

Joy

Introduction

This Christmas, we are looking at the way we have been approaching Christmas. How we have allowed the world to shape the way we engage with Christ on His birthday.

Satan is trying everything possible to get us to avoid focusing on Christ at Christmas. He has the world is a break neck speed frenzy. Everyone rushing around doing busy stuff. We said last week that Jesus would tell...ok yell...at us to just stop. Stop it. Stop everything

We have been looking at the changes we might make if we were offered a mulligan. A do over. A forget what you have been doing and go back to the fundamentals. We spoke about how we serve a God of second chances. How the entire Christmas Story is about God coming to earth to give mankind a mulligan.

Last week we said that we believe God wants us to make some changes about the way we celebrate Christmas. That almost everything the world wants us to do is wrong. So with a mulligan in hand, we said the first thing that we would change is to add simplicity to Christmas. We would have a Mary Christmas and focus on Sitting at the feet of Christ first and then doing what He tells us to do second.

If you remember, we committed to having Mary's Heart first and then Martha's hands. That we would focus on Christ first and let everything else fall in to place. That without focusing on Christ first, all that we do is worthless anyway. So Mary's Heart....Martha's hands...in that order.

With our focus now on Christ, there are other fundamentals that I believe God wants us to focus on at Christmas. With our Mulligan...we need to go back and focus on the fundamentals. This one we will learn from the Shepherds.

Luke 2:8 (ESV) 8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

These Shepherds were the first evangelists. They had no skill...no training...No theological background....they belonged to no organizations....the wrote no books and left behind no writings of their experiences.

Odd that they were chosen to be the first to tell of Jesus' birth. They had failed the rabbi's teachings in the temple. They were almost the lowest on the social totem pole...poor, ignorant, young, peasants, and most likely women. Why would anyone listen to them? Why would anyone believe them? Well they had something almost no one else on earth had.

They had the experience of a Divine Encounter and God knows that is that they needed. Like most of us too...we are not scholars...we are not at the top of the social totem pole....yet we too have the same story.

They were just going about their day...ok night...doing what they had always done. Much like us just going about our daily activities....and then we had a life changing encounter with God. In that moment everything changed.

In that moment we realized that God was real...and that God was personal...and that God wanted to shape us into something very new...very different....we realized in that moment that we were given the life changing opportunity of a mulligan...a chance to start over...a chance to focus on God's way.

The Shepherds had a dramatic encounter that night with God. It was a foreshadowing of what God would repeat with His creation for thousands of years. God breaks into the routine to wake us up to see and embrace the supernatural.

Like the Shepherds and like us, we can't stop talking about it.

Everything about Jesus' arrival was upside down. At one point in Jewish History, Shepherding had been a very noble and respected profession. Even back to Adam and Eve. Able was a shepherd....Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David were all Shepherds.

Perhaps it was noble because they were nomadic. They had to keep the sheep alive and moving for food, sacrifices and temple services. The Shepherds were seen as a key component of the moving tabernacle that God had set up. Shepherding was the training ground for spiritual growth.

But once they stopped moving and settled down in the Promised Land...The role of the Shepherd became much less respected. There were many other professions to pursue as they became less nomadic and more Civilized. By the first century Shepherding became a barely respectable activity.

Shepherds were modern day gypsies. Outcasts that represented a shunned minority. They were just barely ahead of the Lepers. Living as outcasts up on the hills around town. Not Unclean...but darn close.

The Talmud...the Jewish writings...said "No help is ever to be given to heathen or shepherds...."

Shepherding was in their eyes a dirty profession. They can't follow the orthodox ritual of washing...they were considered ceremonially unclean. Uneducated..ignorant...No home...no roots...likely suspect in character. They were isolated and mostly forgotten. Treated with contempt and mistrust. Known to be brash and bold. Much like gangs would be seen today...but with less violence.

Eusebius of Caesarea, —was a fourth century Christian scholar, known as “the Father of Church History.”

In his writings, he spoke of a watchtower 1000 paces from Bethlehem...up on the hills surrounding this small city. This particular watchtower was special because this tower looked out over a very special group of sheep.

This field in the hills above Bethlehem watched out over the temple sheep. The sheep set aside for sacrifices. From November to March all the sheep of this flock were perfect.

They had been examined and certified by the temple priests. They had to be watched closely because they could have no spots...no blemishes...no broken bones...no scarred skin. On fall...one mistake and their value falls. The sheep were worth a great deal to those who sold them in the temple and they had to be protected.

Only the more trusted shepherds looked over these sheep. Still a disgusting and miserable lot...but at least respectable enough to watch the temple sheep. These sheep unlike others we watched both day and night. The shepherds were on watch 24/7. It is into that scenario that the miraculous happens.

Luke 2:8–9 (ESV) 8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

It is pitch dark...the quietness and stillness of the night...Shepherds watching over the temple flock...and all of the sudden everything changes...the natural becomes supernatural.

Suddenly they found themselves in the Shekinah Glory of God. God, who had been silent for 400 years, was now with His people. The shepherds did what everyone does in the presence of God's glory. They freak and fall.

In the face of the purity of God's holiness, we all fall apart because of our sinfulness. We know this is a place where we don't belong. Where we have no business being...a place too wonderful for us.

This is a typical pattern throughout Scripture....Angel appears...People freak in fear and fall to their faces...and the Angel reassures them and says fear not. Then the angel usually reveals what God is doing or will do.

Luke 2:10 (ESV) 10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

One of the most incredible words in this passage is "You" I bring to you...yes you smelly shepherd outcast and alone up here on the hills....You..You who are too unclean to enter the temple but necessary for those in the temple to sacrifice. I come to you...I bring You.....good news of great joy.

God entrusted the greatest message ever sent to mankind from Heaven...to insignificant shepherds faithfully watching over the sheep in the middle of the night.

Notice something critical here.

God made one announcement and one announcement only...and it went to shepherds. One announcement of the most important message ever given to man...This message was given only to the Shepherds....

You would expect text messages to light up all of Jerusalem that night. Political leaders kings governors magistrates...even Caesar might be invited to come and pay homage to the future ruler from God. The religious leaders...priests, rabbis, synagogue officials, the head of the Jewish ruling council the Sanhedrin..they would all be invited to come worship the long awaited Messiah.

Military leaders...wealthy merchants...Men and women of Distinction...The news media...you would expect all of them to be awoken that night with the greatest news ever to befall mankind...and yet the all slept quietly and soundly completely unaware that world was forever changed.

Only these few, poor, social and religious outcast shepherds received the announcement.

Notice something else in this verse..."I bring you"

Notice how personal this message is for each of them and for each of us. God didn't tell them...Hey I have a message to others that I want you to deliver...No...this message was personal...it was to them...God say I bring to you.

Notice that while this message is given to them specifically...God says that it is a message for all the people. No matter how low or high you think you are....whether you are a shepherd, a leper or a king...this message from God...given to the Shepherds...is for you. This message is personal and specific to each one of us and it will demand a response. So what kind of message is this?

"Good news of Great Joy"

This message brings great Joy. This is not a prophetic message of doom like the old Testament prophets spoke...this is a message from God that bring Good news and Great Joy to each and every person on earth.

Now the details...

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

There it is again...the very personal you this time plural...unto all of you is born...Just like the prophet Isaiah promised....

Isaiah 9:6–7 (ESV) 6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Prophets had foretold of this Savior..this promised One....Kings had looked forward to His rule. The birth of each baby boy had kept this hope alive...All Israel had been waiting for this moment.

The Shepherds may not have known much but every Jewish person knew of the promises of the Messiah to come. At last, could the time be now? Could this be Him? The shepherds had to be wondering if they had gone nuts. They could hardly believe their ears.

The City of David...Bethlehem..the place of Bread...He was the Promised One and Bethlehem was the promised City....The prophet Micah had foretold this...

Micah 5:2–5 (ESV) 2 But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

Luke 2:12 (ESV) 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

The angel anticipated their next question...and answers it for them...How odd...A baby...in a manger...A human baby in a place for animals...The Christ...The King....God's Chosen One..the Anointed One...the Promised One...in a manger...

That would be a sign alright. Babies are born all the time...but babies born in mangers are not usually human ones. And then on cue..in order to put God's stamp and seal on this message...

Luke 2:13–14 (ESV) 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Who said this was a silent night? Brightest light....all is bright...Thousands of angels singing...Sound echoing through the hills and through their souls....An incredible moment of praise...a glimpse into heaven here on earth...and then done. Darkness...silence....

How weird is this? Don't miss the bizarre-ness of this night...this moment...God placed His seal on the message...not one of the shepherds could doubt the validity of what the angel had promised.

Think about the irony of all of this. God favored the unclean ignorant suspect shepherds to hold the greatest message in the history of mankind.

Unclean shepherds come to the place to see the Holy of Holies lying in the manger.

They leave the sheep...the sheep that would be sacrificed for some of the people's sins...to visit the Lamb of God who would be The sacrifice for all the sins of all the people.

A thousand years prior, David had watched over the sheep in his pasture and now the Son of David is born in the City of David.

The promised glory of God that had not been witnessed in Israel for hundreds of years....The good news..hidden from the foundation of the World...was proclaimed to them.....really? That is God's Plan?

But then again...who better to tell the story of the birth of the Lamb of God than shepherds?

Shepherds were comfortable amongst the animals. It is a place where the unclean don't stand out...where they too are welcome...It is a dimly lit place where the unclean did not stand out.

The Lamb of God announced to Shepherds...Jesus had come from the brightest and most exalted throne in heaven...to the darkness and sin in the world.

The Shepherds themselves that night moved from a bright exalted heavenly sight of a chorus of angels...to a humble, dirty and messy manger. From the brightest of nights to the dimness of a stable...from the choir of angels to the chorus of animals.

Why did God pull back the curtain of heaven and reveal the announcement to Shepherds?

Were the Shepherds especially pious or unusually holy? Were they expecting something like this?

if I'm a shepherd, I'm probably convinced God has no idea who I even am. I don't sacrifice at the temple, I don't show up for the feasts, I don't go to synagogue; and my deepest theological discussions are with a bunch of stupid, snot-nosed sheep. If God does know who I am, he can't think much of me.

God wanted to show that His love does not discriminate on the basis of class, or wealth, or social standing. He does not respect kings and princes more than hourly laborers, he does not value priests and pastors above the people in the pews. God does not show favoritism; He does not give preferential treatment to one group of people over another.

His love is available to all on the same basis – faith in Jesus Christ, and faith alone. In fact, many passages of Scripture indicate that God loves to lift up the lowly and humble, while at the same time bringing down the proud and self-satisfied:

In other words, God was demonstrating, by His choice of these humble shepherds to be the first to receive the news of Christ's birth, that Jesus was not going to be the Savior of only the political and social and religious elite. Jesus was not going to be the Savior only of kings and governors, or popes and priests. Jesus is the Savior of all equally, he doesn't give preference to any group or any class.

Nor does he discriminate on the basis of intelligence, or education, or wealth, or profession, or political power, or social standing, or any of the other qualities that human beings judge by. His love is offered indiscriminately to anyone who will repent and believe, anyone who will trust in Him as Savior.

Think about their average night...outside of town...an outcast...looking into the city...city lights...voices of laughter...smells of food in the air...hearing conversations...night after night...alone with the animals... God doesn't even know who they are...They can't go to the temple...

The world Jesus steps into is a messy one. Helpless, defenseless, dependant...a baby.. a human God baby...He comes in the weakest of ways...Non threatening... a baby... who

would wait for us to come to Him. But willing for us not to. Waiting for us to see...yet aware that many will turn away blind. Waiting for us to worship Him yet knowing many would renounce Him.

He is Christ the Lord...He placed Himself at the mercy of His creation...at the mercy of the census to determine where He would be born...at the mercy of strangers to take Him in... at the mercy of mere mortals to feed, protect and raise Him.

He is forever at our mercy to betray Him if we are willing....If we are willing to deny Him... to mock Him...to beat Him.. to impale Him on a cross....

And yet knowing all of that...on this night...there is the lamb of God...cradled into the most unexpected of places...coming to us in the weakest of ways.

MESSY VIDEO

Jesus left the comfort and security of His throne in Heaven to join us in the mess that we created. He not only came to earth, he shared in the experience of being human. He came not just to visit us but to join us. What kind of God does that?

Maybe you see yourself in the Shepherds. You feel often like you are on the outside looking in. I imagine that many nights, as the shepherds sat out in those cold, lonely fields, with nothing but dumb animals to keep them company, they looked over at the village, saw the lights of the homes and heard the faint sound of families, people laughing, and wished they could be a part of that. Maybe you've felt that way too.

Maybe you feel like you are not one of the "beautiful people," not especially wealthy or powerful or influential. Not likely to ever see your name in the paper for some great accomplishment. On the fringes socially. Maybe when you compare your level of religious observance to others, the comparison isn't favorable. Spotty church attendance, little Bible reading, infrequent prayer. You think that if God is even aware you exist (which you think He probably isn't), He likely doesn't have a very favorable opinion of you.

And you know what? A lot of people, deep down, secretly feel like that. Even people you would think of as "having it all together". On the surface, everything is going great. But on the inside, you feel like you don't fit in. You feel like God doesn't really care, couldn't care, about someone like you.

If any of that description strikes a chord with you, then I have good news. Great news. The best news possible. God loves you. Just like He loved those shepherds. And you are special to Him. Just like those shepherds were special to Him, so special that He gave them the incredible privilege of being the first to hear of Christ's birth, being the first people other than Joseph and Mary to lay eyes on the Son of God, being the first to tell others about Christ.

He didn't give those privileges to the Roman Caesar or to the Jewish high priest, he gave it to the shepherds. Not in spite of who they were, but because of who they were – humble, ordinary people with no high opinions of themselves. Simple people who were willing to simply believe **what God**

told them and to simply do what God commanded them. When they heard the news, they didn't seek out the religious professionals for a second opinion.

They simply accepted what the angels told them. When they were invited to visit Bethlehem to see the newborn Messiah, they didn't worry about who was going to watch their sheep. They didn't get bogged down in debates about how they were going to find one small baby in such a large town. They simply obeyed and went.

And in the presence of Jesus they found not just joy but Great Joy

Once they had seen the Messiah....locked eyes with eyes of God... they were forever changed. They had witnessed the greatest event in human history and joy exploded from their hearts. They could not contain it.

Is that how you feel this Christmas? Do you, like the Shepherds, have unrestrained Joy bursting from your heart?

Have you locked eyes with God this Christmas? Have you spend time alone with Him....Have you been prioritizing Him? If you are lacking joy this Christmas there is only one reason. You haven't spent enough time with God.

Jesus said clearly and repetitively that if you abide in Him God will produce fruit including Joy. Joy has nothing to do with your circumstances, but abiding does. Most of us are too busy at Christmas to truly abide in Him....and that is our mulligan.

Mulligan #2 Joy

Last week we said that we needed to have Mary's heart. We needed to sit at the feet of Jesus and abide. When we do that one of the things that God promises us is Joy...well actually great Joy

Joy is our mulligan today... We have allowed the joy to get lost in the busyness of Christmas... This time of year should burst our hearts with Joy. God said to the shepherds that night this was Good news and more importantly good news of GREAT JOY....that message was becoming familiar to them. Do you remember the Joy that you had when you discovered Jesus as your Savior? When you realized the gift of joy was for you? Almost every mention of the arrival of the Messiah was associated with Joy

Zachariah is told of the joy associated with the coming birth of John (see John the Baptist) as the forerunner of the Messiah

Luke 1:13–15 (ESV) 13 But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great before the Lord.

When Mary greeted Elizabeth the baby in Elizabeth's womb leapt for joy

Luke 1:41–44 (ESV) 44 For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

The Wise Men....

Matthew 2:10 (ESV) 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

And the Shepherds...

Luke 2:10 (ESV) 10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

You may be overwhelmed by circumstances in your life....you may be going through tough times this year...and your circumstances can bring sadness and despair, but they can't touch your joy.

Joy is an inner sense of well-being that has nothing to do with circumstance. The kind of JOY the Bible describes can't be found in possessions or entertainments or even in looking deeply into your inner self. The first line of "Joy to the World" sums it up. There is one reason --- and only one --- that we can find JOY in this world. As the song says, we can have joy because The Lord has come!

Joy is not something that we seek and then find... This joy does not come from within us...Not something we can produce on our own. No self help book will show us how to manifest it. Joy is a gift...a gift from God. It is one of the fruits of a life lived in the Holy Spirit...Joy is a byproduct of a true life with God.

True Joy has nothing to do with your circumstances or the conditions of the world... Spiritual Joy...true joy...God's joy... is manifested from the condition of your soul.

Joy comes from the unconditional surrender of yourself to the presence, power and authority of the Holy Spirit. Joy comes from your surrender to Him. It comes from spending time with the Holy Spirit....It comes through prayer, Scripture study and being in the presence of God each day. It comes from giving the weight of your circumstances to God and being able to sing "It is well with my soul"

It comes from total surrender of your will to His. The more you allow the Holy Spirit to reign in your heart..the greater joy you will experience. Joy comes from the Holy Spirit as a fruit...a product of a healthy relationship with the Holy Spirit. Joy is a byproduct of our life with God.

The first thing that you lose when you submit to the busyness of the season is joy. When you and I get too busy to focus on abiding with Him, joy becomes impossible.

The reason we often find ourselves lacking joy at Christmas is because we have become so busy that we have stopped abiding in Him. We have so much to do that we don't do much with Him.

Many people.... people who love Jesus and are saved... find themselves just going through the motions at Christmas... the story is familiar...the routines are familiar... We have long to do lists.... we just want to get through it.

It is like that when you need a mulligan. You have taken your shot and it has led you far away from the fairways that God planned for you.

You love God...You believe in Christ... You have surrendered to Christ... You know that you are saved... you know the Holy Spirit is in you... and yet... often at this time of year... you feel so distant... so far from the joy that the Shepherds experienced.

It is like you know the story too well. The routines have become..well routine. Every attempt that you have made to find joy this season...had driven you farther and farther away.... you are in a hazard and don't know how to get out.

The Joy that Jesus promises has nothing to do with your circumstances... You can find God's joy in the direst of times... In fact, often the more difficult our circumstances become the more God fills us with His joy. Jesus had contentment on His way to the Cross. He was filled with Great Joy as He celebrated the Passover Dinner in the upper room...knowing that the next day He would be the lamb of God sacrificed for all.

Joy like Spiritual peace comes from knowing that you are in the center of God's will and fully surrendered and empowered by Him no matter where you find yourself.

Joy is a byproduct of a life lived connected to Christ.

One of Christ's last prayer requests for us was that we would find His joy

John 17:13 (ESV) 13 But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.

Jesus prayed for us that once He returned to Heaven He would leave behind His joy...the same joy He always experienced....a gift...an inheritance for us... manifested by the Spirit. Yes we would have difficult times...we too would have our cross to bear...but we could do with with great joy.

He continues...

John 15:11 (ESV) 11 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

Jesus said our joy would be full.....if you are not experiencing that, You need a mulligan...A do over...

We find joy when we model what Jesus did. We go and announce His good news to those the world has overlooked. We go to those who have been relegated to the fringes of our society. We tell them that the Good News is for them...that God has good news of great joy for them.... we break into their darkness with the light of God's Spirit.

Most of the people we see everyday are like Shepherds up on the hills. They may have heard of the message of Jesus but honestly they don't think they deserve Him. That message is for those who haven't done drugs, or alcohol, or robbed or stolen or murdered or raped or molested.... Many people feel outcast and unwelcome in the church.

They sit on the fringes of our world and they watch us. They know of Jesus perhaps but they are dirty, sinful and unwelcome. God may have good news of great joy, but not for them.

How do you find great joy at Christmas? You do what Jesus did... You leave the comfort and security of your throne...you home... You leave your protection, your security and you place yourself at the mercy of others... You go to unclean places.... the last place people would expect to find Jesus... You burst into their darkness with the Light of God.

You tell them the incredible news...Jesus came for them.... He offers Good news of Great Joy... for them. They may think they have missed God but He hasn't missed them.

Like Jesus we get up and go...because people need to be saved. We love people unconditionally... we sacrifice our comfort and security for the needs of those who have never been comfortable and secure.

Do you know when Good News becomes Great Joy?

When you realize that the Good News includes you. When you realize that when the angels spoke to the shepherds, they were speaking to you. When you realize that good news of great joy is a personal message...actually a personal promise... to you.

When you realize that yes God knows you. Yes God has been watching you...and Yes, God included You in His plans.... when you discover that God loves you even if you don't love yourself.

Can you imagine desperately needing to hear that message and no one shares it with you?

The Shepherds couldn't contain what they had seen. Their joy was overflowing and they couldn't contain it. It had to be shared.

The Key to Joy is to become Christlike at Christmas. To do what He did....to get down in the mess with others and show them the way home. To share with them the Good News of Great Joy...that Jesus came for them too.

We get so busy at Christmas that we tend to focus on ourselves. Getting our shopping list done, getting ourselves ready for all the social events, doing what we need to do for us.

The mulligan that we need to hit is to stop focusing on ourselves at Christmas. Stop looking out for our needs. Stop placing ourselves at the center of our universe. Spend this Christmas invested in others.

Tell them that God sees them, God cares for them, God loves them and God came to save them.

Most days each week, this place is full of people that the world has given up on. People who don't yet know that Jesus came for them. People who are on the outside looking in....

I want to challenge you to come...one day between now and Christmas. Come to the Cafe not to serve food...but to share the good news.

Just find a table, sit down and share what God has shared with you. Become Christ-like at Christmas...Leave the comfort of your life...Go toward the mess....stop serving yourself and focus on saving others. You want to find joy...it will be in the eyes of those you serve. Let's pray.