

Old Testament Lesson—Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

New Testament Lesson—Luke 2:8-20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

I know Pastor Dave introduced our new sermon series that started last week. But I wanted to say a few words about why we thought it was not only a good idea, but a timely one.

You can see the awesome graphic from Randy Darst there in the bulletin. Thank you, Randy, as always. We're calling the series, "Rejoice & Be Glad: Encountering Joy in Scripture & Life." Beginning last Sunday and through the end of July, we want to focus on the abundance of joy God makes available to us.

I'm convinced we encounter reasons to be joyful every day we're blessed to draw breath. Though I'd admit it's much easier on some days than others. There are even times we have to go searching for it—when we need to be intentional by seeking it out—being (in a sense) attuned to joy's frequency.

During his teaching ministry, our Lord, Jesus Christ, would often begin by saying, “Let those with ears to hear, hear.” In other words, if you’re not in the proper mindset—if your heart and senses are closed off to what’s possible, you’ll miss far too many chances to learn and grow.

So yes, along the same lines, you have to be *willing* to experience joy—to be open to the possibility—willing and open to feel it, acknowledge it, and celebrate it. We are more than capable in this day and age of walling ourselves off to the potential of joy around us. We’re also capable of denying its very presence—even when it’s staring us in the face.

Think of it this way... We can allow ourselves to be daunted by the enormity of this world’s grief; or we can do justice *now*, today. We can love mercy *now*, right where we are. We can allow ourselves to be overcome and overwhelmed by evil; or we can discover the joy that comes from overcoming evil with good.

And I get it, friends. I understand how the brokenness of this world—how its powers and principalities can make us feel like joy is elusive—like it’s more scarce now than we can ever remember. I get it.

And...ok. Yes, I’m willing to concede that there’s no shortage of valid reasons why we might be brought low—reasons why we might feel like our efforts and optimism have been wasted. I won’t pretend the accumulating injustices and disturbing legal decisions don’t feel like gut punches.

I want to shut myself away sometimes, too. I understand that we can be disappointed so much that the negative effects stack up—are compounded—and we’re left feeling utterly defeated—left in a place where joy feels like a fairy tale.

But, siblings in Christ...I’m not (nor will I ever) be willing to concede that we have no reasons to be joyful—as if joy has somehow been forcefully stripped from our midst—somehow rendered unavailable to us. It’s just not true—can’t be true—will never be true.

In fact, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say human beings are *created for joy*—that we’re *made* for it! We’ll claim as much in just a few minutes during today’s affirmation of faith.

So, here’s the truth, friends. Because we are created to experience joy—because we’re meant to share it—because it’s a part of our DNA—part of our identities as those made in the image of God—because of this, joy can’t be stolen from us.

No, the world needs your consent to take it from you. Only with your permission can the world come between you and the joy we’re born to share.

Don’t let it! Do not give your consent. Do not give your permission. Don’t do it.

Now, I’m not suggesting we bury our heads in the sand. Nor am I saying we should ignore the injustices around us or pretend they don’t exist. And I’m not suggesting we “fake it ‘til we make it.”

What I *am* suggesting is that you shine your unique light boldly and brightly and without apology. I’m suggesting that we, as the Church, confront the barrage of bad news with the powerful, defiantly hopeful gospel of Jesus Christ. Because the gospel of Christ is an eternal spring of good news whose waters swallow up the bad like it’s Pharaoh’s army.

The bad news hasn’t a snowball’s chance in the desert—not with the gospel at our backs—not with the Holy Spirit blowing as the wind in our sails.

Now...Sometimes (it’s true) the good news comes to us in unexpected ways—wrapped up in packaging that seems strange, out of context—even offensive. Sometimes, as Jesus taught, we have to have ears willing to hear the gospel as good news.

And sometimes, yes, we have to be on the lookout for it—even willing to go searching for it—to seek it out wherever it may be...not unlike a group of travelling, wise astronomers from far away looking to confirm the best news they and the world had ever known.

Imagine this leap of faith: following a star in search of who you believed would not only rescue your people, but would also transform the known world.

Now imagine that search finally coming to a close—only to discover the good news you’ve been tracking is in the most vulnerable of packaging—surrounded by peasants and those who definitely don’t look like movers and shakers. Sometimes, your heart has to be open to the good news in front of you—even if it doesn’t look much like salvation—even if *it’s* clearly the one who needs protection and swaddling.

Or, consider this leap of faith: lowly shepherds—(in those days) the bottom of the pecking order—being told a Savior had been born for them—as if anyone with authority would even bother asking their names!

I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people, the angel had said. *All the people?* Even us? Who even knows we exist? What joys have we except these sheep and the fields we live in? But, of course, the angel wasn’t finished...

To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. To us is born a Savior? Us? Who are we that God’s messiah should ask for an audience? Seriously: who would believe a couple shepherds?

Imagine their surprise when the good news they encounter in Bethlehem looks like folks from their own social class—an exhausted, powerless family at their wits’ end—the mother forced to give birth in a dirty cave where animals are kept. These are our people.

Now imagine their surprise still when those the shepherds come across afterwards are actually receptive to the good news they bring! Luke tells us that *they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.*

Despite their lowly station, people listened. Their lives and perhaps even their vocation had been transformed by the good news—by being open to the gospel that came in unexpected packaging.

But I want you notice something that’s often easily missed here. Luke says that *all who heard it were amazed*. All who heard it were amazed. In other words, those with ears to hear heard what the shepherds told them and embraced it as gospel—as news worth rejoicing in.

Think about it for a second. You live in Bethlehem. Suddenly a few men who seem weirdly excited—shepherds whom you have no reason to trust—tell you that the long-awaited Jewish messiah has been born to a family no one’s heard of. Mhmm, okay. Sure.

The good news can be so easily dismissed without ears to hear it—without a heart open to its bold message and radical claims.

Oddly enough, I think it’s when God and the good news of the gospel show up in the strangest places and times, in the most unexpected of ways, that give us the greatest cause for joy.

And I think that’s because our hearts have to be at their softest and most compassionate. They have to be *widely* open to the presence of the gospel—open to the possibility that good news may show up anytime, anywhere.

The good news of the gospel can come to us at our lowest and weakest. It shows up in our suffering—in our grieving—in our striving for a better world. It follows us into the valley of

the shadow of death. It comes from the lips of nameless, dirty shepherds, wise magi from the East, and even from the mouths of our so-called enemies.

Siblings in Christ: The kind of joy God offers us is far from naivete. It is anything but a form of Pollyanna thinking. No, joy is born of God's very essence. Joy is one of seven fruits of the Spirit (Paul teaches us). It isn't a fleeting, flippant attitude we should feel guilty about embracing.

Joy is faithfulness wrapped in gratitude, submerged in Christ's hope and peace.

But most importantly, and let me be crystal clear about this. Joy is resistance! Joy is a way of living into the countercultural example of Christ Jesus.

Joy is a healing balm to a weary world.

Do not let the brokenness of this world lie to you. Don't let it convince you that joy is absent or hard to come by.

Nothing and no one can rob you of the joy of our Savior's coming—of our Savior's presence—of his death and Resurrection!

Christ the Lord is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, and forever. And his gospel, and the joy that comes with it, is here to stay.

Amen.