

Four Blessings:

3. Great Joy

Third in the 2017 Advent sermon series
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Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
December 17, 2017—Third Sunday of Advent

- Luke 2:10 The angel said to them, “Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people.” (Good News Translation)
- Isaiah 7:14-15 Well then, the Lord himself will give you a sign: a young woman who is pregnant will have a son and will name him ‘Immanuel.’ ¹⁵By the time he is old enough to make his own decisions, people will be drinking milk and eating honey. (Good News Translation)
- Theme: Discovering that God dwells among us is cause for great joy!

Let us pray. God, you are the Fount of Every Blessing. Open our hearts and minds to appreciate the great joy that is ours because we are yours. Amen.

In these weeks leading up to Christmas Eve I've had us focusing on a particular verse from Luke's account of the birth of Jesus. The verse is Luke Chapter 2, verse 10 in which God's angelic messenger says to shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night, “Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people.”

That one verse contains four blessings for the shepherds and for us all. Two weeks ago we saw that the first blessing was “No Fear” – the assurance that we can entrust our lives to God who provides for us, protects us and stays with us always. The second blessing was one of “Good News” – that God's unconditional love for us is good news that never grows old. Today let's consider the angel's promise of a blessing of “Great Joy.”

Every single one of us has experienced “great joy” at some time or another:

- perhaps it was when you got asked out by that certain someone, or the day you became engaged or were married;
- maybe it was the dream-come-true late on Father's Day last year when the Cavaliers won the NBA Championship;
- maybe it's when Santa brought you just what you wanted;
- perhaps you experienced great joy at the birth of children or (as I can now attest) the birth of grandchildren.

For a moment let your mind wander (if it hasn't already!). Let your mind wander to remember a moment of joy in your life. It doesn't have to be “the *most* joyful” time in your life. It doesn't have to be particularly significant. Just think of a moment of joy....

With that experience of joy in mind, think how you'd answer these questions:

- Were you with others at the time or was it a solitary experience?
- What were your thoughts at that time?
- What did it feel like inside you?
- How did you express your joy?
- How did you share your joy?

- Had you had similar experiences of joy before? Since then?
- Could this Christmas season bring similar joy to your life, or does that sound totally unrealistic?

I ask that because the Christmas season supposedly abounds with “tidings of comfort and joy.” But for many of us for much of the time, comfort is replaced by exhaustion and joy is replaced by anxiety. We can feel an awful lot of pressure to meet the expectations of others – or our own expectations! Often they’re unrealistic, unattainable expectations for what constitutes a “perfect Christmas”:

- assuring the appearance of certain foods and beverages and baked goods;
- meticulous placement of decorations throughout the home;
- quantities of personalized Christmas cards the production and distribution of which would impress a direct mail marketer;
- locating *and* purchasing *and* wrapping “the perfect presents” *and then* often having to pack and ship them hither and yon.

All this effort, of course, is exerted along with all your other normal daily activities. And if someone is somehow less than ecstatic with all we’ve done to “make the season bright” for them, often we are the ones who feel frustrated and disappointed. Where’s the “comfort and joy” in that?

The Bethlehem angel reminds us where: it’s in the good news the angel announced. Great joy comes from the good news that God is with us. God is with us. That’s what the prophet Isaiah foresaw: the good news that at a point in time a young woman would bear a son who would be called, in Hebrew, “Immanuel” which means “God is with us.” God is with us always...

- whether we think of it or not;
- whether we feel it or not;
- if we’re feeling ashamed or proud, repentant or defiant;
- if we’re crying out in pain or calling out in joy;
- if we feel left out or isolated from the people we need;
- if we feel connected with others and supported by loved ones;
- if life’s a bed of roses or filled with hard knocks.

God is for us. God is with us. In the birth of Jesus God demonstrated just how far God will go to show us God’s unearned, unconditional love. In coming to live among us God assures us that God understands what it is to live our lives. In Jesus God was subjected not only to the joy of friendship and love, and also the sting of disappointment and betrayal. And even then God stays with us to accept us and encourage us, to guide us and correct us, to love us and to save us.

The angel announces the good news of God’s unshakable love for us for always – and that unshakable love and unconditional acceptance is a blessing for us of “great joy.”

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