

The Triumph of Joy

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve (2011)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

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.

When it comes to holiday traditions, I have to admit that one of my simple pleasures is to curl up on the couch with the woman I love, taste-test a batch of Santa's cookies, test-drive a glass of the cabernet we will serve at the main meal on the big day, and watch some of the Christmas movie classics.

Now, when I say "classics" - keep in mind that my frame of reference is as a 35 year old. And when I say "Christmas movies" I mean that in the cultural, not the religious sense. Very few classics of late have much to do with the story we just heard in Luke's gospel about the holy family journeying to Bethlehem. But the movies do have a lot to do with joy.

I'm a sucker when it comes to joy. There doesn't have to be a great plot or even very good character development. I just love watching people experience pure, unbounded joy.

Remember the movie "A Christmas Story" - where Ralphie's dad finally gets that shapely lamp, complete with fishnet tights? You know, the one that is labeled "FRAGILE." Seeing him set that lamp in the window and then step back to look on it with admiration - pure joy.

Who could forget Clark W. Griswold - who, after spending 36 hours stringing, checking, and double checking Christmas lights on his bushes, trees, roof, walls, and front door, finally...in one last, desperate attempt brings the plugs together in a shower of sparks and frustration and watches as his house illuminates the neighborhood in splendor - pure joy.

And how about that adorable, eight-year-old named Sam from the movie "Love, Actually" - who follows his heart by zig-zag-dashing through security checkpoints at Heathrow Airport in London just to tell his sweetheart crush goodbye...only to be rewarded with a quick kiss on the cheek - pure joy.

I know that, on this night, with the church this full, I should - perhaps - spend this sermon time on something beyond popular Christmas movies. Perhaps I should spend this time on something more important like offering some reflections about what it means - as people of faith - for our God to condescend to human form and enter the world through a meager birth. Perhaps I should spend this time diving into the details of this story

we just heard the gospel writer tell for us once again – and analyze the story’s form, its characters, its truth.

But instead, I am going to take my lead from one of the most famous theologians of the last century, a man named Reinhold Niebuhr, who was a part of the same denominational tree as the Presbyterians and also a seminary professor in New York. I learned this week¹ that on many a Christmas Eve, Niebuhr and his wife made it a point to avoid churches like ours whose pastors insisted on standing up and giving sermons. Instead, the Niebuhr’s preferred to go to a Catholic or high Episcopal Churches where there was only liturgy, music, and candles and communion...and not a meddling preacher to be found who would try to explain, or analyze the mystery of what the word made flesh means.

It’s good advice.

So, tonight – with this time, I simply want to linger on what the angels encourage us to feel at the announcement of Jesus’ birth: Joy.

You don’t explain joy. You don’t analyze joy. You *experience* joy.

You experience it like those shepherds did – after overcoming a little bit of fear – on the hillsides of suburban Bethlehem. Those shepherds – who, if you noticed, were not even important enough for the Romans to count in the empire-wide census that summoned Joseph and Mary – were the first ones to whom the angels announced their good news...the first ones to experience Christmas joy.

You don’t explain joy. You don’t analyze joy. You *experience* joy.

You experience joy like a mother, or a father, who look into the eyes of their fresh-born child and see those big, beautiful eyes looking back right at them.

You don’t explain joy. You don’t analyze joy. You *experience* joy.

You experience it like a wiggly five-year-old who waits at the top of the stairs at 3:57 a.m. on Christmas morning.

¹ Told through a sermon I read this week by the Rev. John Buchannon, pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL.

But there is more.

Because the kind of joy that the angels announced goes beyond what it means to simply be happy. It is a deeper joy than that.

It is the kind of joy that you see in the face of a terminal cancer patient who has learned to soak up the gift of a family supper around a full dining room table.

It is the kind of joy I read about this week, where protestors in Syria...oppressed, abused, and weary...turned their street protests into dancing because they could taste the euphoria of freedom.²

It is kind of joy that sees beyond the pain, beyond the hurt, beyond the disappointment, beyond the uncertainty, beyond the darkness. That is the joy that the angels announced on that first Christmas night: The joy that shone, and shines, in penetrating light, blazing a fearless path through the places of this world that seem devoid of hope.

But there is more.

This joy – this light-in-the-darkness joy; this deeper-than-happiness-joy – is not just for the 1%, nor, for that matter, just for the 99%. It is not just for those who attend church on days other than Christmas and Easter. It is not even just for those who have already discovered the saving love of the One whose birth we celebrate tonight. The joy of this night is given...given...by God for *all people*.

And to experience this joy – and to give ourselves over to believing the good news of this joy – is to find life...life full of grace and truth.

That is why we are here. Because, my friends, when we slow ourselves down and give ourselves space to listen, we might notice that the veil between heaven and earth is thin tonight. So thin that we can hear the angels announcing the good news of great joy for all the people:

² http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/20/world/middleeast/in-uprising-syrians-find-spark-of-creativity.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all

God is here.

The light of love come down.

To experience what we experience.

To feel what we feel.

To remind us that we are never, never alone.

For unto us, a child is born. And he is named, Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Rejoice! And Merry Christmas.