

Date: December 13, 2009

Title: Where does the Joy Come From?

Scripture:

Now, before I read our scripture for this morning; a very familiar passage for most of you, I want you to consider where you might fit into this story. Are you an angel, a shepherd, Mary or Joseph or some other minor character? Listen for whom you can identify with as I read through this passage.

Luke 2:8-18 (NLT) ⁸ That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. ⁹ Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, ¹⁰ but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹ The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! ¹² And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger." ¹³ Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." ¹⁵ When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." ¹⁶ They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. ¹⁷ After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. ¹⁸ All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished.

Did you find someone to identify with? I'm going to come back to this so keep this in mind as we proceed.

Last week I was talking about hope. Hope is an emotion that keeps us going when things are not going well. Hope is what counteracts our belief that nothing is going to work out. It's like an antidote to desperation. It's a very positive word, but you rarely consider hope without also considering some negative thing beside it. Do you see what I mean by this? You only really need hope to get you through when things might otherwise seem hopeless. If everything is going great, who needs hope? Don't get me wrong; hope is important because every person alive is going to face difficulties from time to time. It's just that when we think of hope, by definition we associate it with some kind of trouble that hope will help us to get past. There is just no need for hope without some kind of trouble near by.

But the word *joy*, now that is something completely different isn't it? If hope walks hand in hand with troubles, Joy walks hand in hand with blessings. When you think of joy you think of smiles and uplifting thoughts. Joy is sort of a *my cup-runneeth-over* sort of word. Joy is what we get when we really get how wonderful our lives really are. Joy can be cause for the loud and noisy like a New Years Eve party or it can be cause for the soft and quiet like a mother looking at her sleeping child. But either way, we seem to find joy when we are aware of a blessing in our lives.

When the angel brought good news to the shepherd he said, "Don't be afraid. I am bringing you good news that will bring great joy." The blessing in this case is the great news that THE MESSIAH is here!

Now, I don't think I did justice to my reading of the scripture this morning. Maybe it is just because I have heard this so many times, but I can't help but think that I should put a little more into it. I mean this is the Son of God we are talking about here. This is the savior of the world. And I just read it like: "*Don't be afraid. I am bringing you good news that will bring great joy.*"

That gets the job done, but I think I would be more in keeping with the spirit of the text if I went something more like, "Hey, you guys! The messiah is born! Today! That's right, just over the hill. There is a baby that was just born and is now lying in a manger. He's the one - the one that all Jews have been waiting for. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords and if you don't believe me and my angel buddies, go on over and see for yourselves!

I want the angel to more like a 6 year-old we were watching one day while her mother went to do some Christmas shopping. We told her we were going to put up our Christmas tree and she was going to get to help us. I still remember her standing on our living room stairs as all of us were running around getting things ready saying, "I'm just so e'cited!" I want the angel to be e'cited! He is delivering the most important message of all time.

I guess I don't need to be so hard on the angel because it's clear that the Shepherds got the message because as soon as the angels had finished singing the halleluiah chorus, the shepherds decided to head on over to the stable to see for themselves. And scripture says that once they saw for themselves, they told everyone they met about their encounter and the people who heard them speak about this were **astonished**. I'm not surprised either. It was an astonishing message.

Remember when I asked you to think about which character you could most clearly identify with in this story. You know who that was for me? It was the people who were astonished. That's right, the people who were told by the shepherds about this great news. And the reason I identify most clearly with them is because like them, I was told about Jesus second hand. I didn't have an angel or a choir full of angels announce the good news of Jesus Christ to me. I got it from other people who had experienced the love, mercy and grace of Jesus Christ for themselves and they passed that extraordinary news on to me. There were only a few people who were there for the first hand experience of the birth of Jesus. All the rest of us received the news later.

Now, I have to admit that I sort of envy those shepherds. I mean they got the message from an angel. They were just hanging around doing their job and out of nowhere an angel came right into their camp, was somehow illuminated so they would know that it was indeed an angel and then he delivered the message. I envy the shepherds, but even without a choir full of angels, I did receive the message and my life has filled with a healthy measure of joy as a result.

I bet that is the same for many of you too. I have read some accounts of people seeing angels. I know it happens, but personally, I haven't experienced it and my guess is that most of you have not experienced that either. No, I'm guessing that most of us have received the greatest message of all times from pretty ordinary folk. Maybe it wasn't just one time, maybe we received the message several different times in our life, but somehow we got the message and for the most part it came from people just like you and me; people who were filled with the joy of the blessing of the living Christ in their lives and who wanted to share the same good news that the angel delivered that night. I'm guessing they used different words

than the angel used. They probably didn't have a heavenly choir of angels backing them up, but something about the truth of what they said captured your heart and began the process of filling you up with the same joy that filled the shepherds and millions of other believers down through the centuries.

And it's the same joy that when you live it out in your every day life is just as astonishing as a sky full of angels singing to a bunch of lowly shepherds. Let me share with you how angels visited a woman back in 1960. She writes:

In September 1960, I woke up one morning with six hungry babies and just 75 cents in my pocket. Their father was gone. The boys ranged from three months to seven years; their sister was two. Their Dad had never been much more than a presence they feared. Whenever they heard his tires crunch on the gravel driveway they would scramble to hide under their beds. He did manage to leave 15 dollars a week to buy groceries. Now that he had decided to leave, there would be no more beatings, but no food either.

As far as I knew there was no welfare system in effect in southern Indiana at that time, I certainly knew nothing about it. I scrubbed the kids until they looked brand new and then put on my best homemade dress. I loaded them into the rusty old 51 Chevy and drove off to find a job. The seven of us went to every factory, store and restaurant in our small town. No luck. The kids stayed, crammed into the car and tried to be quiet while I tried to convince whomever would listen that I was willing to learn or do anything. I had to have a job. Still no luck.

The last place we went to, just a few miles out of town, was an old Root

Beer Barrel drive-in that had been converted to a truck stop. It was called the Big Wheel. An old lady named Granny owned the place and she peeked out of the window from time to time at all those kids. She needed someone on the graveyard shift, 11 at night until seven in the morning. She paid 65 cents an hour and I could start that night. I raced home and called the teenager down the street that baby-sat for people. I bargained with her to come and sleep on my sofa for a dollar a night. She could arrive with her pajamas on and the kids would already be asleep. This seemed like a good arrangement to her, so we made a deal. That night when and the little ones and I knelt to say our prayers we all thanked God for finding Mommy a job. And so I started at the Big Wheel. When I got home in the mornings I woke the baby-sitter up and sent her home with one dollar of my tip money-fully half of what I averaged every night.

As the weeks went by, heating bills added another strain to my meager wage. The tires on the old Chevy had the consistency of penny balloons and began to leak. I had to fill them with air on the way to work and again every morning before I could go home.

One bleak fall morning, I dragged myself to the car to go home and found four tires in the back seat. New tires! There was no note, no nothing, just those beautiful brand new tires. Had angels taken up residence in Indiana? I wondered.

I made a deal with the owner of the local service station. In exchange for his mounting the new tires, I would clean up his office. By this time I was now working six nights instead of five and it still wasn't enough. Christmas was coming and I knew there would be no money for toys for the kids. I found a can of red paint and started repairing and painting

some old toys. Then I hid them in the basement so there would be something for Santa to deliver on Christmas morning. Clothes were a worry too. I was sewing patches on top of patches on the boys pants and soon they would be too far gone to repair.

On Christmas Eve the usual customers were drinking coffee in the Big Wheel. These were the truckers, Les, Frank, and Jim, and a state trooper named Joe. A few musicians were hanging around after a gig at the Legion and were dropping nickels in the pinball machine. The regulars all just sat around and talked through the wee hours of the morning and then left to get home before the sun came up. When it was time for me to go home at seven o'clock on Christmas morning I hurried to the car.

I was hoping the kids wouldn't wake up before I managed to get home and get the presents from the basement and place them under the tree. (We had cut down a small cedar tree by the side of the road down by the dump.) It was still dark and I couldn't see much, but there appeared to be some dark shadows in the car-or was that just a trick of the night? Something certainly looked different, but it was hard to tell what. When I reached the car I peered warily into one of the side windows. Then my jaw dropped in amazement. My old battered Chevy was full-full to the top with boxes of all shapes and sizes. I quickly opened the driver's side door, scrambled inside and kneeled in the front facing the back seat. Reaching back, I pulled off the lid of the top box. Inside was a whole case of little blue jeans, sizes 2-10! I looked inside another box: It was full of shirts to go with the jeans. Then I peeked inside some of the other boxes:

There were candy and nuts and bananas and bags of groceries. There

was an enormous ham for baking, and canned vegetables and potatoes. There was pudding and Jell-O and cookies, pie filling and flour. There was a whole bag of laundry supplies and cleaning items. And there were five toy trucks and one beautiful little doll. As I drove back through empty streets as the sun slowly rose on the most amazing Christmas Day of my life, I was sobbing with gratitude. And I will never forget the joy on the faces of my little ones that precious morning. Yes, there were angels in Indiana that long-ago December. And they all hung out at the Big Wheel truck stop.

I BELIEVE IN ANGELS! They live next door, around the corner, work in your office, patrol your neighborhood, call you at midnight to hear you laugh and listen to you cry, teach your children, and you see them everyday without even knowing it!

2000 years ago, the angels came to shepherds to bring them incredible news of one who would change the way we think about nearly everything. That same good news has been spreading ever since. In 1960 angels came to an impoverished woman and let her know that she was not alone in her struggle. Many of you have had a hand in spreading the same good news in your own way as well and you have experienced the joy that fills you up; the joy that comes just as much from sharing as from receiving the love of Christ.

The angels are still out there, you know; sharing the joy and caring for the needs of others. In fact, I would guess that these days there are far more angels than even the heavenly host the scripture tells us about. Some are singing but most are simply passing along the joy that they have found in knowing in their own personal way, that little baby who was born to a virgin in a stable, and laid in a manger. Pretty astonishing huh? Amen.