

A few weeks ago, we were doing some sharing and worship at our staff meeting. Sometimes, Brandon likes to take requests, and his prompt to start the worship set was, "If you grew up in church, what was your favorite worship song as a kid?" Of all the songs I know, I couldn't think of one until I was writing this sermon. Growing up, we would sing, "I've got the joy, joy, joy down in my heart—where? Down in my heart—where? Down in my heart. I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart, down in my heart to stay." George William Cooke wrote that little song in 1925. Since then, it has been sung by kids and adults for many generations. It has been covered by too many bands to list and has been sung in movies and television. It has been a soundtrack to commercials and video games.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, and we have just lit the joy candle. Joy is a funny word and sometimes a complex emotion. This is the time of year when we are all expected to put on a happy face and look and act joyful all the way down to our hearts. If we are honest, it isn't easy.

Maybe your circumstances are troublesome, or perhaps you are in a dark place when it comes to your mental health. Maybe there has been a job loss or the loss of a loved one. Perhaps sickness has entered your world, or you are grieving. Are you troubled about our world and wonder if joy can be found? You may not want to hear a sermon on joy this morning. But I hope you will find joy, wonder, and gratitude in the Good News of Jesus.

Before we dive into the text today, let me remind you where we are in the story. Mary and Joseph were off to Bethlehem to register for the census, and Mary was about to give birth. They arrived in Bethlehem and found that there were no rooms available anywhere. The

only place left where they could stay was in an animal stall. Some call it a stable. We like to think of it as a crèche, but in reality, it was a cave perhaps where the shepherds kept their animals. When touring Israel, we saw some of these caves right off Shepherds Field on the outskirts of Bethlehem. Needless to say, it wasn't a glamorous spot for the Messiah to be born. The King of Kings was about to be born in an ordinary place to ordinary people.

The Setting: Ordinary People in Ordinary Places.

"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night" (Luke 2:8). It is a dark night, and the shepherds are tending to their flocks. Being a shepherd was the lowliest job in this day and age. Shepherds were considered outcasts; they had bad reputations. They could not observe Israel's ceremonial laws even though they were tending the sheep that would be slaughtered in the temple. They were considered unreliable and could not testify in a court of law. They were despised among their people.

It's ironic to think about what shepherds do. They are on the lookout for wolves and robbers who want to eat or steal the sheep. The irony is these men were not above dishonesty and theft and were often untrustworthy. But these outcasts, these lowly and ordinary men, will be the first to receive the announcement of the gospel.

I love what God is doing here; he is using the ordinary. We like to hear how God works, but we usually look for dramatic stories. I have found that God often works in the ordinary, the long path in the same direction. He is at work in the every day. I was sitting with our

student ministry team, and they wanted to know what I thought a win would look like in student ministry.

I said, "We don't get to see the wins until 10, 20, or 30 years down the road. Our job is to be with students in the ordinary, the day-to-day, to show up, teach, and live out the gospel in the ordinary. When we bump into them years down the road, and we ask where they are in their walk with Jesus, if they haven't tossed their faith out the window but are enjoying the ups and downs of authentic faith with Jesus, that is a win.

The Shepherds are living in an ordinary night and are about to learn that God will meet them where they are in the every day of their life, no matter how ordinary or insignificant their circumstances may seem.

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." Luke 2:9-14.

The Proclamation: Joy For All People.

Imagine in your mind's eye for a moment a field filled with stinky sheep on a dark night, stars shining, and the not-so-noble men, the shepherds, shepherding the sheep. Then, all of a sudden, bright, eye-piercing light breaks through the darkness, and an angel appears and says, "Do not be afraid." The angels have been very busy in these first few chapters of Luke!

The angel, Gabriel, visited Zechariah and Mary. And now this angel, who is not named, comes to see the shepherds. With every encounter, they open with "Do not fear" or "Do not be afraid." Although this sounds comforting, I'd still be freaking out if an angel appeared to me. Imagine being the shepherds and seeing this angel!

God sends his angels to the most questionable people of their day. The only people lower than the shepherds were lepers. I believe God chose the shepherds because it emphasizes that his love and grace are available to everyone. For those of you reading this, the message of do not fear is for you! You may have walked in here with fear about your health, your family, the economy, your job security, or our country. Whatever fear you have right now, the message these angels have is for you, too, and it is so personal.

This angel says, "I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people." This good news is for the shepherds, the lepers, the outcasts, the rich, the poor, the powerful, the lowly, the CEOs, the hourly wage earners, and everyone in between. This good news will turn your fear into joy.

I mentioned that joy is such a complex word. Most people think joy means happiness. Joy has nothing to do with happiness. Happiness is based on our circumstances. I'm happy that I got an "A" on my test. But I'd be sad if I got a "D." This word, joy or rejoice, isn't about happiness. The Greek word is *chara*. It often refers to a deep, abiding sense of contentment that comes from spiritual or divine blessings rather than fleeting, circumstantial happiness.

We have confidence that God is in control of our lives and has a purpose for us, and that is where our joy comes from; it's how we can rejoice! This word emphasizes the profound, spiritual contentment brought about by the fulfillment of God's promises, as announced to the shepherds on the night of Christ's birth. Knowing that God is in control, you can have joy through Jesus, even during difficult

circumstances. Don't let the fear of your circumstances steal your joy.

We do regularly do reviews as staff here at CPC. Early in my time here, Mark Mitchell did my annual review. We have a saying that one shouldn't be surprised by anything in their review. This means that our supervisors should give us open and honest feedback throughout the year. However, in this review, Mark started to see a pattern in me. He said, "Sandy when things in ministry don't go as planned, don't let it steal your joy."

As a recovering perfectionist, when things didn't go as planned, I would be extremely hard on myself, which showed in my demeanor. He was picking up on that as he got to know me more. That single review changed my perspective on so many things. Not only as a recovering perfectionist but a recovering control freak. Mark was reminding me that my way may not have been God's way. Don't let your circumstances steal your joy.

On this night, these shepherds were about to learn about the good news that would give great joy. The angel says, "Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." This message is so important! Let me give you a little bit of context! During this time, Rome worshipped its rulers as God. Julius Caesar was declared the God of Rome. Octavius, also known as Caesar Augustus, who issued the decree to take a census of the Roman world, became a "son of god." When Augustus was born, it was announced as "good news" and the arrival of a "savior." As a savior, Augustus ended the war and ordered peace. In reality, Augustus was just as treacherous as Hitler. A pastor once said:

When the angel says that good news has come that will bring great joy for all people, it is confronting how the world works. When the angel talks about a baby being born who will be savior and lord, they're confronting who rules the world. It gives hope to people who have followed saviors

and lords that didn't work out. D. Rivera

The angels are saying that this Lord, this Messiah, who was prophesied about so long ago, this Savior, this baby Jesus is for you. This good news is for all people; no one is excluded. Those outsiders who long to be included, Jesus is for you! Jesus is available to all of us. I love what my friend Doug Goins says about this passage,

This appearance was to bring joy. At the heart of the heavenly announcement was a great joy. The joy the angel told the shepherds of was a joy that would overcome fear and apprehension about the future and the unknown. It was a joyful, mind-blowing message for them and everyone who heard it. Joy was concentrated in a baby, a gift given by God for all the people, every member of the human race; a gift given to each of them individually, down to our day, who would recognize the identity and claims of this infant born in Bethlehem, the baby Jesus, who is Joy Incarnate. Doug Goins

The angel goes on to say in verse 12, "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Next, the angel tells the shepherds where to find this good news of great joy! Where to find the true Lord, Messiah, and Savior. Then, this scene goes extra. "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."

Through this birth announcement of the Messiah, the heavenly hosts set the example, and the joyous celebration of the heavenly host is how the world should have responded. In this song, the angels announce what the birth of this baby will mean for God and what it will mean for us. For God, it means glory in the highest. Heaven and earth will be filled with the praise and glory of God. It is the fulfillment of God's covenant, faithfulness to his people, and love for the whole world. It will

testify to his nature and to the hope that is in him. It will proclaim to the world that God is a personal God of love and the promise of grace and peace.

While it brings glory to God, it will bring peace to men. To those who respond to the gift of Jesus are those upon whom God's favor rests and will enjoy peace, the shalom of God. This peace isn't an absence of conflict, but because of Jesus, we have peace with God. It's a wholeness and completeness that reflects God's design for humanity and the world.

The Response: Witnessing and Worshiping

When the angels had left them 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. Luke 2:15-20

They Act

How do the shepherds respond? They act immediately and go to Bethlehem to see the good news that the angels celebrated! They leave their fields to see this good news of great joy! They aren't fearful of the wolves or robbers stealing the sheep. They don't sit and have theological discussions about angels. They hurry off and find Mary, Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger, just as the angels said. They act in obedience.

They Proclaim

The language in the passage suggests they tell Mary and Joseph their story on the hillside. But they also tell everyone they see. They are so overwhelmed with what God has done for them that they can't keep it quiet. They proclaim him wherever they go.

They Praise

In one day, the shepherds go from being outcasts to proclaimers of the birth of the Savior of the world, Jesus. In an instant, God uses the ordinary to proclaim the extraordinary. The shepherds go back to the fields, praising God for who he is and what he has done.

How did the people respond to the shepherds? The people and Mary wonder as the people hear the shepherds' testimony. It causes amazement and wonder. The people might be amazed that the shepherds would tell such a crazy story. Maybe they think the shepherds drank too much to keep warm at night. Others who are amazed may begin to believe this could be what the shepherds say it is: the birth of the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. As Mary sees this story unfold, she ponders, wonders, and treasures. She understands that God is doing something amazing, and she wonders.

The shepherds exemplify several essential characteristics. Through God's message and their experience of seeing Jesus, they discover God's joy, which transforms them. The Shepherds also have the capacity to wonder, to believe that God might do something, that he might actually fulfill his promises.

The Shepherds believed God's message, became witnesses to it, and walked away transformed. They became proclaimers of the good news. They did not worry what others thought but shared their story and their experience. The birth of Christ invites us to live in joy, wonder, and gratitude for God's love every day.

Every June, while I was hands-on in our Jr. High Ministry, I would have a special message for our eighth-grade students before they moved on to high school. I would warn them of the gradual loss of joy and wonder. Often, children are the best examples of joy and wonder, and as they move from childhood to young adulthood, there is a gradual loss of it. Their world becomes more complicated; they become more cynical and skeptical and ride the emotions of their circumstances. I encouraged them to be grateful, not entitled. I encouraged them to be a light on their campus and proclaim the good news.

Now I know this is a tall order for eighth graders; it's a tall order for adults! I was trying to help them understand that Jesus invites us to live in joy, wonder, and gratitude for God's love daily. This story from Luke is really about ordinary people, like you and me, who experience God in the ordinary day of their lives and walk away transformed by God's extraordinary love. Like Mary, I encourage you to ponder and wonder about these things this week.

We are invited to live in joy, which is an abiding sense of contentment that comes from spiritual or divine blessings rather than fleeting, circumstantial happiness. We have confidence that God is in control of our lives and has a purpose for us; that is where our joy comes from.

Do you have the joy, joy, joy, joy down in your heart? Are life circumstances stealing your joy? Jesus tells us in John 15 that when we abide in him, Jesus' joy will be in us. This week, intentionally look for ways to rejoice in God's blessings, even in challenging moments. Reflect on Philippians 4:4, "*Rejoice in the Lord always,*" and ask God to fill your heart with his deep, abiding joy.

We are invited to not live in fear, which can be a debilitating emotion. Fear can take hold of us and hinder us. The phrase fear not or do not be afraid appears 365 times in the Bible. If you think about it, that is one reassurance for every day of the year. Maybe you are sitting

here constrained because of your fear of what might happen if you follow Jesus or how your life might change. Or you like to control your life and fear what might happen if you follow Jesus. The voice of God is saying to you today, "Do not fear!"

We are invited to live in wonder. When was the last time you pondered anything of God? When was the last time you just gazed at his wondrous works in the ordinary every day of life? This week, take time to notice God's hand in the ordinary moments of your day. We are invited to live in gratitude. As the shepherds went back to the fields, they were full of gratitude, worshiping God for who he was and what he had done. When was the last time you truly worshiped God? When was the last time you thanked him for his love and grace that he lavishes on you? Keep a journal or make a list of things you're thankful for, and spend time in prayer, thanking God for his faithfulness, grace, and love.

We are invited to be proclaimers of Jesus. The shepherds were the first to do it. Just like the shepherds, we can bring the light of Jesus into someone's dark world, living as his witnesses. Identify one person in your life who might need to hear the hope and joy of Christ this season. Share your story or invite them into a conversation about the ways Jesus has transformed your life.

As we seek to "prepare him room" this season, I want to encourage you to say yes to Jesus' invitation to live in joy, wonder, and gratitude for God's love every day.

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for the gift of joy that comes from knowing You. As we reflect on the shepherds, ordinary people experiencing extraordinary grace, we are reminded that You meet us in the everyday moments of our lives. You transform our fear into joy, our doubt into wonder, and our hearts into places of gratitude.

Help us to carry this joy, not as fleeting happiness, but as a deep

and abiding trust in Your promises. Teach us to marvel at Your works, even in the ordinary, and to share the good news of Jesus boldly, just as the shepherds did. Let our lives proclaim the light of Your love to a world that desperately needs it.

As we go from this place, may we embrace Your invitation to live in joy, to trust without fear, to wonder at Your goodness, and to give thanks daily for the gift of Your Son. Fill our hearts with Your peace and guide us to be instruments of Your grace to everyone we encounter.

In the name of Jesus, our Savior, Messiah, and Lord, we pray. Amen.