



Sermon Transcription • Luke 2:8-14

Our Joy

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[Please Note: This transcript has been lightly edited for ease of reading. Also, some headings have been added in square brackets to aid the reader in locating portions of the sermon.]

Isaac Watts is the name of a song writer, a hymn writer, who wrote all kinds-hundreds and hundreds of hymns. He wrote, accredited, about 750 hymns or so. If you've been around the church for awhile, you've probably heard some of his songs. "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," and "Alas and Did my Savior Bleed." Even if you're not a Christian though, or if you've ever been to church before, you've probably heard at least one of his songs, especially at Christmas, because it gets played everywhere in malls and elevators and *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. Clark Griswold getting the lights set up, <singing> "Joy to the world!" Poof! <speaking> And it doesn't work, but then it does later (spoiler alert, in case you haven't seen the movie, the lights do end up working). "Joy to the World" is easily one of the most well-known Christmas songs of all the Christmas songs that you would sing in churches and all different places you would hear them. Joy itself is the theme, one of the most commonly recurring themes of the Christmas season itself. You've probably seen the word "joy" in some Christmas card you've received from Hallmark where you've been wished much laughter and joy, or much peace and joy. I actually had an idea this week of a Christmas movie that I was going to pitch to Netflix called *Christmas Joy*, and it would be about a woman who worked as a corporate executive, who used to like Christmas but doesn't like it anymore. And her name is Joy, and she would be called back to her hometown to be with her family at Christmas, and she'd reconnect with a loved one from high school or something. They would get together. I was telling one of our interns this, he said, "That is a movie, [laughter] that's on Netflix now, called *Christmas Joy*." And I said, "See? Good idea." [Laughter]

Joy is everywhere at Christmas. The passage that Linus reads to Charlie Brown to explain what Christmas is all about is about the good news of *great joy*. It's just a common theme at the Christmas season. And so this morning, we're going to think about the idea of joy. And we're going to do it by looking at the very passage that Linus tells Charlie Brown, Luke 2:8, if you have your Bibles open to that page. If you don't have a Bible, the Scripture will be up on the screen for you. Here's Luke 2:8-14,

"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.' Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with



the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.'

The shepherds are out in the field, and angel comes to them and he starts his delivery, the declaration of his news, by saying that there is good news of great joy. And we're going to look at this passage, Luke 2, by asking ourselves two questions. First question: what is the good news? And secondly: who receives the great joy? So first, what is the good news? Second, who receives the great joy?

[What is the Good News?]

Let's think first about that first part, who what is the good news that the angels told the shepherds? Luke 2:9,

"An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them [the shepherds], and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.'

See, the good news that God's people were going to receive a Savior fit in a worldview, in a perspective that the shepherds and the other Israelites would have had. Because here's the situation the shepherds found themselves in: the shepherds found themselves living in a land with their fellow Jews that they had some freedoms in their land, they could do some of the things that they wanted to do, but they were unable to rule over themselves. They actually had someone else, the Roman authorities, oppressing them, and actually dictating to them certain ways of life. So imagine us Abbotsfordians are living in our own little area, and we can do some of the things we want to do, but we have another nation that's over us, oppressing us, telling us to do certain things. The nations may be like Kitsilano, and they've come, and they've told us, "Look, no more Oldhand, no more Tim Hortons, just JJ Bean. That's it. That's all you can drink." Or maybe the nation of Toronto comes over to the nation of Abbotsford, and we can do some of the things we want in Abbotsford, but Toronto comes and they say, "Look, you have to love the Toronto Blue Jays." And some of you are still under this oppression. [Laughter] There's freedom, there's the Mariners, just south of us, right? We can do some of the things we want to do as Abbotsfordians, but we had an oppressor over us, dictating certain ways we would live. The Jewish people had some freedoms, but they were looking forward to a day when they wouldn't just exist in their land, but they would be fruitful in their land and they would be able to rule over themselves and their own land. They were expecting a Messiah to come for the sole purpose of removing the oppressor. So that they could exist in their own land and live fruitfully, and they could govern themselves.

So the angels come to the shepherds who are expecting this kind of Messiah, and they say, "Look, we have good news of great joy, because a Savior has been born to you today." And they are thinking to themselves, this is our ticket out of Roman oppression. Even the language in Luke 2, for us, our familiarity with this passage is Charlie Brown and Linus reading it to Charlie Brown, right? That's the framework we hear this text in, is in the Peanuts story. But the framework that the original audience



would have heard these words of the angel to the shepherds is actually a very different context. Actually, these words were aggressive. It's called a polemic. A polemic is a really aggressive attack against another person or idea. And it's a polemic against Caesar Augustus. Luke 2:1 says,

"In those days [the days where the shepherds are doing their thing and the angels are about to come, in those days] Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world."

So, Luke locates this story of the angels coming to the shepherds under the reign of Caesar Augustus. Here's how the rulership of Caesar Augustus was described in some writings that were written about 10 years prior to this scene taking place, describing Caesar Augustus. They called him "the son of God, who is the savior, who is lord, who will end all war, and whose birth will bring good news for the whole world." The angels come to the shepherds living under the reign of Caesar Augustus, and they say, "Look, a Son of God is being born to you," Luke 1:35. "A Savior," Luke 2:11. "He's Christ the Lord," Luke 2:11. "Who's going to bring peace to you," Luke 2:14. "Whose birth is good news for all people," Luke 2:10. It sounds a lot like the angels are saying there's a new Caesar in town. You've heard these things about Augustus, but it's actually going to be true about this baby in a manger. Your Savior is coming to deliver you from your oppression. That's what these shepherds heard when this good news was being declared to them. The good news that Jesus is going to confront and oppose the Roman oppression.

The reality in the story of Jesus, though, is that in his life and ministry, Jesus didn't actually remove Roman oppression; he died under it. Jesus didn't conquer Roman leadership, he was conquered by Roman leadership. The child in the manger was supposed to be a deliverer who would go against Caesar, and by all expectations of what the shepherds and other Israelites had of what their savior would be like, Jesus failed. He wasn't actually the savior that they expected. And yet, Jesus tells us that he is successful in *his* mission. Here's what I mean by that. One of the other gospels tells a story of an angel coming to Joseph who's engaged to be married to a woman named Mary. And the angel comes to Joseph and he says, "Look, I want you to continue with the marriage for this reason." Matthew 1:21,

"She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

See, the Jews felt the oppressor was actually Caesar, but the angel coming to Joseph says, "No, the oppressor that needs to be dealt with isn't necessarily Caesar; it's sin. And Jesus is coming to actually deliver his people from their sin. Jesus predicted this himself in Luke 18. He said this is going to happen through his life, death, and resurrection. Luke 18:31,

"Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, 'We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. [He's not going to be delivering people *from* the Gentiles, he's going to be



delivered over to the Gentiles.] They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.”

And in case we have any ideas in our mind that this was just something that was happening to Jesus, as though he had no control over the matter, Jesus makes it really clear in John 10:18 where he says,

“I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and I have authority to take it up again.”

Jesus is saying, “This is my mission,” and he succeeded in it. By all accounts of what Israel was hoping for in a savior, Jesus was a failure. But God’s plan for Jesus was a massive success. There’s good news of great joy because a Savior has come. Not the savior that we expected, but the Savior that we need.

See, the Israelites thought their main problem was the suffering and the affliction and the oppression that they felt in their day to day life. Everyday that they woke up, they were reminded of the sorrow and the affliction and the struggle of being under Roman rule. And they expected a savior to release them from that oppression. I think a lot of us, when it comes to our belief in God and in Jesus, is that if he is going to be our Savior, he needs to release us from those things that oppress and afflict and cause us sorrow. That’s his job, we think. Forget about the sin piece, we’re not actually that bad. The problem I have, we think to ourselves, is that I have sorrows in my life, I have disappointments in my life, I have failing health, I have friends who are relationally fractured from me. There’s all kinds of things that when I wake up I feel, that’s the thing I want salvation from. And yet, Jesus comes and says, “I’m not going to take care of Caesar, I’m going to take care of your sin. And he accomplished what he set out to do. See, all of our actual situational problems like our financial struggles and our fractured families and our divorces and our illnesses and...look, I know, I know that there are so many disappointments and struggles and sorrows in this room right now. But Jesus didn’t come to deal only with those problems. He came to deal with the real oppressor, which is sin. The reality that we as sinful people are alienated from the God who is there, the God who has made it all, the God who we’ve been created to have a relationship with, and he has made a way for us to be reconciled to him, through the successful ministry of the Messiah. Who actually was victorious in his mission. So what’s the good news? The good news is that the Savior was born. The Savior that we needed, not the one we expected. The angels had good news that caused great joy, which brings us to our second question.

[Who Experienced the Great Joy?]

Who experienced the great joy? Luke 2:8-9,

“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.”



Luke makes it really clear that the people who are receiving this good news of great joy, the people who receive the great joy (at least in this scene) are the shepherds. They're supposed to be representative of the kind of people who would receive this great joy. So what is it about the shepherds then? Well, shepherds in that time frame were basically at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. They weren't despised, necessarily, but no one also thought really highly of shepherds. They were noble in the work that they did, but they weren't very important...they were the interns of the ancient world. [Laughter] Right? They're like, yeah, interns aren't like, awful, but they're also not like, how you say, valuable? [Laughter] Or like, contribute anything to society, they're just there. Doing their thing. Once a shepherd, always a shepherd. Once an intern, always an intern. You can't remove the tag. It sticks with you forever. Believe me. [Laughter] The shepherds were in this society, they were the bottom rung of the socioeconomic scale. They were the kind of people who would be up for some good news. And the angel of the Lord comes to them and says, "Listen, don't be afraid, I have good news that will bring great joy." The shepherds hear about the Savior who has been born, that you'll know it's the Savior because he'll be wrapped in cloths, lying in a manger. They hear this news, Luke 2:15-20,

"When the angels had left them [the shepherds] and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.' So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told."

See, the shepherds are told, "Look, here's some good news of great joy. A Savior's here, he's going to be lying in a manger, you're going to know it's him because he'll be wrapped in cloths, he's the deliverer." The shepherds go, they see this baby, they're like, this is exactly like we were told. And their response to the good news was great joy. They're worshiping, they're praising God for him actually fulfilling what he promised to them. See, the kind of people who experience great joy at the good news of Jesus are the kind of people who know that they need saving. In other words, I think that there's a correlation between our recognition of our need and the joy that we'll have at the good news of salvation. The greater the need, the greater the joy.

This past week, we had all kinds of windstorms and historic stuff taking place in terms of weather patterns and all that. You probably lost power at some point in the past week. You probably saw, actually, the footage at White Rock of the pier that was just being pummelled by wave after wave after wave, eventually breaking the pier apart. You probably saw the footage of a guy standing on the other side of the pier, stuck. Can't actually cross the pier back onto dry land because the pier's being just demolished by these waves and these winds. And I imagine that that man, when he saw the helicopter coming, thought to himself, this is good news of great joy. [Laughter] He's not going to be standing on the pier being like, I'm good! He's going to say, "Get me in the copter, man!" He knew his need, there



was great joy when he found out that there was salvation for him. The greater the awareness of need, the greater the joy of good news.

Or, let's think about it like this. Imagine you're a parent, and you left your child for about five minutes to go to the other room. Some of you are like, "That sounds like a miracle. Keep talking." [Laughter] You left for five minutes, you come back in the room to your child and you say, "I'm here." And they look at you and they say, "Okay." [Laughter] Now imagine, you left your child for about, let's say, a long workday. A longer workday than normal. Normally you see your kid around 3:00, this time you saw them right before bedtime around 7:30, you come home, you say, "I'm here." And they look at you with a smile, and they come up and give you a side hug and they're so happy to see you. Now imagine you're away on a two week trip for work. You don't have a lot of access to the internet to connect with your family, so for about two weeks you haven't seen your children. You come back home after your trip and you see your kids, and excitedly you say, "I'm here!" And excitedly they run into your arms and you embrace. And I know, there are many of us in the room right now who have lost someone very dear to us, and we would want nothing more than an opportunity to see them come back into the room and say, "I'm here." And we would embrace them for a very, very long time. See, the action of the parent coming in the room in each situation is identical. Coming in, saying, "I'm here." The only difference is the awareness of the need on the part of the child. The greater the need, the greater the joy at the good news of salvation and the deliverer. The shepherds were the kind of people who experienced great joy because they knew that they needed a Savior.

But if we're going to be talking about joy and joy at the Christmas season and how the Christmas season brings good news of great joy, we probably have to take a minute to differentiate in our minds joy in this way, and circumstantial happiness. Right, because we're in the season of joy, but really we're in the season of circumstantial happiness. The Hallmark cards should say, "Merry Christmas, we hope you have circumstantial happiness all the time in this season." That's what we're all about, right? We're about setting the table. We're about inviting the friends. We're about keeping the traditions the same. We're about giving the right gifts. All of that. All we're trying to do is build moments of happiness. And for many of us, those moments that we're trying to build up aren't actually going to come to fruition. We're going to invite the family around the table thinking to ourselves, I'm going to make this moment of circumstantial happiness but actually, it's going to fall apart. You're going to give the gift you think your child wants; they don't actually want that anymore. That look you're looking for, they're not going to give you. All of the season is about building these moments of circumstantial happiness. And look, even if we get them, they'll be gone soon. Now, I'm no Scrooge, right? I say, go for the circumstantial happiness moments. Do it. Like, make your Christmas Instagram-able. Awesome. [Laughter] All I'm saying is, those moments are fleeting. They're not actually going to last. The reality is that we live in a place and in a time where our happiness is momentary. It comes and goes. Where our happiness is like a land that we can visit briefly on vacation, but then we return back home.

So when we think about this idea of joy as Christians, if we're real with ourselves, we recognize that we are (many of us) in massively difficult situations. We have sorrows and griefs and stresses on our life that feel like we're the pier and life just keeps hitting us with wave after wave after wave, and we're



not sure if we're going to be able to make it or collapse under the pressure. That's where we live now. That's our life. And so when we think about good news that brings great joy, we hear that thinking to ourselves, but the darkness is so dark and feels so weighty. The reality is that for Christians in the real world, we can't talk about joy without talking about hope. They're interrelated; they're connected. You can't talk about one without the other. Yes, it is true that Jesus has come, the Savior was born. Sin was defeated. He lived the perfect life, he died for our sins in our place. He rose victoriously from the grave. He reigns with the Father in heaven. Amen, amen, amen, amen, amen. And yet, the storms still hit. But he's coming back to make all things new. Look, we can have joy in the already of our salvation, but we still feel the weight and the sorrow of the not yet. So the way for Christians to experience joy is almost synonymous with us thinking about our hope. James 1:2-4 says it this way:

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

See, James is coming to Christians who believe the gospel, they believe that Christ died for them, that he rose again, that he's coming again, and yet, they live in this situation of darkness and sorrows and oppressions. And he says to them, listen, in those moments of trials, consider it *joy*. Why? Because it's preparing you for your hope. Think about being one of the shepherds, hearing the good news of great joy. And you come to see Mary and Joseph and the baby, and you are told by the angel that that baby is your Savior. And you come and you see that baby, and you rejoice. But you're probably thinking, one of those shepherds was probably thinking to themselves, but he can't be our savior quite yet. Like, our salvation's not fully here yet. He's probably going to need to grow up a bit. The reality is that in this time in history, when Jesus has already come, he's lived, he's died, he's rose, but he hasn't returned yet. We are living in an infancy stage of our salvation. It's here already, but it's not yet here fully. That's why the shepherds are a great picture of who are the kinds of people who have great joy at good news. It's because we know we have a need, but we have hope that that need will one day be fully, finally, eternally met. But we sit and we wait in that season that is called the already and the not yet. So we can consider our trials joys because they remind us of our hope for a more full salvation yet to come. If it's true that the greater the need, the greater the joy at good news, what brings to mind our need more than the trials of life? What causes us to think, I need help! Than all of the sorrows and sufferings of our life? It's like they're producing in us this flower that will bloom full with hope of our Savior yet to come fully, finally, eternally.

This is why Paul in Romans 12:12 writes,

“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.”

He's saying, look, you should be joyful, but you should be joyful *in* hope. Don't be joyful in your circumstantial moments, whether happiness or sadness. Be joyful *in* this great hope that's coming. That even though you're salvation's in an infancy stage now, there is a day coming when it won't be like that; it will be full. It will be as it should be. It will be perfect. It will be eternal. We have a hope still



before us. See, just like the shepherds, we rejoice that our salvation is here, but not yet fully here. And so we hope.

Said another way, Christianity is a hope-centric life. Christianity is not the story that you come to Jesus and everything gets better right away. Christianity is the life that is centred on hope. I actually think that a helpful image for hope in the Christian life is like putting on your shoes everyday. You can't actually leave your house and go through the rest of your day without actually putting on your shoes. Right? Our hope in our future, full, eternal salvation, are like the boots that we wear every single day. You can't be a Christian without it. You won't make it. I've really, actually enjoyed this past month of December with the days getting dark sooner, I know that sounds weird. Because it gets dark at, like, 2:00 now. [Laughter] Actually, I don't even think it gets bright, right? I think it's just different shades of darkness. But one of the benefits, the side benefits of it getting darker earlier, for me and my family's life stage, is that I have a son whose four, who loves staring at lights. They're amazing. You're in this dark place, and there's these little things that are bright, that you can look at. They captivate him. So everyday around 4:00, 4:30, we walk around our house in the darkness and we see all the different houses with Christmas lights. The darkness and the mist and the cold surround us, and yet we see these little bursts of hope piercing the darkness. The Christian story is that we currently live with darkness surrounding us. Pressing against us at every turn, and yet the Christmas story is that into the darkness, there shone a great light. And this light is the hope of the world. Every time we have an opportunity to see a Christmas light in the dark, you can think to yourself, I have a hope of a future that winter won't actually last forever. There's a time coming when all things will be made new.

But look, the only way I actually get to enjoy walking with my son in the darkness, thinking about the light piercing through the darkness, is if I'm willing to put on my boots. Christianity is a hope-centric life, that hope is like the shoes that we wear every single day to get through the darkness, even though there are glimmers of hope and light that we see. We can't talk about the great joy without talking about our great hope. See, the reality is that there's a day coming that for those who trust in Jesus, happiness will not just be a momentary experience. But happiness will be our experience for moment after moment, for eternity. And there's a day coming, for those who trust in Jesus, when happiness is not just a land that we visit briefly, but actually happiness is the place we live in and build our homes for eternity. That day is coming. And the reason that day's coming is because the Savior we needed came. He didn't deal with the things we expected him to deal with; instead he dealt with the real oppressor, sin, so that God and sinner could be reconciled. And it's with all of that being true that we, like Watts, can say "Joy to the world, the Lord has come." And we can remind ourselves to be joyful in hope because he's coming again. Let me pray for us,

Father, you're good. You didn't need to make a way for us to be reconciled to you, but you did and you did it by sending your Son in a way that was so full of humiliation and pain for him. And yet, even though he wasn't the one we expected, he was the one we needed. And so Father, for that we are so grateful. I pray that by your Spirit, over these next few hours and days, you would remind us of our great need for you. So that when we hear the good news being proclaimed, we would respond with great joy. And even in the midst of the darkness, we would trust that the great light has come, to bring hope to those in the darkness. And we would be joyful in hope, knowing that one day, winter will be



over and we'll be in our home for eternity. We pray these things for your fame, and in Jesus' name. Amen.