

Dec 21 Joy and Glory

Luke 2:8-20

Brian McLaren, in his book *Naked Spirituality* says the following: “Many of us associate God with stern preachers with pursed lips nearly bursting with fury because we were chewing gum in church. We see God as a stern and controlling parent who was watching with simmering rage from the window when we were experiencing the thrill of our first kiss in a car in the driveway. Or we see God as a terrifying judge who has been counting our life’s infractions and will inevitably charge us, mercilessly judge us, and eternally punish us for our guilt.

But the scandalous truth, known by mystics throughout history and affirmed in the pages of our sacred texts, is that when we connect with God, it is as if we are plugging our souls into a pure current of high voltage joy.”

Today as Christmas draws so very near I want us to focus on that word “Joy” and its sister word “Glory.” They were central in the actions and words of the angels and shepherds, as recorded in Luke. They should be a part of our lives not only today but always. Let me go back over the scriptures and lift up those special words. When we are examining a text so familiar, as this one is, we don’t always pay close attention to the words.

When the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds the “Glory” of the Lord shone around them. The angel’s message to the shepherds is that he had come to share good news of great “joy.” Later, as the first angel is joined by the heavenly host, their song begins, “Glory” to God. After the angels leave, the shepherds go to Bethlehem and see the child lying in a manger. It says they return “glorifying” and praising or we could say joyfully worshiping God because of all they have heard and seen.

McClaren also says, “When we tap into the joy of the Lord, when we step into the pure joy that burns like a billion galaxies in the heart of God, we’ll soon find ourselves celebrating and jubilating!” This is the response of the shepherds when they let the

message of joy given by the angel fill them. In their response to this good news, we too will find a blueprint for how we can find and experience God's glorious joy.

As I was preparing this sermon I was struck for the first time how the angel encounter with the shepherds begins with glory and joy. Glory is one of those words that translators use for over 40 different Hebrew and Greek words. That is why it means different things at different times. We begin by experiencing Glory as heavenly brightness come to earth. We leave it as a way of the shepherds expressing their inexpressible joy. But glory and joy go together. When we encounter God, as McLaren says we also tap into the joy of the Lord.

We have little to do with encountering God's glory. As the shepherds found out it can happen at the most unexpected moments. Who would have thought they, people who lived on the margins of society, would encounter God in the midst of their daily routine? Yet it happened. God's presence and glory will burst into our lives as well, often when we least expect it. What the shepherds did, because of the encounter with God's glory, led them to their joy-filled moments of glorious praise. If we follow their example, we too will find our ways of plugging into God's high voltage current of joy.

The departure of the angels leaves the spotlight on the shepherds. The response of shepherds is three-fold. First it says they converse with each other and they immediately resolve to go to Bethlehem. When we encounter God we need to remain grounded. We need to share this moment, figure out what it means for us and decide what we are going to do about it. I think about the man in one of my congregations who experienced God in a powerful way during worship one day. He had been struggling at his job. The company was going through reorganization and his boss was taking his stress out on his employees. He had started regretting going to work. Something I said in the sermon caused him to examine his life with more openness and he felt as if God was saying, "Quit your job. Everything will be fine." Now he did not go out immediately after worship and resign. What he did was sit down with his wife and talk about what happened. He finally admitted to how discouraged he was at work. He had been hiding it from the family to not worry about them. Together they prayed and they came up with a plan for him to move on to other work. It was scary to encounter God and hear news

that pushed him in directions he had not wanted to explore, but then there was joy as he finally realized God had heard his pain, God was listening. So, when you encounter God, listen but reflect with others to make sure you are clear about what you have experienced, and have a plan for moving forward.

Then it says that the shepherds went to find Mary and Joseph and the child. Why? They wanted to “see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” If they found a child in a manger it would mean that God’s messiah had come. It meant that they had heard the angel’s voice. All of us at times need a bit of confirmation that what we are doing is what God wants from us in our lives. I have found that those moments of encouragement and confirmation come, if we are looking for them. And just as surely, if we are truly on the wrong track we will hear that as well.

My Dad told this story about his entry into ministry. He had been out of the service for a few years following the end of World War II. Through hard work, he had created a comfortable life for his family running his own business of distributing magazines to grocery stores and drug stores. Another area right next to his was coming available and he had been approached about buying it. To do so would assure him financial security and probably lead to him becoming an area manager. Life was good when he went to a weeklong evangelistic service being held at the Methodist Church. Dad admitted that he was so tired at the end of the day that he usually fell asleep during the evangelist’s message. But on the final night the preacher talked about an empty life was no life at all. He said, “You can have all the money in the world but if you don’t like the person you see in the mirror it will mean nothing.” Dad felt as if he was speaking only to him. He had been enjoying the success but the work was mindless. He knew if he got the other route it would mean him being gone a lot from his family. The preacher ended by saying “God is calling some here right now to the ministry.” Dad had always thought about a church career but he was painfully shy, he chain smoked and was a little rough around the edges. Not good material for a minister. That night he talked to mom and told her about what he was thinking. They decided that God needed to be a little clearer in direction so instead of buying the other route he decided to put his own up for sale. He put it up for 15% more than it was valued at. They decided that if it didn’t

sell in 90 days they would accept that as God's help in deciding their future. It sold in 5 days. The day it sold Dad gave away his cigarettes, his lighters and ash trays and never smoked again. They say you can't go cold turkey from four packs a day but that is what he did and did it joyously because he knew he was on the path. He had seen his baby in a manger.

Finally the shepherds told others. It says they let all know what they had seen and heard and that the Shepherds then returned glorifying and praising God. To tap fully into the joy of God you not only have to encounter it, explore what it means but then you have to share it. One of the things that so heartens me as a pastor is to hear your stories. Stories of how God has been at work in your life. Sometimes it has happened in your being willing to help another, other times you have experienced it in other's ministering to you, perhaps it was a chance encounter that helped you along the way. Whatever it was, that moment gave you a great sense of contentment and you were filled with joy as you shared your story. The shepherds learned this. Not only do you need to encounter God, and you will, but as you experience the joy you need to share it with others.

Whenever God is at work joy is a possibility, I would say a reality. Where is God announcing words of great joy for us today? What do we need to do to respond and be filled with that joy? These are words that will fill us and challenge us this week and always.