



Text: Luke 2:10-14; Ps. 98¹
Title: The Comfort of Joy
Series: Tidings of Comfort
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The angel declared to the shepherds on the night Jesus was born...

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” Luke 2:10

As we began our worship this morning on this the third Sunday of Advent, we lit what we called “the candle of Joy.” Many churches around the world today are joining us in lighting a candle to remind us of the angel’s announcement that the birth of Jesus is “good news of great joy.”

The Bible has a lot to say about joy. There are about 400 references to joy in the Bible. While in a few places the Bible talks about the joy that comes from human activity, the vast majority of references relate joy to spiritual realities. The bottom line of joy, in the Bible, is a relationship with God. Verses like Nehemiah chapter 8, verse 10 set the tone for the Bible’s major declaration about the source and nature of true joy...

“...the joy of the Lord is your strength.” Nehemiah 8:10

This morning I want us to root our thinking about joy in a Psalm that is a wonderful explosion of joy. The writer of Psalm 98, his heart opened wide by the joy of the Lord, declares to the whole created world...

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!” Psalm 98:4

I’d like you to read this Psalm with me this morning as we explore joy together. I’m reading from the English Standard Version and you’ll see it on the screen behind me. Let’s read together...

[READ Psalm 98] Slides: vv.1-3, vv. 4-6, vv. 7-9

Joy is a word that fills the air at Christmas time:

- 2,000 years ago the angels announced "good news of great joy"
- We sing songs filled with words of joy:

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Cf. the songs we sang this morning
Angels We Have Heard on High: "Shepherds why this jubilee, why
your joyous strains prolong..."
Hark the Herald Angels Sing: "Joyful all ye nations rise, join the
triumph of the skies..."
Cf. closing song: "Joy Has Dawned"

Cf. Joy to the World, Good Christian Men Rejoice, etc.

BUT "joy" is a very difficult word to get a handle on. What is "joy"?

Since a picture is worth a thousand words, one of the best definitions of joy can be seen in one of the most familiar of all Christmas stories, Dickens' A Christmas Carol.

You've probably seen it, heard it and read it year after year. My favourite part is at the end, when Scrooge wakes up after his long ordeal to find that he's been given a second chance at life, an opportunity to "mend his ways." I love the old black & white version of the story with Alistair Sim playing Scrooge. As you watch him jump and leap around his bedroom on Christmas morning, shouting "I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a school boy," we're treated to a picture of a man filled with joy!

Why is he joyful?

Ben Patterson, a pastor from the US and author of books on the Christian life, was interviewed on the subject of "joy." In answer to a question about the essence of joy, he said, "joy is what you feel when you're thankful."²

I think he's got something there. Joy seems to be the product of a deep sense of gratitude and well-being. As one Bible scholar puts it: "Joy is a by-product of life with God. Joy is not found by seeking it as an end in itself. It must be given by God. (e.g. Psalm 4:7)"³

Scrooge was joyful because he was thankful that he had been given a second chance at life. He was thankful that...

- His past failures wouldn't be held against him if he changed his ways -- in response, he gave Bob Cratchit a much-deserved raise
- His present relationships could be healed if he changed his ways - in fact, he accepted an invitation for Christmas dinner from his nephew that he had earlier rejected.

² "More Oxygen to the Flame," Leadership, Oct 1, 1998.

³ Ryken, L., Wilhoit, J., Longman, T., Duriez, C., Penney, D., & Reid, D. G. (2000, c1998). *Dictionary of biblical imagery* (electronic ed.) (465). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.



- His future was an open book – he no longer lived in fear, but enjoyed each day as a gift, anticipating a blessed future.

Thankfulness had set Scrooge free to be joyful! Thankfulness seems to be a powerful "joy-producer."

Zig Ziglar is a Christian writer who specializes in motivational seminars. He was also interviewed along with Ben Patterson on the subject of joy.⁴ He drew a strong connection between joy and thankfulness and gave a great example.

He met a woman after he had given a seminar on workplace motivation who told him she hated her job. Ziglar said, "Let's get out a sheet of paper and list all the things you DO like about your job."

She said, "That's easy: NOTHING!"

Ziglar asked, "Do they pay you for working there?" "Yes, of course."

"And you don't like to be paid?" "Oh, yes I do."

"Then that's one thing you like about your job isn't it?" "Well, yeah."

After ten minutes of talking with Ziglar, she had put down 22 things she liked about her job.

Then Ziglar told her to go home and repeat that list for 30 days, saying "I like my job because...." He also told her to carry the list with her because she would probably discover other things to add to it.

Six weeks later, Ziglar came back to do a follow-up seminar for that company and met the woman again.

As he said, "She grinned so wide she could have eaten a banana sideways. She said, 'Mr. Ziglar, I'm doing wonderfully well. You can't believe how much those people down there have changed.'"

What changed? What had produced that grin? The people hadn't changed one iota. What had changed was her attitude -- she became someone looking for things for which to be thankful and she ended up being filled with joy.

Thankfulness freed her to be joyful!

One of the classic holiday movies is "White Christmas" with Bing Crosby. In one of the scenes, his co-star played by Rosemary Clooney is up at night and having

⁴ "More Oxygen to the Flame," Leadership, Oct 1, 1998.



trouble sleeping because of some worries. Crosby sings her a song that gives the following advice:

**"When I'm worried and I can't sleep I count my blessings instead of sheep
And I fall asleep counting my blessings.
When my bankroll is getting small, I think of when I had none at all
And I fall asleep, counting my blessings."
(Lyrics by Irving Berlin)**

It reminds me of the old Gospel song that gives the same advice in dealing with worry and fear...

**"Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your many blessings, see what God has done."**

This morning I want to share a short list of **three blessings** from the Word of God for which we can be thankful. And as you take these things to heart and are thankful, I believe the natural product in your heart will be joy -- God's joy!

The **first blessing you can count on** is this:

We can count on a powerful Saviour who has done great things for us

The psalm writer tells us to...

"Oh sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him." Psalm 98:1

You can't be joyful if you're worried. Fear and joy simply don't go together. What we need to be joyful is a sense of security -- that we're OK and our needs will be met.

God says: "I have done marvelous things! My right hand and holy arm have saved you!" On the night that Jesus was born, the angel told the shepherds why the news he was announcing was "good news of great joy..."

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:11

The greatest gift of joy we can receive from God is the understanding that in Jesus we have a Saviour. From what have we been saved?

First of all, Jesus is the source of our hope that death isn't the end. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that one of the reasons that Jesus was born as a baby in Bethlehem 2000 years ago was to so that he could take away our fear of death.



“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.” Hebrews 2:14-15

In his death and resurrection, Jesus’ purpose was the destruction of death as a force that could hold us in slavery to fear. In order to do that, he had to become “flesh and blood” and that is what we are celebrating at Christmas time.

I was struck some time ago by the story of two-time world bull riding champion, Adriano Moraes, from Brazil. He is known as one of the best bull riders in the world. Fans know him for his flawless technique and natural riding ability, but there's more to Adriano than being able to stay on a bucking animal: he is a man deeply committed to Jesus Christ.

Moraes remembers one rodeo in particular where his faith was severely tested. After one of his rides, he witnessed a fellow Brazilian rider get thrown from his bull and go down hard. The rider didn't move as a concerned crowd of cowboys and officials gathered around him, loaded him on a gurney, and took him to the nearest hospital.

Suddenly, Moraes was gripped with fear. He didn't want the same thing to happen to him! Later, in his hotel room, he knelt by the side of his bed and prayed: "Lord Jesus, strengthen me through your Holy Spirit who lives in me." The Lord heard him and blessed him with peace and courage. Walking out of the room, he said, "I can die now."

(© 2008 PreachingToday.com Beyond the Bull television series, Episode 1, "Out of the Gate" (The Learning Channel, 1-10-05))

When I read that I recalled the words that Simeon spoke over the infant Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit had told Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah and as he held the baby Jesus in his arms he raised his voice in praise to God and said...

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation” Luke 2:29-30

“I can die now!”

Brother and sisters, please know that there is still a sting in death; there is still pain. We grieve but we do not grieve without hope; we rejoice, but we rejoice with tears. But that pain is relieved by the hope and confidence we have in the resurrection of Jesus. Death no longer holds us in slavery; in Christ, we are “more than conquerors” over death! As Jesus was preparing his disciples for his death on the cross, he told them:



“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, ... You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.” John 16:20-22

When they saw him again, after he was raised from the dead, the joy that that knowledge produced in the disciples was what gave them the strength to freely offer their own lives in the task of spreading the good news of great joy about the Saviour born in Bethlehem. They knew he was alive and they knew that death was not the end -- Jesus had proven that fact! One day they would see Him again!

A ninety-year-old man approached his pastor after a meaningful time of worship. The man had been blind from birth and he told the pastor he wanted to "see" him. He ran his fingers over the minister's face, then began to cry. He asked the pastor, "When I open my eyes for the first time, you know who I will be looking at, don't you?" The pastor said, "Yes, you will be looking at Jesus." The man cried out with joy, "Pastor, it is worth being blind for ninety years to know that the first time I open my eyes, I will be looking at Jesus!"

People, if you have put your faith in Christ, one day, you will see Him! And because Jesus is alive, we can believe God's promise to us that he will raise us from the dead to live with Him forever!

But there is another way in which Jesus had freed us from the fear of death. Not only has our Saviour freed us from the fear of human death, but he's also freed us from **the fear of eternal death** – what the Bible calls “the second death.” (Rev 20:6) That's the death we die when we die with our sins still hanging around our neck like Jacob Marley in Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. You remember the scene when the ghost of Marley, Scrooge's friend and business partner, appears to him to warn him that because of his hardheartedness he is building for himself a weight of chain that will enslave his soul for all eternity.

In our sin and rebellion against God, we really are building a chain that will bind and drag us to eternal destruction unless that chain is broken and removed. Through his death on the cross for us, Jesus has taken away our weight of guilt and shame, he has broken the chain and has saved us from the wrath of God against sin. When we stand before him the “second death” will hold no fear for us!

As the Apostle Peter meditated on the wonder of that marvelous act of Jesus' saving arm, he was moved with joy and he wrote...



“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” 1 Peter 1:8-9

Why should we be joyful? Because we have a powerful Saviour who has done and will yet do marvelous things for us!

The second blessing we can count on is this:

We can count on a welcoming King who invites us into his presence

The psalmist writes:

“With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!” Psalm 98:6

The New English Bible gives us a new facet on the meaning of the Hebrew author when it translates the phrase “joyful noise” as **“acclaim the presence of the LORD our king.”**

Earl Palmer, writing on the subject of joy, suggests that joy is connected with experiencing the presence of God. “Joy,” he wrote, “describes our relationship with God. Joy comes from knowing the Lord and knowing that the Lord is nearby.” Notice that: not just that we know the Lord, but that the Lord is **“nearby.”**

Listen again to the declaration the angel made on the night Jesus was born...

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Luke 2:11

The King has come! Immanuel is born! God is present with us! He’s here – now – among us by His Spirit. And it’s the presence of Jesus’ Spirit in us that fuels our joy. Paul tells us that one of the evidences of God’s Spirit in us, among other wonderful things, is joy. (Gal 5:22; 1 Thess. 1:6)

The King of kings is not “far off” on some distant peak -- He invites us into his presence to shout out our joy to him and to receive joy from Him.

In Psalm 16: 11 David tells us his source of joy when he writes...

“You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” Psalm 16:11



We don't bring our joy into the presence of God and offer it to him as praise -- we receive joy from His presence and return it back to Him as praise!

One French theologian said that "joy is an infallible proof of the presence of God." I'm not sure if it's "infallible" but it can be very convincing.

The British writer Malcolm Muggeridge was a Marxist before he became a Christian. During the Cold War era he went to Russia to do a story on the Communist Party and what he thought was a dying religion in that state committed to removing faith in God from the minds and hearts of the people. After completing his interviews with people in the Kremlin, he went to a Russian Orthodox service on Easter. The church was packed. At the end of the service a priest shouted, "Christ is risen!" The people yelled back, "He is risen, indeed!"

Muggeridge looked into their faces and instantly realized that they were right and Stalin was wrong. He later said it was the reality of their joy that tipped the scales of his soul toward Christ.

What had the angel said to shepherds? "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people." (Luke 2:10) Perhaps when that truth grips our hearts, then the world will believe that Jesus is alive!

I'd like to paraphrase the Easter cry: Christ is risen! I'd like to make it a Christmas cry -- a shout of Christmas truth: Christ is born! He is born indeed!

Jack Hayford, an American pastor and song writer distilled the joy of Christmas down with these words:

"A crystal punch bowl sparkles in the candlelight...
Tree lights reflect the spectrum on the windowpane...
Visions of sugarplums dance in children's dreams...

JOY!

A spontaneous embrace is filled with grateful affection...
The warmth of relationship is renewed by a simple greeting card...
Mom and Dad share a deep closeness as they watch their children
playing with new toys...

JOY!

Loved ones, filled with lazy satisfaction following the holiday dinner,
surround the hearth...

JOY!

And most joyous of all ... **He is with us.**" (*Joy!* by Jack Hayford)

We can be joyful because we have a King, whose name is Emmanuel, God with us. He invites us into his presence to share his gifts of joy with us.

Finally, **the third blessing we can count on is this...**



We can count on a righteous Judge who will come one day to make everything right

The psalm writer calls on the created world to...

“sing for joy together before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.”

Psalm 98:8-9

There are two strands of joy in this passage. **The first is this, ...**

We can anticipate with great joy the day when Jesus will come back for us

There were two men who served together in the trenches of the First World War and drew to be close friends. We'll call them Jim and Bill. One day, during a charge against the enemy position, Jim fell, severely wounded, but Bill made it back to the relative safety of the trenches. The officer in charge refused to let Bill go back to get his friend. But when the officer turned his back, Bill went over the top.

Sometime later, Bill managed to get Jim back to the lines, but too late. Jim was dead. The somewhat self-righteous officer, seeing Jim's body, cynically asked Bill if it had been worth the risk.

Bill responded without hesitation. "Yes, sir, it was. My friend's last words made it more than worth it. He looked up at me and said, "I knew you'd come."

Jesus is coming for us! He promised! Regardless of how desperate our situation you can be confident that Jesus is returning for you.

The second strand of joy is this,...

We can anticipate with great joy the day the Jesus comes to set all things right.

It's rather strange to think of judgment as a source of joy! But what a release -- to know that God will set things straight. And we can be confident that he will do it fairly and with justice.

Back when the world leaders sent forces in to overthrow Saddam Hussein, we were told that they were sent in to destroy "weapons of mass destruction." Later, the British prime minister and the American president were both challenged about the validity of that rationale. Invading Iraq might have been the right thing to do, but human justice is often a confused and partial thing.



But when God comes to set things right, we can be sure that he acts out of his character of complete righteousness and fairness. His judgments are always right, fair and true.

Many in our world struggle with injustice they can never redress. How can they release their sorrow? We can find comfort in the knowledge that one day God will set the record straight.

In 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, verse 16, it says that when Jesus returns,

“the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God.” 1 Thessalonians 4:16

Gregory Fisher was teaching in a Bible school in West Africa when one of the students asked him, “What will that command be?”

Fisher wanted to leave the question unanswered, saying that we couldn't go beyond what Scripture tells us, but as he thought about the question, he recalled a meeting he had had earlier in the day with a refugee from the Liberian civil war.

The man, a high school principal, had told Fisher how he had been terrorized by a two-man death squad who described how they would torture and kill him. He eventually escaped but two of his children lost their lives.

Fisher also thought of the beggars he passed every day on this way to the school, haunted by the hopelessness he saw in their eyes.

"Reverend, you have not given me an answer. What will he say?" the student asked again.

"Enough -- He will shout, "Enough" when he returns," Fisher said.

"What do you mean, 'Enough'?" the student asked.

"Enough suffering. Enough starvation. Enough terror. Enough death. Enough inhumanity. Enough lives trapped in hopelessness. Enough sickness and disease. Enough time. ENOUGH!"

You don't have to be a refugee, or caught in a civil war, to find yourself dealing with an injustice you can't change -- what a source of joy it can be to release that situation to the Lord, knowing that he is coming one day to make all things right!

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” Luke 2:10

Why should we have joy this Christmas? Because we can count our blessings!



Because we have a powerful Saviour whose hands and arms are strong to save.

- His salvation is for you -- have you received it?
- His care is for you – what can you think him for?

Because we have a welcoming King who invites us into his presence.

- When was the last time you sang out in joy for Him?
- When was the last time you spent time in his presence and received his joy?

Because we have a righteous Judge who will come to make all things right.

- He's coming for you – your salvation is coming!
- Are there any situations or burdens you're carrying that you need to release to him so that His joy can be yours?

- **Prayer**

- **Final Song:** Joy Has Dawned

- **Benediction**