

Reclaiming Our Joy at Christmas

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Scripture: Luke 2:6-20

One of my favorite sermons on the Christmas story actually comes from some lay preachers known best as the characters of the Peanuts comic strip. You remember a Charlie Brown Christmas. Charlie Brown is commissioned to go and to find a Christmas tree before the local pageant. As he searches, however, we are aware that there is a deeper search going on in Charlie Brown. Bombarded and distracted by the commercialization he sees around him, Charlie seems to be looking for something more than a tree, the true meaning of Christmas. At last he settles on a humble tree with sparse branches, and brings it back to present to his friends at the auditorium. He's met with laughter and cheers by his friends. Even his good pal Snoopy, his beagle, roars with laughter at the tree he has brought back.

But when the others depart, Charlie Brown bemoans that he still doesn't understand: What is the meaning of Christmas? And that's when it happens. Linus, blanket and all, makes his way to the stage and says, lights, please. And that begins to speak that wonderful story. Of shepherds abiding in the fields by night watching their flocks.

"And an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were so afraid. But the angel witness tells us says if you're not. Fear not. For I bring you tidings of great joy: good news, which will be for all the people. For born to you in the city of David this day is a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign to you: You will find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

"And that," Linus says, "is what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."

But as Linus tells the story, there is a moment in there. As he tells the story of the angels saying, do not fear, Linus becomes transformed himself by the story. Caught up in the wonder of a God who would come, Linus, who always carries that blessed security blanket, where this time only, allows the blanket to slip from his hands.

For memorabilia and trivia, for those of you who are into such things, you can check it out - in all the other frames of Charles Schulz's Peanuts comic strips, this is the only time that Linus gives up his blanket. As if somehow Christmas and the wonder of it all is enough to allow Linus to release the thing that he cling to - and to embrace God.

Wouldn't that be a wonderful thing to happen to us this Christmas? For if I'm honest, this Advent season has been more like Charlie Brown's journey than Linus's moment on the stage. The pandemic, the separation of family, our departure from those traditions we love in our local church building. The threat of Corona; the landscape of our nation and our political climate have bombarded us and encroached in on us, so much so that

Christmas doesn't seem like the Christmases we know. And we might therefore be tempted to think that somehow the wonder and the awe can't happen to us. We feel, if we're honest, that our hearts are heavy. And not much like singing with the Christmas Angels. But God's word is amazing, and if we look at it, I believe embedded in this text we will find reasons again to reclaim our joy and realize what God has done for us at Christmas and through that greatest gift of Jesus Christ.

I invite you now to journey with me. If you want you can open up your Bibles to Luke 2:8-20, or just follow along in the story. The first thing I noticed as I read the story anew is that this story is the story of a God who wants to connect with us. A God of compassion who looks upon the mess that we are in and doesn't turn away, but instead enters into the story. I think we think this Christmas is so unusual and so hard to imagine God entering, but the first Christmas was much the same. There was a census going on that had everyone upset. There was oppression and violence by the Romans. Displacement of the Hebrews. And certainly in the midst of Mary and Joseph needing to go to Bethlehem, life was anything but normal.

In fact, perhaps in many ways this Christmas is more reflective of the night that Jesus was born. And yet, God chose in the fullness of time that night to be born and placed in a manger. A refugee, if you will. Not when things were perfect, but when things seemed like they couldn't get worse. God in Jesus Christ chose to come.

I think that choice of God to enter into the mess of a manger and a stable, a census, can be a powerful word to us this day. For scripture says this is characteristic of God. He longs for a relationship with us and he doesn't wait for our lives to be perfect. But enters in in love, nonetheless. In fact, Romans picks this up and says: "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." To hear what that means in our lives right now, God looks at us with love and longs to enter in with us. Not sending help from afar, but coming and being a part with us.

Perhaps in this time of isolation, you've thought about your own life, perhaps things aren't perfect this Christmas. That's probably an understatement. Perhaps it's too much time with the people in the house or not enough time with the people outside of it. Perhaps in the isolation, you're troubled by some things that have happened in the past. And you find yourself in a place of regret. Here's the good news of Christmas: that just as God started this story and sending an angel to Mary and an angel to the shepherds, so God wants to enter into whatever you're facing this day. To partner with you. To be present and have a relationship with you. God is not afraid of our messes.

The second piece I read in this is just the sending of the angels. And the message that they proclaim that night is this: We have a God who longs to offer us guidance. A God who wants to speak to us. And to whom do we speak but people when we want to share our thoughts? Jesus became the Word made flesh, so that we could understand who God is and what God is like.

The angels come giving specific words to the shepherds, telling them not to fear. But also giving them a specific sign for which they can look: "For you will find the child wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." This good news of the Gospel is God did not just enter in at Christmas, but continues to do so every day in the hearts of those who believe in his name and receive him. That while Mary, in her encounter with Gabriel, was not informed of what her life would look like as the mother of the Messiah, and the shepherds were not told about the next day, only what was going on right now. Yet God was faithful in his promise: to give them guidance so they would find the path that God had prepared for them.

In John 15:15 Jesus says, *"I no longer call you servants, but I call you friends. For I share with you what the master tells me."* Psalm 23 is not often thought of as a Christmas text, but it is a Psalm that the characters of Christmas would reaffirm:

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

*He makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters,
he restores my soul.*

He leads me and paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

Friends, in all the interactions in the Christmas gospels, we hear again and again a God who wants us to find our way. Who offers us guidance on our path. We may not understand all that's going on in our world. But we only need to trust that this God is compassionate enough to want to guide us on a daily basis. And that's very good news for this Christmas.

The third thing in the text is that God also offers us a purpose. Those shepherds out on the hillside, I am sure, felt like they were outsiders to the God story. In social circles, they were the lowest of the low. And really, in first century Palestine, no one was really in the inner circle but the Pharisees and the priests, the religious leaders.

And Christmas Eve, as well as Easter Sunday morning, God chose to reveal his message to those who were outside. Shepherds at Christmas and the women on Easter Sunday morning. Reaching out to them to include them in the story. They say, in effect, that no one is beyond the Christmas story or outside of God's circle of love and compassion. Not only that, but God, offered the shepherds something God also offers us this Christmas: a purpose. That for which Charlie Brown searched in the search for a tree, is offered to the shepherds. And they become the first preachers, really, of Christmas. Given a mission and a specific sign in which to look that they would find this child wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger means that they now have a purpose. Not just to be blessed by Christ, but this precious invitation to partner with him, to bring his kingdom to Earth.

My friends, this Christmas, that invitation is also included to you: that God frees us from our past mistakes, the messes of our life, the sin that binds us. But he frees us for our partnership with him. And I assure you this day: just as much as the shepherds had a

purpose and a mission, so God has a specific purpose and mission for your life. For those who receive, they will find the guidance on the journey. A scripture says God knew you before you were even born, that you are fearfully and wonderfully made by him. You might have felt like an outsider in God's story. But you are, in fact, included.

And so how do we release those? Well the fourth gift comes like this: The shepherds are willing to say yes. The gifts and the power of Christmas become released in us. Our joy is renewed when we are willing to surrender, fully, to God. Mary was encountered by the angel Gabriel, and an invitation was offered her and she said yes. And in that moment the story of the incarnation began. The invitation came to Joseph through a dream to receive Mary as his wife. And to be the earthly father of Jesus. He was released from the pain of feeling betrayed, to a purpose: to raise Jesus as his own.

The shepherds could have stayed in the field that night thinking it was a really cool experience. But they surrendered all that they knew of shepherding left their lives in the hills for a moment to take the risk to enter into the town, to find the Christ child.

The story of the Christmas characters is one filled with joy and the presence of God. But what they all have in common is this: In hearing God's invitation to embrace the son, Jesus Christ, is also the invitation to be on a journey with him. Worship is that place where we best surrender.

We're like the shepherds, we come and remember who God is. And we surrender our lives and our hearts and our souls to him. Worship - surrender - can happen any time and any place at Christmas. We don't need to be in a church building. We don't need a choir or a praise band, we don't even need a congregation holding candles. All we need is a heart that is willing to hear the Christmas story of a God who has come, to be born, to die on a cross, deliver us from sin and death, and to offer us a new life daily, partnering with him in his kingdom here on Earth. To one day live eternally in this kingdom. With Christ. To believe and to receive.

And in that moment of surrender, our Christmas joy is restored. And Christmas happens again to us.

You know, Linus laid down his blanket at that moment of telling the Christmas story, but he does take it up again. But do you remember then what he does with it? He takes that blanket and he lays it around the base of Charlie Brown's ugly little Christmas tree. And in that moment, Charlie Brown's tree begins to be transformed.

When we surrender our lives, offer our gifts that God has given us, offer our service, we receive Jesus Christ, something happens in us. And not only in our hearts, but in the world around us. When the church lays down its gifts, its security, and trusts in Christ with a surrender and a worship to serve others, lives besides ours will be reborn.

Thank you for the privilege of being able to share with you. And as I go into 2021, I have that image: Of Linus laying his blanket at the foot of the tree, to make it something else. May that be an image that we carry in the Church of Jesus Christ called York District, so that others might also have life.