

Christmas at Luke's House
Luke 2:1-14
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Well, my friends, I've got potentially disturbing news for you today and its less than ten days to Christmas with Christmas only ten days away and with all that entails, I find myself compelled to ask you, my dear parishioners, this fundamental question — "Is there any JOY in living?"

We've been searching for JOY – literally – ever since Thanksgiving Day, when Deb and I began the daunting task of decorating our new house for Christmas with all our earthly belongings down in the basement. Our basement looks like the third circle of Dante's Inferno right now. It is a jumble of cardboard boxes which may – or may not – contain Christmas decorations. Somewhere down there I knew there was a disassembled plywood sign saying JOY with the Holy Family cuddled inside the letter "O." We needed to get JOY up from the basement and out on the lawn, which felt like the thirteenth labor of Hercules to unearth it, drag it up from the basement, set it up in the front yard and turn on the lights.

Oh, yes, the lights; that's another issue for JOY isn't it? How many of you have spent hours untangling last year's Christmas lights only to find that half the strand has gone over to the dark side? And there's nothing you can do about it. You have to start all over again.

Well, we had lots of those as we were getting ready for Christmas. We even had a Clark Griswald moment when I was up on top of a fourteen foot ladder, wobbling away trying to hang lights when Guillermo, our custodian was standing at the foot of the ladder, muttering to himself, "Pastor, I'm not so sure this is a good idea ..."

Well the clincher was this. Last summer at the Antique Mall in Princeton, Wisconsin I discovered what I knew would bring me absolute JOY on Christmas – a set of 1950's Christmas lights in the shape of candles set in little brass candle holders with golden lights on them. Still pristine, unopened in their cardboard boxes, I knew that these would bring me JOY. I had to have them. Here they are; they are really cool.

They are lovely but they were not made by Santa's elves. These Christmas lights were made by little demons who organized them in a way that they form a circle not a strand. I can't untangle these in time for Christmas...which sends me back to my original question, "Is there any JOY in living?"

Google defines JOY as "a feeling of happiness or pleasure," but I'm not sure that's altogether right. Feelings come and go, and happiness, when it is based on the things we have – can sometimes feel a little like Christmas morning after all the presents are opened and the papers scattered all over and you hear a little voice say, "Is that all there is?" Now JOY is something deeper.

Richard Wagner, the composer, said, "JOY is not in things, JOY is in us." I want to talk about that kind of JOY with you today as we return to the familiar words of Luke 1 and Luke 2. JOY defines the Gospel of Luke, JOY and humility. It fills it, like starlight, from the beginning to the end. It begins with the announcement of the Heavenly Host and the angel and it ends with God's people going out in JOY every day to worship God in the temple, having known Jesus, crucified and risen. It's all about JOY. It's also about hearts that are humble enough and lives that are lowly enough to receive that JOY. Like the shepherds did on the hills outside Bethlehem.

When we look at Luke itself, we find Elizabeth and Mary, both of them pregnant. Mary comes to visit to her cousin Elizabeth and we're told that the baby in Elizabeth's womb, who is John the Baptist, "leaps for JOY" in the presence of the Lord Jesus as Mary walks into the room and bursts into song at that point. The other thing about Luke, it operates almost like a libretto, almost like a musical. There's narrative then people just break forth into songs. There's not one, there's four songs in the first two chapters. And the first one is Mary's, Magnificat we call it in Latin, saying "My soul magnifies the Lord and my heart rejoices in God, my Savior. For God has done great things for me and holy is God's name." Her song is a song of JOY. And, it's more than that because it looks forward to a time when the prayer that Jesus taught us will be fulfilled...thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. It should be used to describe that kingdom. A time when the mighty will be cast down from their thrones and the lowly lifted up; where the hungry will be filled with good things and the rich sent away empty where God will scatter the proud and the imagination of their hearts. This biblical stuff is like Isaiah saying every mountain shall be laid low and every valley shall be raised up. This is kingdom talk. And the vision is one of JOY.

A little bit later we have the song of Zechariah after he gets his voice back. And the first thing he sings is "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel." He says the tender mercy of our God has come down for us from on high and a new morning shall break forth. I read this and it's almost like I'm going to *Oklahoma*, the musical, but instead of people from Oklahoma, it's the holy family and its characters from the Bible that are singing these songs... "O what a beautiful morning, O what a wonderful day"? That's Zechariah's blessing. These people are filled with JOY but it's not a JOY of this world, it's a JOY in

the Lord. It's a JOY that finds its source and its ending that finds something greater than ourselves.

C.S. Lewis in his book, *Surprised by Joy*, has three things to say about how JOY operates. I want to talk about three ways that he talks about it. First of all, "JOY is something that overtakes us; it surprises us. It's not something we can control or manage or commandeer. It doesn't work that way. It happens and it can be asymmetric to what is happening in your life. It doesn't have to have anything to do with the situation you may find yourself in. It can overcome you and cover you in the way the angelic song did on the hills of Bethlehem long ago.

You know the story of French mathematician and philosopher, Blais Pascal living in the 17th century. He wrote this in his diary: "The year of grace, 1654, Monday night 23rd November ... from about half past ten in the evening until about half an hour after midnight ... God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob. Certitude, Certitude. JOY, JOY, JOY! Tears of JOY. God, may I never be separated from you, forever." He carried that entry on his person every day after that. And they found them on his person the day he died. It changed him. It was an experience above that came upon him, that changed his life.

Theologian Marcus Borg speaks about a similar expression while on a flight home from Tel Aviv on a 747. He looked out into the cabin and he saw all those hundreds of people on that 747. It was late afternoon and the sun was coming through the windows and as he looked at the light when it was on the faces of all those people, he suddenly felt a change and the light became luminescent. He describes a feeling of love that he suddenly had for each and every one of them. As if he was seeing them for the first time as they really

are. As if he was seeing them as Jesus Christ saw them. And love filled him with this deep and holy JOY that he never forgot.

That's the way God's JOY can work. It can literally come upon us at any point. I hope there have been points in your life where you've experienced that sudden JOY like Charles Wesley after the worship service in London when he felt a sudden warmth overcome his heart and he knew that the Spirit was with him. I've had those experiences two or three times in my life; I hope you have too. I cherish them. I don't forget them. And sometimes it's as simple as a January day when it's ten below zero and the sun's out bright and I go out for a walk and I look at a tree and the leaves are off of it, the sun is shining so deeply into the bark of the tree that I can kind of lean in and look and I can see summer in the tree. I can see it there. I can feel summer waiting to come back. That's the kind of JOY we're talking about. Its source is not us or this world nor is its ending. That's why it's not the same as happiness.

The second thing Lewis says about JOY is that it's not just fun and excitement and happiness which may be a response to life. Happiness is things that happen to us but they don't necessarily endure. He describes JOY as a longing for something that we don't have and that we need. Augusta talks about it in the same way. If you look at Mary's song in Luke you see this longing. She is longing for that day when God is going to make this world right again. And the kingdom of heaven will be here, on earth. She is longing for that day, she is talking about it. It's in the future as if it has already happened and she is looking backwards. For you have scattered the proud and the imagination of their hearts and she's looking forward to look back knowing that God's will, will be done. And it is filling her with JOY. So our longing itself for what is right and what is good can bring to us, even though we don't have it yet, a sense of JOY and hope and certitude about who's world

this is and who's in charge of it. I heard a story just this morning about the impact of seeing a sunrise just on someone's heart. To know that God is in charge of this world and that sun is beautiful and I didn't make it and I know who made me. Therefore I have JOY and I have hope.

The third thing that Lewis talks about with JOY is that it can be present even with pain; even with suffering; even with mourning. JOY can be present in those moments as well. I think of my father and the day that he died. I traveled from the Midwest to be with him in New England and he'd been waiting for me. On that day, he died. We were all there with him and I remember not only the sorrow of losing my father. I also remembered the gratitude that I felt and continue to feel for him and the love and, yes, the JOY. There was JOY on the day that he died in our family because of who he is and who we are.

Yesterday in this sanctuary there was a beautiful memorial service to one of our own – Mary Farwell – who we love and we miss. The church was full of people; the entire choir came to honor her. As they were singing the fourth verse of the beloved carol, *Once in Royal David's City*; the verse that goes: “And our eyes at last shall see him, through his own redeeming love; and he leads his children on to the place where he is gone.” As they were singing the final verse I looked at Mary's husband sitting right here and he lifted his eyes, very blue eyes, and they were blazing with love and JOY...even in that moment of loss.

That's how God's JOY works. It's not something we do, not something we achieve. It is something we receive. JOY is an attribute of God; JOY is the character of God. When we ask for that JOY in prayer, with the humility of a poor shepherd on a hillside in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, then we shall find it and it will change all our darkness into light.

Friends, we live in a time where there seems such a lack of faith on earth. In the words of David A.C. Reed, so many seem to embrace a bleak and a barren secularism whose joyless conclusion is that life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. We need to offer a different narrative. We need to offer Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, in whom is our JOY...a JOY that triumphs over sorrow; good over evil; and love over death. That's a JOY that will never be taken from us. It's the answer to my question this morning, "Is there any JOY in living?" Oh yes. Yes, there is. His name is Jesus. We have only to ask and he will come and make his home in our hearts. And we will know the JOY of the Lord. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.