

## Christmas: An Emotional Rollercoaster

### “JOY”

*But the angel reassured them, “Don’t be afraid!” he said, “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people.” Luke 2:10*

Last week we launched this new series that will trace some of the emotions connected to the Shepherds and their initial experiences with Jesus. We noted the first emotion was FEAR, and discussed how we might find our fears relieved by what we find in the manger. Today, I offer to you that our **Joy** can be realized, by who we find in the manger.

Joy is different than happiness, we all know that. Happiness is related to what happens to us, and often comes and goes, ebbs and flows, by circumstances and situations that are ‘outside’ us. Joy has a different place of origin; it is not an emotion, but a state of being, not determined by circumstances or bad luck. Joy is something internal, something much deeper, something chosen, something received! Joy doesn’t come just from inside us, or what we can conjure up; it is a gift from God, and a fruit of the Spirit that grows in the life of one who pursues God.

Joy has a divine source, and humans are privileged to have a part in receiving it. From the story of the shepherds we might discover how to have more joy in this Christmas season...and beyond! Joy to the World! The Lord has Come!

*That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior – yes, the Messiah, the Lord- has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.”*

*Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others – the armies of heaven – praising God and saying, “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”*

*When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”*

*They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about his child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.*

From this beloved story we discover an outline for finding that “*Good News of Great Joy for all people.*”

## **1. THEY WERE ATTENTIVE**

*...guarding their flocks...*

These humble, lowly shepherds were attentive to the life that had been given to them. It is recorded rather unceremoniously that they were guarding their flocks, by night. Many times in ancient Israel, guarding sheep, especially at night, was not as simple as locking them in the barn. Many of the shepherds would congregate together for strength in numbers. Often one of them would be appointed to literally be the ‘gatekeeper’, and lie down for the night at the entrance to the corral or pasture, if there was one. Sometimes the shepherds hardly slept at all, maintaining vigilance and attention to keeping the thieves, predators and wanderers in check.

I’m not advocating that in order to discover true joy in our lives we just have to work hard, or be diligent, or even attentive just to our jobs, as admirable as each of those characteristics might be. No, what I’ve discovered from these lowly shepherds is that the promise of Joy on Earth; starts, with a humble human recognition that all of life is a gift from God, and joy is found in the faithful fulfillment of who God has made us to be, and in doing what God has made us to do. I call it attention to the details!

God has made us to Love Him, and serve Him; and true Joy will never be found until we give attention to those realities. We’ll never find lasting joy living in denial of God’s purpose for us. We’ll never find lasting joy ignoring the fact that God has a claim on our lives. We’ll never find lasting joy anywhere else but in an intimate attention to God’s presence in our world, and in our life, no matter how mundane it might seem.

## **2. THEY WERE AWED**

*...they were terrified...*

Last week we discussed their fear from a natural perspective, but as you know, there is another way to translate the word, FEAR. That is AWE, and carries with it, a much more wholesome, positive vibe. These simple shepherds might not have just been simply afraid, of the Angel or the Glory; they might have been reduced that night to a reverential sense of AWE. I have a hunch that they were awe-struck by the intrusion into their lives, of the divine.

Joy comes more profoundly and easily to us, when we begin to recognize the need to make room in our 'natural', world for interventions of the supernatural, and find our joy in the simply profound 'divine interruptions' that break into our days. It seems that the more sophisticated and advanced we think we are becoming, the less we are willing to acknowledge the divine appointments among us. Birth used to be considered a miracle, now we make up stuff in test tubes and call it cloning.

I don't think discovering joy is a matter of reversing technological or medical advancements back to a bye-gone more simplistic era; but rather an honest recognition that the supernatural is much more prominent in our world, and that the Spirit is much more active in our lives, than few are willing to admit. We've got to be on the look out for God in the strangest and simplest places, and if our only hope is placed in science, or knowledge or drugs; we're never going to be awed by the glory of God, even when it comes! Joy is found...partly at least...in being awed by an angel, by the glory of God, and by gazing in a sheep trough!

## **3. THEY WERE ACCEPTING**

*...you will recognize Him...*

The announcement that shook their world; was followed by a pronouncement that they would recognize their long awaited Messiah, if they would just seek Him.

There had to be an adherence, there had to be an agreement, there had to be an acceptance that this message was valid, legitimate and true, or they would never have left their favorite resting place that dark night. They accepted the Angel's message, and sought to find their Messiah.

Some scholars claim that these shepherds were actually the care takers of the sheep sold on the street and used in the Temple sacrifices, by wayfarers who came long distances to worship. If so, my hunch would be that they have been around the temple, they would be marginally familiar with the talk of Messiah's, they would be somewhat at least, acquainted with the meaning of all these religious observances. Yet it was this divine interruption that sent them scurrying to seek this new 'Savior'. What changed? They accepted the message.

So too for us; many of us have been closely associated with 'the temple', but not until we make a decision of the will to accept the gift of the Messiah, do we begin to experience real joy, or peace, or forgiveness in our lives. We'll never get there just hanging around the perimeter or sitting in the pew. A divine appointment with Joy, is dependent on our acceptance of Jesus Christ, and His ultimate claim on our life. And frankly, there is no joy, real joy, anywhere else! Our hearts will be continually restless until they rest confidently in Jesus! Our joy will be cheap and irrelevant until we reckon with the manger resident, like the shepherds did...and it all started with their acceptance!

#### **4. THEY WERE ACTING**

*...let's go...let's see...they hurried...*

We learn another profound truth by observing these smelly sheep watchers; they were men of action; at least this night! Probably not normally, instead preferring to move slowly, so as not to alarm or startle their sheep.

They most often acted quietly, walked leisurely, grazed casually; but tonight, at the announcement of the Angel, after accepting the message; they act, rather impulsively, even dangerously, some would say irresponsibly, even radically! They jumped up, left tending sheep, and headed out toward Bethlehem.

We must put action to our words, our beliefs, our values and our lives. We will find our joy by acting, by living as joyful people. I heard this week of a Pastor who prayed following the offering while holding the plates aloft: "Heavenly Father, no matter what we say...these gifts, really represent what you mean to us." I know that action means more than giving money, but that pastor was right. It doesn't matter what we say we believe; there will be no joy in muddville until our actions match what we say we believe. It doesn't matter if we say we are Christian, but act like the devil. It doesn't matter if we say we love Jesus, if we ignore people. It doesn't matter that we say Merry Christmas instead of Happy Holidays if the Joy of Jesus has no residence in our hearts, minds, lives and ACTIONS! It's not about what we say; it's about what we do! Joy is found in action.

##### **5. THEY WERE ADORING**

*...back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God...*

Well, the end of the story for today; is not unlike so many other mountain top experiences; they went back to work. The people who loved Lori Line, and enjoyed Kenny Rogers, had to go back to work last Monday. You can live in the glow for awhile after meeting celebrity; but soon it's back to earth. Not so after meeting Jesus!

Yea, they went back to work, but they went back differently. They left the little stable and returned to their flocks, glorifying and praising God. They had shepherded sacrificial lambs to the temple many times, but never met the Good Shepherd...until tonight!

Now they were different, the joy of Jesus in the manger changed them, and they joined the heavenly army, the angelic messengers, and the choir of the ages in glorifying and praising God. Their sheep were probably stunned and confused!

Christmas comes once a year; lasts a few days or weeks depending on how we prepare, then it's back to work, back to reality. The batteries wear out, the clothes don't fit, the bills keep mounting, the tree dries up, and the decorations have to be put away. But you know what little event also marks the Christmas season? Maybe you've overlooked it in the midst of midwinter darkness. Around Christmas time...the days start getting longer – it's one day closer to spring. (And I think you know what that means for me.) But what of you/us?

Yes, we must go back to our regular routine lives after Christmas, but the days are getting longer, and the joy of Jesus we find in the manger, gains full measure in the Spring, on a tree, at Calvary. Only by continually abiding in Christ's presence, and repeated receiving Christ's forgiveness, and honoring, glorifying and praising God will we be able to preserve the Joy of Jesus, and live in the perpetual glow of Christmas. That's what I want...to experience Joy, all year round, it's not seasonal, it's not dependant on my circumstances, but my attention; my awe, my acceptance; my action, and my adoration. Yours too!

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*...guarding their flocks...*

2. **THEY WERE** \_\_\_\_\_  
*...they were terrified...*

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**STUDY/DEVOTIONAL GUIDE FOR  
Christmas: An Emotional Rollercoaster  
“JOY”**

It is my prayer for you that as you read and study these passages, you might also make a conscious choice to experience these emotions as we explore them this Christmas season.

**MONDAY:** Read and meditate on I Chronicles Chapter 16 and pay close attention to verse 23. You might want to prayerfully consider some of the ‘popular gods and stuff and nonsense’, that often fills our holiday calendar. How might you find more real joy by dealing with that ‘stuff’?

**TUESDAY:** Please read and meditate on the familiar chapter of Isaiah 9. Look for all the references to Jesus in this passage, but also be on the lookout for mentions of JOY. If possible find this chapter in the translation of the Bible called the MESSAGE. Make a plan to spread some joy today...then do it!

**WEDNESDAY:** Read and meditate on Matthew 28. This is the opposite end of the spectrum from Jesus’ birth. I want you to notice the mention of the women’s emotions after leaving the empty tomb. Do they sound at all familiar to the emotions expressed by the shepherds in Luke 2? Can you say you have found joy from the cradle to the grave?

**THURSDAY:** Read and meditate on John 15, especially enjoying verse 11. Do you find any reference there to the type of joy Jesus wants us to have? How would you define or translate that type of joy? What might you have to do in your life to have that kind of joy? What is the ultimate source of such joy?

**FRIDAY:** Read and meditate on Psalm 86, then consider this quote:

As a third-century man was anticipating death, he penned these last words to a friend: "It's a bad world, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people are Christians -- and I am one of them." Are you one of them? How does joy ‘mark’ your life today? How will you live a recognizable “Joy filled” life today?