



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# Joy to the World

SCRIPTURE:  
Luke 2:8-20

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December 19, 2021 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

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**T**he carol we will sing at the conclusion of our service is, “Joy to the world, the Lord has come... let heaven and nature sing.” The inspiration for this world-encompassing joy comes from the text we read this morning. It was the promise of an angel. I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all the people. Joy for all the people? What is the nature of this joy the angel promises? What would it look like for this world-encompassing joy to be real?

We have been talking about joy this season. I said at the beginning of this series: It seems to me that we all need a bit of joy. I also said, as people of faith, joy can be a fairly constant companion; a friend to the faithful. But it's not a given. So, what is the nature of this joy the angels promise?

So far, we have said that joy is rooted in the confidence that the love of God searches for us—seeks us out. Now, confidence that God's love searches for us, that's not a given either. You know me, I'm the “we believe, help our unbelief” guy. I have sympathy for anyone who struggles to trust all the time. But this season of Christmas testifies that God's desire is to dwell with us—joy to the world, the Lord has come. Come to your house, to your life.

We also said last week that God's love does not rest with us, but seeps out of us and fills the spaces between us and our neighbors, shaping our encounters with others. Both of these realities provide a reason for joy in our lives.

But I also imagine the angels had to tell us of this joy because joy does not come easily in a world like ours. It takes some courage.

Given the way the world is, even just the events in the past few weeks—violence and devastating storms and Covid numbers rising—it may seem that the only way to be joyful is to try to sequester ourselves away

from all that is bad. Don't you sometimes just want to escape?

Ferrol Sams writes a short story of a nameless character who is a narcissist and goes through life using people. When confronted with how he has hurt others, he blows it off saying, “If you don't say it out loud, it never happened.” He gets sick but pretends he's not. “If you don't say it out loud, it never happened.” The story ends with his saying, “I never said it out loud, but I'm still dying.”

Denial is a powerful anesthesia. It has allowed all of us, at times, to avoid the realities of our lives. And that has a powerful attraction at times, but I think the angels were not promising a joy based on self-denial. I think they promised joy that is real and lives in the real world. And that takes a bit of courage. Joy is not an act of denial, but to some degree, it is an act of defiance.

See if this makes sense to you. Joy is a gift. It is a gift born from the love of God and comes from knowing that God's love calls us by name. Joy results from trusting this love.

But at the same time, joy is a discipline. It is something that we pursue. It is something we practice. By practice, I mean we live each moment believing we are loved by God. When times are wonderful, we remember that we are loved by God. When times are hard, we remember we are loved by God. And that love shapes our choices.

Late one night, during my seminary years, my dad and I were talking about faith. He told me about a time his faith carried him through. He said the day's mail arrived with an invoice for medical expenses. The amount of the invoice exceeded his annual salary. It was 1964 and he was a pastor of a small congregation in Mississippi. The Civil Rights movement was everywhere and what he called his “mod-

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est” support of that effort, meant he was in conflict with some of the church leaders and the writing on the wall—soon he would need to resign from his position. Just a few months before, he welcomed my sister, his one and only daughter, into the world. I was four years old and active enough to render any room I was in a federally-declared disaster area. My special-needs brother, Gene, was receiving inpatient care. At eighteen months, he was still learning to swallow. My mother had crumbled under the weight of postpartum depression and was hospitalized. Taking care of three small children, his wife suffering greatly, and uncertainty about his vocational future was hard. When the mail arrived with the unpayable invoice, it pushed him over the edge. He said he went to the carport to weep. He didn’t want his kids to see him cry.

But what he did next is the reason he told me this story. He prayed. Not a pretty, prayer-book kind of prayer. He yelled at God. He vented his fear and his pain. He let God know just how disappointing God had been. And then he made a decision: He would begin tithing. Crazy, right? He already gave money to support the church, but he decided to adopt the old practice of giving ten percent of his income to the work of the church. He said if God loves me, then even in the midst of this storm I want to show my love for God and this is one way I can do that. It was one way he could live like he trusted, no matter what, that the love of God was reliable.

My mother got better. My brother learned to swallow. Eventually, the unpayable bill was paid. Most miraculous of all, I eventually learned not to destroy every room I was in. My dad did have to resign, but another congregation called him to serve them. Let me be clear, this is not one of those prosperity gospel fairytales that you find on religious broadcasts. This is not a claim that tithing is an investment program where God promises to make you healthy and wealthy. I don’t believe that.

My point is much more basic than that: Faith is practiced. Faith is lived out in daily choices and when life falls apart, those ordinary practices like prayer and worship and generosity—can become the garden in which joy grows. When we live like we

trust God’s love, joy comes.

My dad was charismatic in spirit and was always the center of the room. He was a bit self-absorbed and would tell the same story over and over and over—it has to come from somewhere. But he was a joyful man. When you trust in the love of God, joy comes. It’s the most important lesson I ever learned from my dad.

Joy is both—at the same time—a gift of God and a spiritual discipline. It is grace and it is something that requires grit and courage. Swiss theologian Karl Barth says joy is not an act of denial, but an act of defiance. He calls joy a “defiant nevertheless.”<sup>1</sup> When storms come, nevertheless, I am loved. When illness comes, nevertheless, God is God and we belong to God. When trouble comes, nevertheless, good Christians friends rejoice with heart and soul and voice, for the love of God has come. This defiant nevertheless requires courage.

Carla worshiped in the first church I served. She was a grandmother. After worship, she filled the narthex with giggles. Everyone wanted to talk with Carla. She could lift your spirits.

I always admired her but once I learned her story, I was amazed by her. Carla was married to Ryan. Ryan was a sailor. Not professionally, but it was the passion of his heart. He taught their boys to sail and they all knew their way around a boat by the time they were in middle school.

Their son, Phillip, had just graduated from college when he and some buddies took the boat and headed out to sea. There was an accident and they didn’t make it home.

I was young and stupid so I asked, “Carla, you are so happy now. How did you ever get over that?” She just smiled and said, “Tom, mothers don’t get over that. But let me tell you what I learned when I was in the valley of the shadow. I began to see that we all have sadness. Everyone knows the dark night; everyone knows heartbreak. I know what that is like.”

“Every day the sadness is waiting. I don’t know if it will come with the coffee and the morning paper or if it will speak to me in the grocery or penetrate my dreams. I don’t know if it will whisper to me in worship. But every day I pray: God, don’t let the

1 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (1962) p. 120.

sadness win. Let me push back the sadness not only in my life, but in the lives of those I talk with today. Help me push back the sadness.”

“I’m not a smart woman,” she said. “But I know how to laugh and to help others do the same. You may think it is silly, Tom, but I think it’s a kind of ministry.”

She’s right. The next Sunday I walked into the narthex and there she was, people gathered around

and laughter was pushing back the sadness. Now I know it was just the narthex of a Carolina Presbyterian church, but it seemed to me the angels had come and said, “See I told you, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be to all the people.”

The message of this season is pretty simple. God has come because God wants to live where we live, to be with us. Because God loves you. When we act like we believe that’s the truth, that’s what we call joy.