

December 16 – Third Sunday in Advent

Infectious Joy

Scripture: Luke 2: 15-20

Do you remember a time of great joy? Perhaps it was looking into the face of a newborn and feeling overwhelmed with love. Or maybe it was working for a long time to achieve a goal and then came the day when your efforts were rewarded. Do you remember? Or maybe the joy wasn't because of anything you had done but because another invited you into their joy. You attend a wedding and see and experience the joy of new beginnings. Or a child or grandchild accomplishes something in school and comes home shouting the news and their joy is infectious. Do you remember?

Today our story is about joy and longing. There are many types of joy. I hopefully got you thinking about some of them as I began this sermon. Today I want us to think about unexpected joy and vicarious joy.

The joy the shepherds experienced was unexpected. Madelon sees the shepherds returning from Bethlehem and in our scripture it says they were "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." And can you blame them? For centuries, the people of Israel had believed that God would send a Messiah. The shepherds earnestly believed that now was the time. God was on the move. The baby they had seen was the long awaited one. All of this would bring them joy as it would for anyone. Why do I say theirs was an unexpected joy? As we heard the first Sunday in Advent, Shepherds were looked down upon by the good and upstanding people of the community. They were a necessary group of people you had to have around but you didn't really want to mingle with them. Tending sheep meant that they could not follow all the Sabbath requirements so their faith in God was questioned. Most of the land suitable for grazing was owned by absentee landlords so by necessity they often trespassed to find suitable grass for their flocks. This put their ethics and morals in doubt. Being a shepherd meant being disrespected by many. For ones such as these to be invited into the great drama of the coming of the Messiah is shocking to most, but not to God. To be a part of something like this when you usually were not wanted would fill

you with incredible joy. And we read how they were indeed filled with awe and joy towards a God who even cares about shepherds.

We have no control over this kind of joy. It breaks into our lives changing all of our plans and perceptions. I think about a time when we got a call from friends to go with them on vacation. We had not talked about it, been planning for it or anything else. The idea popped into their heads to go and wanted to see if we would come along. It would cause us to change some plans but we said yes! When these moments happen, don't take them for granted. Give thanks to God. Unexpected joy is a reminder of the goodness of life. Never take it for granted and always give God the glory.

The second type of joy we learn about in the scripture is vicarious joy. This is feeling joy through the experiences of others. We learned that the shepherds returned to their flocks praising God and telling all about what they had seen and heard. Their joy bubbled up and out of them and others, like Madelon, were infected by this joy.

As I think about this part of the story I am challenged. I ask myself, "Where can I share the joy of this season? How can I share it in such a compelling way that it invites people into the story?" Our society is flooded with Christmas messages but they are about what to buy. For so many, presents under the tree is the primary focus and theme of this season. We, who come to church, know there is a greater message, a joy-filled message. Like the shepherds, I hope every December you are again amazed at how much God loves you. God sent Jesus to be among us, to love us and to forgive us. God asks us to witness and be a part of that story. Are you filled enough with joy to share it with others? Can you do it in ways that are inviting? I hope so!

In one of my churches we had a caroling party. A member would bring a big flat bed trailer, loaded with hay bales and we would all climb on and go around the town singing to some of our homebound members. We all had fun and it was a joy to see the look of delight on the people we sang to. Often, as we went, we would have people ask us what church we were from. We even had a few times where people came to church the next Sunday because they had seen us caroling a neighbor. The joy of the season moved out into the world.

What this joy should do is create a longing, an awareness of something lacking in a person's life. This was the case for Madelon. She sees the shepherd's joy, she too wants to be involved. She realizes she is missing out on something important. Their joy draws her in. That is the good side. The other part of the story is that sometimes we resist the call of God to be filled with joy because we examine our lives and find them to be wanting. For Madelon, how could she go without a gift? God is going to answer that question, but that is for another day.

But her reticence reminds me of people who doubt they are welcome by God and by others. I preach so often about the unconditional love of God and yet I hear over and over again people expressing doubt that God could love them because of something they have done in their past. Or they feel that they have to earn that love and don't believe they have done so. I preach about how we are called to forgive. Yes, people do horrific things. Yes, some people's actions have changed our lives or a family member's life in ways that are ugly and destructive. We think forgiving them is the same as excusing their behavior. It is not. Instead of releasing the past we hang on and it robs us of joy. God wants you to experience joy. God asks you to let go of all that would keep you from experiencing it.

Getting back to our story. Did Joseph and Mary welcome the shepherds because they brought gifts, or was it because they came filled with awe because an angel sent them? Did Mary and Joseph welcome the wise men because they came bringing gifts or did they welcome them because they were filled with the awesome awareness that God was doing a new thing? We know the answer. In both cases, their heart, their spirit, their love and faithfulness is what made them acceptable participants in the greatest night the world has known. The gifts they brought were secondary, almost unimportant.

Do you think Madelon would have been scolded and sent away from the stable because she had no gift? I doubt it, don't you? But her perceived lack, her unworthiness almost kept her from experiencing the joy of that night. God had to intervene to get her past her own road blocks.

So, if you are feeling like there is anything keeping you from fully experiencing the joy of this season, let it go. Know that God loves you and welcomes you no matter

where you are on life's journey. If you think God might reject someone you love because of their actions, remember God loves them. This is the power and beauty of this season. If you are having a hard time forgiving someone and it poisons current relationships maybe now you can release that anger and give them and it to God.

In closing let me share a story. In one of the churches, I have been blessed to serve, a member came to see me. He was struggling in a failing relationship. We talked often as it ended and he began to put the pieces of his life back together. Besides the grief of losing his girlfriend was the grief of losing touch with her two children. The young boy, about 6 at the time of the break up, and he had been very close. For a long time he was severely depressed and borderline suicidal. We kept visiting and one of the things I kept telling him was that God wanted him to know love and to experience joy. As the wounds of grief began to heal, those words began to be a beacon of hope. He began to see himself not as a loser but as one who has lost. A great distinction. We have stayed in touch and recently we chatted. It has been about twelve years since those dark times. He is happily married, looking forward to retirement, is back in contact with the older daughter who keeps him informed about what her brother is doing. His life is joy-filled. Once he again believed that God loved him, it filled him with joy. It allowed him to forgive his ex., to move on with life and to find new beginnings.

So celebrate the Joy of God surrounding you this season. Remember the greatest joy is that you are loved by God. Share the goodness of this day in wonderful compelling ways that invite others. And, if you find at any time you doubt your worthiness, let it go because God loves you just the way you are.