

The Gift of Joy
Luke 2:8-20
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
December 13, 2020
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

Here it is - December 13. We are less than two weeks away from Christmas. And while there are some out there who are appreciating the less hectic season, I also know that many are aware of what is missing. Whether it is things like baking and shopping that are often more fun this time of year, or lunches with friends and parties with family or co-workers, or worshipping together in the same space as we sing our favorite songs of the season, or passing the light around the sanctuary on Christmas Eve...there are traditions that, even though they sometimes get stressful, are inevitably longed for right now.

So, when the days are getting shorter and it seems like sometimes night will never end...when we long to be with people we love and to just throw our arms around them...when nothing that we think of when we think of Christmas feels quite the same... how do we find joy?

Maybe some of that answer came in the words Catrina shared as their family lit the Advent candle. Because sometimes we first have to stop and ask what joy is. Do you remember what she said?

“Joy is a way of being. It is a choice to see the possibilities. Joy is a feeling deep down inside. It is the belief that all will be okay. Joy doesn’t pretend that sadness isn’t real, but it helps us remember that sadness isn’t all there is.”

And so, in this season we *can* be honest about the grief that is part of this year, whether grief due to pandemic restrictions, or grief because of personal loss or because of loved ones whose lives have ended and who are missed.

And still we can find joy. Because joy, while it often comes hand in hand with happiness, with good feelings, with laughter...joy is not about these things. Joy is something deeper that recognizes the both/and of this life. Joy is something that says, “I miss what I am used to *and* I am going to be okay.” Joy is something that says, “I want one more Christmas with my loved one *and* I will celebrate their life as I continue to live mine.”

Even in the scripture Brandon shared with us today we often pretend that joy is about easy glee. But if we are honest, there was nothing easy about the story of Jesus’ birth. Rather we are told that a betrothed couple’s marriage starts with the stress of an unanticipated pregnancy. To top it off, Luke tells us that late in that pregnancy they had to make a long journey and the baby was born away from home in borrowed living quarters.

Then, when we get to today's reading, as if there weren't already enough stress for new parents to handle, angels invited strangers to come and see the baby. Not only strangers...but shepherds...people who were closer to the bottom of the social ladder and who likely burst on the scene having not bathed for longer than Mary might have wished and with sheep in tow...people who were not usually included in important events and certainly not usually the first to be invited.

And yet, the angel began this invitation to the shepherds saying, *Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord* (Luke 2:10-11).

And this message weaves throughout the entire story.

A baby comes into the world in a less than traditional manner...and the angel assures his parents that fear doesn't have the last word, but that hope and peace are coming with him.

A group of hard working but often discounted shepherds are invited to be the first to meet the baby...and the angel assures them not to let fear keep them from responding because there is joy to be found and they have a special place in the story.

As the child grows, a light guides foreign visitors to his home as they and we discover again that God's love is for the whole world.

Yes, this year is different. It is difficult. And maybe that means we will hear this story a little differently.

Because here is the joy...

When things aren't as you had planned - God still shows up.

When you feel alone and left out, when you feel like you don't have a place in the story of your own life - God invites you to look again and to see something new.

When you are in the midst of the dull day to day routine of life - God is ready to show you something wonderful.

When fear or grief or disappointment is overwhelming - hope exists and God comes to us.

Friends, listen carefully...you just might hear the angels singing good tidings of great joy...joy not only for shepherds, but also for you. Amen.