

“Christmas Unwrapped--Joy”

We're in a series of messages called, "Christmas Unwrapped." We're trying to cut through some of the superficial layers around this time of year and figure out what God was really doing in taking on human form, in being born as a baby. God had a reason to invade earth like this and that reason is simple. God had certain gifts he wanted to give us and he had to take on human form to do it or we wouldn't have gotten it. We wouldn't have understood. In Christmas, God gives us the gift of strength, in Christmas God gives us the gift of hope. Those are two of the gifts we've talked about. Today we talk about a third gift of Christmas and that is joy. Joy.

But just like the other gifts, we've got to unwrap it in order to enjoy it, make it a part of our lives. That's why this popcorn tin is up here. This was given to me back in 1991 and I never opened it, never unwrapped it, never enjoyed it. It will always be a reminder to me to be sure and unwrap the awesome gifts God gives.

Today the gift of joy. How God wants to give you and me an incredible joy that we can live our lives with.

The word "joy" is a tiny word that deserves a closer look. We know how to spell it, but it's easy to write off joy as something that's just not possible for our lives. We look at a verse like 1 Thessalonians 5:16 **[SLIDE...]** **“Always be joyful” (1 Thessalonians 5:16)**. We look at a verse like that and if you've had a particularly tough week, be honest, when you hear a verse like that doesn't it bug you? "Always be joyful? I had a tough week! I don't want to always be joyful. I'm not sure I can always be joyful!"

For some of you, because of the kind of week you had, you came in feeling bad. You had a rotten week. You feel rotten you don't have any joy. You have a right to feel that way and nobody's going to take it away from you.

We sing "Joy to the World" at Christmas. To the world! That means everyone. That means everywhere. Is that really possible, joy in this world?

Real quick, there are a couple of things that keep us from feeling like that's a possibility. Things that you and I face on a daily basis. **[SLIDE: “What keeps me from seek joy as a possibility?]** **1. The bad that shouldn't happen.** We all have to admit that a lot of the bad things that happen in our lives, we bring them on ourselves. Most of the bad things. But there are bad things that happen to us, and in this world, that just shouldn't happen. We didn't bring it on ourselves, no one deserved it, that person was innocent. Because of that we wonder, "Can joy really happen in this world?"

Alongside of that you put the second thing. Not only the bad that shouldn't happen but... **[SLIDE, add to previous...]** **2. The good that doesn't happen.** The good things that we want to happen that don't happen in our lives. The dream that we've had that doesn't seem to be able to come true. The heart that we hope to change in someone else that never seems to change. The prayer that we pray that doesn't seem to get answered, at least not the way we wanted it to get answered.

You look at these real-life truths that we have to face everyday and you realize if joy is going to work, you can't wait for perfect circumstances because we do not live in a world of perfect circumstances. If joy is going to work it has to work in an imperfect, often ugly world. That's what the message of Christmas is all about. God came to this often-ugly world and, in Jesus Christ, he told us joy can happen even here. Even in your kind of a world, joy can happen.

Dr. David Myers, in his research for the book Pursuit of Happiness, discovered that over the past seventeen years there have been 80,000 research projects done on depression in the United States. While at the same time there have been only 400 research projects done on joy. It's easy to focus on the negative.

Because of the kind of the world that we live in, you can choose to be a discouraged person because there's a lot to be discouraged about. You could choose to be an angry person. There's a lot to be angry about in this world. You could choose to be a cynical person. There's a lot to be cynical about. The message of Christmas is, because Jesus came you can choose to be a joyful person. Because there is a lot to be joyful about. It's a new choice. It's a new day because of what Jesus Christ has done.

You may have heard someone say before, joy is a choice it doesn't just happen in our lives. It's something that must be chosen in our lives. The question I've got is, "How? How do you choose it?" It's obviously not just automatic. Even those of you who have been believers for a long time, who come to church a lot, realize that you don't automatically become joyful because you read the Bible more or pray more or even come to church more. How does it happen? Do you work harder at it? If it works that way the most joyful people in the world would be workaholics and that doesn't work. Can you lie yourself into it and just pretend that everything is ok? There are some people who think they're joyful but they're just blissfully unaware. No! If joy is going to work, it has to work in a real world with real problems. If joy is a choice, how do you choose joy? How do I get from here to there? How does that happen in our lives?

We're going to let some guys show us how to get from here to there today, some guys who were part of the first Christmas – the shepherds. **[PICTURE: SHEPHERDS]** They were out in their fields near Bethlehem and God brought them a message of joy. They made some choices, some simple choices, the same kind of choices that you and I can make today, that bring joy into our lives. Do you want to have joy? Three choices that result in joy:

[SLIDE: "Three choices that result in joy:..."] I. CHOOSE TO HEAR THE GOOD NEWS. Have you ever been really down and the phone rings and you pick it up and it's some good news? All of a sudden, maybe it's just for a moment, but your spirits are lifted. We were leaving my mom's in Warrensburg over Thanksgiving and Zoe could not find her toy, her digital Littlest Pet Shop Pet. We searched, and searched, and searched. It was no where and we had to get on the road. Zoe was heartbroken. I'm putting the final suitcase in the trunk and I hear a noise. I look inside and sure enough, there it is. I took it to Zoe, who was covered in tears and snot. And said, "Guess what I found!" The joy was unmistakable. That's the power that good news has to bring joy into our lives.

It's the kind of thing that happened to these shepherds the first Christmas. Luke 2:10 says, **[SLIDE...]** **"But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.'"** (Luke 2:10). Not just for the shepherds but for all people, this message of good news. They're just out there watching their flock, a pretty boring job. Sheep aren't that exciting to look at while they're awake, let alone while they're asleep. It was night. It was not a very exciting time. All of the sudden, in that routine ordinary life, God brought them a message of joy just like he wants to do for some of us today. You may think you just sort of showed up today. But God wants to bring you a message of joy. In the middle of that life God came and said, "I want to bring you some good news." What's the good news? That Jesus came. The good news is that Jesus Christ wants to make a difference in our lives.

You may have heard that the first four books of the New Testament are the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of John. The word "gospel" just means good news. That's all it's saying. This is the good news about Jesus that Matthew told, the good news about Jesus that Mark told. The good news is a story of what Jesus came to do. The good news is the fact that Jesus Christ came to this earth to tell us that God loves us. J. Robert Oppenheimer, the great scientist, once said that the best way to communicate a great idea is to wrap it in a person. That's what God did.

That's what Christmas is saying. God called. He came to this earth in Jesus. He called you. He left a message on your answering machine. Now he's waiting for you to call back. He's invited you. Have you done that yet? The message is he's already sent the fax. He's waiting for you to fax back. He's already put an email in your in-box. He's waiting for you to hit the reply button. He's already beeped your beeper.

Christmas means God called you. And get this, he didn't call you to give you bad news! If you're afraid to listen to God because you think he's going to say, "Here's the 87 things you did wrong this week." He doesn't call to give you bad news! He called to give you good news. He called to tell you "I love you." He's calling to tell you, "I want to forgive you and help you with the struggles in your life. He's calling to tell you, "I care about what you're going through right now." That's what he's calling to say. Good news brings joy into our lives. But you and I have to choose to hear it.

You might say, "I've lost everything. Is there any joy in that?" There is if you know him. Hebrews 10 says, **[SLIDE...]** **"You even had joy when all that you owned was taken from you because you knew that you had something better and more lasting" (Hebrews 10:34, NCV).** Because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, because of the hope that he gives us for eternity you can have nothing to look forward to in this world and still look forward to joy. Because this world is not all there is. God is building for us an eternity of joy. That is good news. For some of you it's the only good news that you can hang on to right now. It's enough. It's enough even in difficult times. When you listen to that good news, whatever else is happening in life, the result is joy.

These shepherds teach us that. They also teach us a second thing about where joy comes from. It starts when you listen to the good news... **[SLIDE: "Three choices that result in joy:..."] II. IT CONTINUES WHEN YOU TO DO WHAT GOD SAYS.**

These shepherds heard God tell them to go and find a baby, wrapped in a blanket, lying in a manger--a feeding trough for a cow. They did it. And when they did it, they found joy. Luke 2:15 says, **[SLIDE...]** **"When the angel had left them and went into heaven the shepherds said to one another 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about.'" (Luke 2:15).**

Why did they go? Because they believed what God had said. They could have spent the rest of their lives wondering. They could have said, "I don't know if that's true," and stayed in the fields outside of Bethlehem and never gone and always wondered, "What would have happened that night if we had gone to see what the angels told us about." But they trusted what God had said and they did it.

It's easy for a lot of us to get stuck in those fields outside of Bethlehem. You hear God say to you "Trust me with your life, trust me with this decision, trust me with this relationship." But you just stay there and later you wonder, "What would have happened if I had?" Maybe this happened years ago for you. I'm here to tell you this morning that it's never too late to trust him. It's never too late to go to Jesus Christ and find hope in him. Never too late. You don't have to wonder any longer. Today may be your day to trust him. Today may be your day to ask him to help you with a decision. Today may be your day to ask him to give you strength in that relationship. You don't have to wonder. Christmas is the method that joy can happen in our lives. And joy happens in our lives when you and I decide to do what God has said to do.

Psalms 19:8 says, **[SLIDE...]** **"The commandments of the Lord are right bringing joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are clear giving insight to life" (Psalm 19:8, NLT).** God's commandments bring joy. What are those commandments? Jesus boiled it down to two things. He said, **[SLIDE...]** **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40, NIV).**

Jesus is saying, "Here are the directions of life to give your life joy." If you follow the directions, if I follow the directions, he's going to give you the most joyful life possible. That's the kind of life he wants to give. So are you loving God with your head, your heart, your hands? Are you loving others as yourself? When you do what God says the result is joy. His commandments aren't meant to take away our fun. They're meant to give us real joy! When you make that choice, even in an imperfect world where everything doesn't always work out right you have genuine joy. Joy is not the circumstances always working out right. Joy is following God in spite of the circumstances.

When you do what God says to do it brings a joy, a different kind of joy than you've ever experienced before. One of the things God tells us to do is to ask. At Christmas when we're asking everybody else for things and trying to figure out things we're going to ask for for Christmas God tells us to ask. And he tells us when we ask it brings us joy.

Jesus said, **[SLIDE...]** **"Until now you've not asked for anything in My name. Ask and you will receive and your joy will be complete" (John 16:24, NIV).** Circle the word "ask". What are you asking God for this Christmas? What are you asking of God? If you're thinking, "I don't know whether I can ask this of

him.” He’ll tell you if it’s a wrong request. He’ll tell you if it’s the wrong thing. More than likely if it’s something on your heart, as a loving Father, he wants to grant that request.

Joy comes when you hear the good news. Joy comes when you do what God says to do. Then there’s a third thing these shepherds remind us of. **[SLIDE: “Three choices that result in joy:...”] III. JOY COMES WHEN YOU CHOSE TO TELL SOMEONE ELSE.** When you tell someone else the good news about what God’s doing in your life it brings joy. A principle of joy is, it cannot be bottled. If you try to put a cap on joy it sours every time. It has to be shared.

These shepherds immediately shared the good news about what God is doing. Luke 2:17 says, **[SLIDE...] “When they’d seen him (the baby Jesus) they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child” (Luke 2:17, NIV).** They went out and immediately told everybody else. Tell someone else. It’s what you and I need to do.

Psalms 107:22 puts it this way, **[SLIDE...] “With joy they should tell what he has done” (Psalm 107:22, NIV).** With joy tell what God has done in your life. Tell someone in your family, at work, at school. Joy happens when we tell someone the good news.

Some of you know exactly what I’m talking about. There’s an almost indescribable burst of joy that happens when you share with someone else the good news of what God has done in your life. Because you care about them. You want them to experience the same good news. When you share that with them, you can’t describe the kind of joy that comes out of that.

And this is real important to know: People want to come to church at Christmas. They want to come at Christmas and Easter more than any time in the year. People are actually waiting for someone to ask them to come. They’d like to go but nobody’s asked them. If you’ll invite a friend at work or school maybe even somebody in your family, you’ll be amazed at the answer instead of being, “I don’t know...” will instead be “Thank you! I’m glad you asked.” People want to be asked. They want to be in church at Christmas. And a lot of people connect to God for the very first time because they come to a Christmas Eve service.

Those of you who have been at Saint Paul’s on past years know that Christmas Eve is an incredible moment of hearing music and a message that comes together and helps us realize the true meaning. Don’t come alone Christmas Eve. Invite somebody. Have somebody join you. You may be new to Saint Paul’s. This may be your first week here. You can invite somebody. You don’t have to wait. You can already start inviting somebody else. If God is giving you the good news today, tell somebody else right away like these shepherds did. Invite them this next week for Christmas Eve services.

That’s where the joy comes from. You choose to hear something and do something and say something. Even when you’re in the middle of difficult circumstances. Linda Koehler has been very, very ill and in the hospital for weeks. She’s been in ICU for weeks now and is critically ill. It’s been very hard on her family. I went by to see them this week and Gerold, her husband introduced me to Linda’s nurse and told me how he had invited her to come to church today, and how one of the doctors had overheard that invitation and said, “I’ll come too.” In the midst of that very difficult time, Gerold is sharing the good news. He’s inviting others to hear. You hear the good news, you do what God says, you tell other people.

That’s the secret to unwrapping this awesome gift that God wants you and me to have this Christmas. And it’s a gift we can experience throughout our lives, even in the midst of difficulty and doubt, because this joy isn’t based on our circumstances, it’s about the presence of God. And God is with us. Philippians 4 says, **[SLIDE...] “Be full of joy in the Lord always. I will say it again. Be full of joy” (Philippians 4:4, NCV).** Unwrap this awesome gift of joy. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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