



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Joy to Carry You Through

SCRIPTURE:
Philippians 2:5-11

December 24, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Welcome to this night. From the world of Delta and Omicron and overflowing hospitals. From the world of violence on the streets and in airplanes, from storm devastation, from food and housing insecurity—the markers of the year we have just journeyed—welcome to this holy night. The world needs it. It feels like we were coming to the end of a long-distance run, only to turn the corner and discover there awaits an uncertain number of miles ahead yet to run.

We have been talking about joy here at Village during this Advent season and this is what I believe: The joy that is found in this night is a joy that can carry us through challenging times. I don't know what 2022 will bring. I imagine like most years, it will be a year of beauty and brokenness, of blessing but also of burdens. But whatever it is, I don't want to go through it without remembering this night.

We all know the story. A collection of folks traveled to Bethlehem because of a star or because they were sent by angels or because they were sent by the governor. There's the manger—a poor substitute for a crib. There's the baby's exhausted mother and overwhelmed father. There are shepherds, their voices still a bit shaky from fear but they have come to share the song they've learned from angels. There are magi who arrive bearing gifts that no one has ever brought to a baby before. We know the story and we also know what we have done to the story over the centuries... by done to, I mean how we have added detail around the edges.

Once I preached on the uncaring innkeeper. Of course, there's no mention of an innkeeper in the scriptures. We just added him. We sing of the three wisemen. We even know their names: Gaspar, Melchior and Balthazar. But read Matthew. There's

no mention of how many there were. And their names? Well, we just added that. It's quite fun.

We have learned that along the way the magi stayed with a young cripple boy named Amal. That's a great story. We have blended the details. The carol, "Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow," beckons the shepherds to follow the star. Well, you heard the story. There was no mention of the star with the shepherds but I suppose if the star was there for the magi, maybe the shepherds could see it, too. Most bizarre of all, to me at least, is the drummer-boy carol. You know, some guy stumbles across this holy family exhausted, with no room for the child except for a manger, and thinks to himself: What this family with a newborn needs is a drum solo.

Here's what I think. We have played with the details of the story. We have added details as a way of putting ourselves in the midst of this story. We want to find our own name included in the story of God. And that is the right instinct because this night is about this child, but because the child is who he is, this night is about us. If I understand it, this child would never have been born were it not for us.

That's what Paul says. Paul quotes a hymn, maybe one of the earliest Christmas carols, and he describes the incarnation this way:

*though he was in the form of God, did not regard
equality with God as something to be exploited
but emptied himself,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form
he humbled himself...*

Paul says this night reveals Christ's humility. Humility is not too popular these days and I understand; it's hard.

I was driving down Mission Road and had the opportunity to meet one of the officers who works

the area. He invited me to have a little roadside chat. Turns out having your tag renewal sticker in the glove box doesn't count. So, lights are flashing and I'm a Mission Road criminal. For about 20 minutes, I sat there with all of Prairie Village driving by. Oh, I could the imagine the conversation... "I think that was Tom Are." "Did you see Tom?" I'm trying to squeeze into the head rest. It is humbling but I'm sure you have never had that experience.

I had a different experience. Not long after Carol and I were married, we went with my dad and his wife to Ghana, West Africa. We were visiting the work of the church there. Presbyterians began our mission work in Ghana almost 200 years ago. We have hospitals, schools and many Presbyterian congregations there. Carol and I visited a congregation in a small village. Before I knew what was happening, the elders of the village decided that they would make me chief of the youth. To make one chief is quite a process. They brought me the chief's stool and the chief's robe and the chief's beads and bracelets on my wrist and powder on my face. The women were singing; the men were dancing. It was quite an ordeal. I thought we had just had a little fun in the church. But then I walked outside. People on the street started falling down on their faces and singing to me. Men would sweep the path in front of me. They went and got an umbrella to hold over my head to protect me from the sun.

I was thinking: This is ridiculous. But I must confess, there was also a part of me that thought: I could get used to this. I was feeling pretty good about myself... I was. But then I would have to face my grandmother. She knew the quickest way to be turned away at the pearly gates was to think too highly of yourself. "Nobody likes a braggart," she would say. "Don't get too big for your britches."

Jon Meacham wrote a biography of George H.W. Bush. He said that when Bush was running to be a senator in Texas, his mother, after hearing a campaign ad, called him and said, "George, stop talking about yourself. Nobody likes a braggart."

She's not wrong and neither was my grandmother. I have assumed that humility is making sure we don't think too highly of ourselves. Right?

But I don't think when Paul said Christ humbled

himself, he meant that Jesus came as some "aw, shucks, it's just me" kind of Lord. He didn't move through the world keeping in the shadows, staying out of the center of things. So, what does Paul mean when he says Christ humbled himself?

Here's where I have misunderstood humility. I have assumed humility describes how I think about myself, but in truth, humility describes how I think about *others*. I am not humble because I think less of myself; I am humble when I think *more* of others. Jesus didn't come to us because he thought less of himself; he was born because he loved us and couldn't bear to stay away from the world he loved.

My friend David was like that. He was an attorney in my church in Florida. His wife, Winkie (yes, I'm not making that up) was quite the football fan. David was quite the cook. When the Sunday School class met for a cookout, Winkie was in the backyard with the guys debating the benefits of zone defense; David was in the kitchen swapping recipes for lemon meringue pie.

But everyone wanted to be with David. To my knowledge, he never served on a board. He never joined a club. He never held a leadership position. He was never elected to anything. He was no mover and shaker. But everyone wanted to be with David because he was always glad to see you. He seemed genuinely excited when you came in the room—like he had been waiting all day for your arrival. I would see him and say, "David, how are you?" "Better now that I've seen you," he would respond. "I've been wanting to talk with you; do you have a minute? Tell me about everything," he'd say. And he said it in such a way that you believed it. You were always glad to see David because he was always glad to see you.

I'm telling you about this because I think that's what humility looks like. Humility is not thinking little of yourself; humility results from thinking highly of others.

Paul said: He was God but because God is love, love came to us; couldn't bear to stay away from us. And it is that love that draws us to this night, for God says: Tell me everything. I've been waiting for you... wanting to be with you, just tell me everything. The story of this night is that the love that breathed the universe into being has called you by name.

And we need that. We will soon put this year behind us and greet a new year. I don't know what it will bring but I know this: It will be a mixture of beauty and brokenness. It will be a mixture of blessing and burden. But we can greet it with joy. Because Christ humbled himself—not because he thought less

of himself but because of how much he thinks of you.

So, no matter what may come, remember this night, for the angels didn't simply say, "a child is born." No, the angel said, "I bring you good news of great joy, for to you is born a savior."