him. We fall short of his design. He takes no pleasure. Our righteousness is like filthy rags apart from Jesus. But when we come to know Jesus, when we meet Him, when we receive Him as our Savior, as our Christ the Lord, He changes our lives forever so that now the peace on earth the angels speak of rests upon us, His beloved sons and daughters in who He's well pleased. It's an unexpected joy that grips us.

But I want you to see the second half of this passage because what we're also going to see is that there is an unstoppable joy of Christmas. So look back with me at the text beginning in verse 15 and read down through the end of the section.

¹⁵When 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.” ¹⁶And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. ²¹And at the end of eight days, when He was circumcised, He was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.

So notice what happens here. The unexpected joy of Christmas gives way to the unstoppable joy of Christmas. And it begins with an unstoppable reaction to that joy right there in verses 15 and 16. So when the angels go away, when the show ends, how did the shepherds respond? Look at what it says, verse 15. The shepherds said to one another. They began to talk, to discuss, to debrief this. What just happened? Did you see what I saw? Did you hear what I hear? Is this for real? Should we believe this? Should we go and see if this is true? They begin to discuss. And then notice what they do. Verse 16 tells us that they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph. There was this sense of urgency to action. There are homes all around the country right now during this holiday season that are celebrating Christmas in different ways. But one of those that might show up in your home is the Elf on a Shelf. If you're not familiar with it, the elf moves day after day to different spots in the house in order to watch your children's behavior and report it back to the North Pole so that Santa will know how they're behaving throughout the Christmas year. And if those are in your home, what will likely happen is as soon as your kids get up, they will bust out of their room and immediately go on a ferocious search around your house to find it. There's this sense of urgency until they can locate it and then they move back into their regular life. And doesn't it just baffle you that the same kid that can put that much energy into the urgency of finding that elf, just can't manage to find their shoe when you're trying to leave? Or they can't find that sock that doesn't match with the other one while you're putting the laundry away. The difference is curiosity can fuel urgency. And that's the essence of what's happening here with the shepherds. They are so captivated by the message that they've heard that they respond with an unstoppable reaction. They quickly go and they find Mary and Joseph and the baby. And I don't want to go on and miss what this text is telling us. Do you see how it begins by saying, Mary and then Joseph? That would have been unheard of in the ancient world. For a woman to be mentioned before a man and yet here in this moment, the writer, Luke, is highlighting to us the significance of Mary's role as the mother of Jesus. But what the shepherds were looking for wasn't the mother, but the Messiah. They were looking for the one that was right there in the cradle. And it tells us in verse 16 they find Him laying in a manger. But notice what happens. That unstoppable reaction leads to an unstoppable retelling of the joy in verses 17 through 19. When the shepherds finally locate Mary and Joseph, they begin to tell their story. But before we get there, just think about the nature of that search. What did the shepherds do when they decided, “We've got to go check this out.” Did they leave the flocks behind or did they try to take them with them? They hurried as quickly as they could. And I'm trying to imagine them herding all of these animals with them. They were shepherds so they likely knew where most of the stables in Bethlehem were and they went door to door looking not for animals, but for people. And at last they come upon this stable. And they look inside and they see Joseph, Mary, and this baby. And they begin to retell this story. And look at the way

that it plays out. It tells us in verse 17, they made known the saying. In other words, they recounted or informed, they revealed this reality. You can't miss the irony here that the shepherds are telling the story of the birth to the parents who just watched this birth take place. That's how captivated they are by the unstoppable joy of Christmas. They can't help but to share what verse 17 tells us they had been told concerning this child. There's a sense in which when you look at Scripture, these shepherds are the first missionaries in the Bible. They hear the truth of the gospel. They understand what God is doing in Jesus and they are so overwhelmed by the joy of that reality that it puts them on an unstoppable mission to share it with others. That's the way the joy works. You know the difference between happiness and joy is that when they're shared, happiness shrinks, but joy spreads. Happiness is divided. Joy multiplies. Happiness feels like it's a fixed pie. And if I give some of it to you, that means there's less for me. But true joy is like the loaves in fish in the feeding of the 5,000. The more you give away, the more there is. Because part of what it looks like to experience joy is to share it with others. That your deepest joy is felt when others experience the joy that you have. And that's a reminder to us this Christmas season of what it looks like to be faithful in our gospel proclamation and reaching out to family members, neighbors, friends, and letting them know about the joy that we can experience through Christ this season. It's why in just a moment we're going to come down here to the steps and pray for these names on this prayer wall. We want to share the joy that we've experienced in the way that we saw these first missionaries do the same thing.

But look at the response. Back in verse 18 how do the people respond when the shepherds share this story? It tells us there that all who heard it wondered. They don't respond with skepticism or uncertainty. They marveled. They were amazed. They couldn't believe it. And the danger for you and I during this Christmas season is that it can become so familiar to us that we get bored with it. That we lose the sense of wonder, the sense of amazement that happened when these others heard the story of the shepherds. But it wasn't just the broader group that responded in this way. Look at the way he describes Mary's reaction in verse 19. It tells us, she treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. Imagine if I were to go over to your house, many of you tucked in a closet or a cabinet, might have a baby book that you kept for your children or grandchildren as you were raising them that marks out milestones and moments. If you were to come to my parent's house, you could find one of those about me. And the whole principle behind it is you want to protect those moments that are important to you from the tyranny of time. That as time goes by, as the decades pass, those memories begin to fade. But when you're reintroduced to them, they are reawakened. You protect them for the sake of treasuring them. And when the text speaks here of Mary treasuring these things in her heart, that's the picture. That she protects them, she marks them out, she keeps them, she preserves them. And as it tells us there, she ponders these realities in her heart. When she meets Jesus, when she hears this message about Jesus, she sees the Messiah as her treasure. She sees the Messiah as the location, the person upon whom she should fix her heart. And that same reality is true for you and I 2,000 years later. That when we encounter the story of Christmas, when we come to know the message of Jesus, we are called to treasure Him as our Messiah and ponder Him in our heart. The way that should change how we are called to live. And when we do that, what will happen is we will respond in the same way that the shepherds do here at the end of this text. Because we'll notice as it comes to a conclusion there is an unstoppable rejoicing and joy that they display.

So what do they do after they tell Mary and Joseph about this story with the angels. Do they stay there? Do they linger? Do they stick around? Well look at what it tells us there back in verse 20. It says, the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God. And when Luke writes about their journey, he's not focused on where they're going, but what they're like as they go there. They're praising, they're glorifying, there is this sense of joy, this rejoicing in the joy of God. They cannot help but to celebrate the joy of Christmas. And just think about the journey that these shepherds have been on. The story begins by them recoiling in fear. Then it moves to them responding in faith. Then next we see them retelling in joy and now we notice them rejoicing in hope. That's what the gospel does in our hearts. It moves us from fear to faith so that we might be filled with the joy that can only be found in Jesus Christ.

It's interesting when you look at this passage. The text doesn't tell us what happens when the shepherds get back to the fields. We don't know if they came back to some of the best months of their life. Maybe the Lord poured out His blessings upon them. Maybe their flocks were more successful. Maybe their lives were easier. Maybe things were simpler than it had ever been as God poured His blessings out upon them. Or maybe just the opposite was the case. Maybe they left those animals behind when they raced to Bethlehem and they came back and they were gone. Maybe they were scattered. Maybe some of them had been eaten by ferocious animals. Maybe they had to toil and labor and face difficulty. We don't know the nature of their circumstances. But here's what we know. When someone is gripped by an unstoppable joy, they can find joy regardless of the circumstances. They can stand firm in the most difficult of seasons. We have no idea what's in front of us in 2021. It's impossible to imagine that it could be as difficult as 2020. But here's what we know. Regardless of what's coming before us, we know that in those time periods, we can embrace the heart of what Paul calls us to in Philippians 4:4. Do you remember what he says? He tells us, rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice. When Satan can't stop the gospel, what he seeks to do next is to steal our joy. To rob us of finding the goodness of God and finding our contentment in that. But what the shepherds model for us now is that we can choose joy regardless of the circumstances. But it's not just the shepherds who walk away from this moment. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus also move on to the next chapter of their life. And you see that beginning in verse 21 where it tells us what happens next to Jesus. He is given a covenantal sign and He is given a covenantal name. So notice what it says there. At the end of eight days, when He was circumcised. This was standard for all the boys of the people of Israel. They were marked out with the sign of the covenant through circumcision on the eighth day. Marking them out as part of the covenant people of God. And Jesus goes through this same experience to identify with His people, to be made like them in all things so that He might accomplish God's design for rescue that He was given. But He's not just given that sign, He is given a name there. It tells us in verse 21, He was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. If you were to look back in the original language, the word Jesus comes from a root word that means, deliverance and salvation. Even in the giving of His name, the mission of Jesus is made clear. And that mission is a mission that is to carry forth joy to all people. That good news of great joy. Which is why I was struck by these words I read from a scholar this week in preparing this message when he said: The truth is, even if Christ were born in Bethlehem a thousand times, but not within you, you would be eternally lost. The Christ who was born into the world, must be born in your heart. Religious sentiment, even at Christmastime, without the living Christ is a yellow brick road to darkness. I can't help but notice throughout this story of the shepherds that there are pieces of scrap wood that show up over and over again. Those shepherds were probably tending the flock in their fields by night,

carrying a staff that they'd picked up from a tree limb and whittled down that scrap wood into something useable. And then when they experienced the angels and they go to see Mary, Joseph, and Jesus they show up in a stable that was likely constructed out of scrap wood that wasn't worth any other construction project, made just usable enough to host animals. And right there at the center of it was this piece of scrap wood that would have been discarded but had been turned into a feeding trough, a manger, that was now the cradle for a King. And even as you look on the stage, you see this prayer wall here that is made out of scrap wood. That is a reminder to us that what God does in the gospel of Jesus Christ is He makes all things new. Because this wood that shows up in this story was pointing ahead to another piece of scrap wood in Jesus' life. What we know is that in the crucifixion, when Jesus grows to the cross, He is nailed to two pieces of scrap wood, fashioned to kill criminals. And He hangs there for you and me, dying in our place so that if we trust in Him in salvation, we can experience the type of joy that the shepherds experienced that night.

Many of you are familiar with C. S. Lewis' well-known series of books about The Chronicles of Narnia. And if you were to look back at the seventh of those books, the last battle, it tells a story involving a man named King Tirian. And the king travels and he comes upon a stable. And when he walks inside that stable, he realizes that even though it is diminutive in size, there is a whole world inside of it. And while he is there experiencing it, he also gets to interact with characters who have showed up at different parts of this series of books including Lord Digory, Queen Lucy, and I want you to hear the exchange that they have while standing in that stable.

“It seems, then,” said Tirian, smiling himself, “that the stable seen from within and the stable seen from without are two different places.” “Yes,” said the Lord Digory. “Its inside is bigger than its outside.” “Yes,” said Queen Lucy. “In our world too a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world.”

That's the message of Luke 2. This stable had something inside of it that was bigger than our whole world. And that's why we can find joy this Christmas. It's why we can say with Linus, “That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.”

Let's pray together.

Father, I don't know the situation of everyone in this room, But I'm sure there are those that are here that would love to experience joy. But it eludes them every day. It eludes them right now. The cares of this world, the discouragements of this life, have brought them low. But perhaps, God, it hasn't brought them low enough this morning that Your Spirit needs to take them to the rock bottom so that You can make them new. And I pray in this moment You would do that now. That You would help us to experience the joy that can only be found in Jesus. And as we look ahead into this new year, this new chapter in our lives, God, we're praying that we would be a people who are so overwhelmed by the unexpected joy of Christmas that we carry that unstoppable message to those around us. That we would be faithful witnesses just as these shepherds who declare the goodness of what You've done for us at Christmas and the cross in a way that invites people to follow after You and in a way that reshapes our hearts so that we can rejoice in all things just as You've called us to. And we ask this in Christ's name. Amen.