

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS”

4. Joy

(Luke 2:8-20)

Pastor John Hart

December 22, 2019

Becky & I fly out on Christmas morning to join our kids in Virginia to celebrate Christmas. As we've been getting ready, Becky asked me to bring along a DVD of some old Christmas home movies.

The clip I'm bringing is from Christmas 1993. It's our first Christmas in Montclair, NJ, and our kids are the perfect Christmas ages – Brian is 9, Carolyn is 6, and Emily is 3.

The clip begins with me standing with one foot in the living room and one foot in the front hallway. I start with a close up of the star on top of the Christmas tree, and then pan down to get the entire tree, the presents underneath, the decorations on the fireplace mantelpiece, Kenny G's Christmas album playing on the stereo. Then I pan up the stairway that leads to the kids' bedrooms. Becky is holding the kids back until she gets the cue from me, but somehow three-year-old Emily has already snuck half-way down, with a mischievous look on her face, determined to be the first one to the presents – Emily was always that way. Then I give Becky the signal – “Unleash the hounds!” – and Emily jumps down the stairs, followed by Brian & Carolyn careening around the stairway turn. Brian delivers a perfect hip-check on Carolyn, so Brian enters the living room second, and he & Emily run straight for the presents. But Carolyn takes about 3 steps into the living room and then comes to a stop. She takes it all in – the stereo's playing Christmas carols, the tree's lit up, there are presents everywhere. And then Carolyn throws her arms up in the air and lets out a squeal of delight.

The reason I love this clip is that Carolyn isn't squealing because she's thinking, “Look at all the presents I got.” No, it's the whole thing that has overwhelmed her. Of our three kids, Carolyn was always the “Christmas Wonder Child” – Carolyn loved *everything* about Christmas:

- She loved opening her Advent calendar each day.
- She loved being someone's Secret Santa every day in December.
- She loved helping decorate the house and the tree.
- She loved all the baking of cookies and breads that we would drop off for friends.
- She loved listening to Christmas carols and singing Christmas carols.

- She loved the church Christmas pageant, and loved playing every part from a sheep to a star to an angel to a shepherd to a king to being Mary one year.
- She loved her Christmas clothes and Christmas sweaters.
- And, of course, she loved getting presents, too.

So, there's Carolyn, right at the start of the celebration of Christmas, and she just rears back and lets out a six-year-old squeal of pure, unadulterated joy.

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Listen to the word of God from the second chapter of *The Gospel of Luke*:

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior — yes, the Messiah, the Lord — has been born today in Bethlehem! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of the armies of heaven praising God and saying,

*"Glory to God in highest heaven,
and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."*

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."

They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

We know this story. The shepherds have rounded up the sheep for the night, one or two of them are keeping guard around a small fire, the rest are sleeping when **BAM**: an angel, of all things, appears to them, wakes them up and lights them up and scares the hoo-haw out of them. And the angel says to the shepherds, "Don't be afraid, even though you've never seen an angel before. I'm not an *avenging* angel – I'm a *messenger* angel. And I've got a message for you. Good news. Incredible news. Good news of great joy – literally "mega-joy" – for you and for everyone on earth. Something just happened – a boy was born in Bethlehem. But this isn't some ordinary baby – he's the Savior of the world, he's the Anointed One of God, this boy is the Lord."

And then an even bigger **BAM** as a battalion of angels suddenly appears in response to this good news of mega-joy. It's not clear if the angel army was

traveling along with the messenger angel or whether they just burst through the fabric of heaven at his announcement. And even though the angel army already knows this news, because it is good news of a mega-joy they break into praise: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04KcKPoTmBU> 0:00-0:26.

And as soon as the angels are done rejoicing, the shepherds are up and moving and heading down to Bethlehem to check it out. They find the newborn baby that's in a manger. And they all crowd around Mary and Joseph, and they're all talking at once, interrupting each other, telling about the angel and the good news and the mega-joy and the singing and praising. And after over-staying their welcome by a good bit, the shepherds are still all fired up, and they head back to their sheep "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen".

* * *

This morning we're focusing on God's Christmas gift of joy. And here's what the shepherd's story tells us about Christmas joy: Christmas joy is really noisy.

Now, it's true that December can sometimes be really noisy in an annoying way. This past week, as you've been rushing through your "got to do" list to get everything ready for Tuesday evening, you've been rushing around in a noisy world:

- Christmas music blaring in the malls.
- Cars "communicating" as you negotiate parking spaces.
- An excessive brassiness on TV commercials stoking the feeding frenzy of last-minute shopping.

This is the not-so-nice noisiness of Christmas, an unpleasant loudness as secular Christmas is observed. Because December is a noisy month – parties, loud clothing, "Jingle Bells" playing at the malls, neighbors who go way overboard with their outdoor lights, a big, huge, barely digestible Christmas dinner.

But here's the thing – even though it's not always well-focused, I would argue that all this noise is true to the spirit of Christmas. Because it's Christmas, so it's time to rejoice. You see, I think that we Christians, as we try to negotiate secular Christmas, we're tempted to over-react. When December gets too loud and brassy, we can get overly-pious and turn our backs on all the noise. Instead, we try to focus on the peace and stillness of the Christmas season – captured perfectly in our Christmas Eve services – because that feels like the right mood, the better mood, to celebrate Christ's birth.

But that's not how Luke tells the story. For Luke, it's just the opposite. Everything started out quiet and peaceful – "baaah". But then God sent his angel, and the volume got cranked way up:

- There was the trumpet blast announcement by the angel with the good news of mega-joy.
- There was the 10,000-strong angel army bursting into song.
- There were the shepherds, all at once, blurting out their story of the angel and the angel army to Mary and Joseph.
- And there were the shepherds, all along the way back, “glorifying and praising God.”

Wouldn't it be funny if Christmas, for Christians, has turned into a battle between “Silent Night” and “Joy to the World”? Because if that's where the battle lines are drawn, I'm on the “Joy to the World” side!

Because all of this noise at Christmas is about joy. Luke's shepherd story is about joy and noise. It's like my Carolyn on Christmas morning – she's just overcome with it all, it's all just too good to be true, it's something that she's not able to contain, and so she just throws up her arms and lets out a whoop of joy.

It's the noisy Christmas joy:

- God came into a world of darkness and lit it up with light.
- God left his throne in heaven and moved right into our neighborhood.
- God became a human being such that now when He loves us, He loves us from the inside out.

This is good news, it's the best news that's ever come down the pike, it's good news of mega-joy.

* * *

At our church in New Jersey, we had an 11:00 Christmas Eve service. And it was your typical service of candlelight, readings and carols, much like our service here at Liberty. Each year the church organist, Barbara, would hire a special musician to play an anthem during the service and to play for 20 minutes before the service started, because Christmas Eve is always packed and people always come extra early.

Well, Barbara had mixed success our first couple of years there. She hired a trumpeter one year, but he wasn't very good. She hired a flute duet the next year, and they were OK. But the third year she hired a brass quartet – two trumpets, a trombone, and a tuba. Her explicit instructions to them were 1) to prepare an anthem for the service and 2) to play 20 minutes of prelude “Christmas music”.

Well, something got lost in the translation. You have to picture a very traditional church – gothic sanctuary, stained-glass windows, a 25-member robed choir, me in my clergy robe seated right up front, looking directly out at the congregation, with

the brass quartet set up in the rear balcony. Right at 10:40, the brass quartet began the prelude by playing – “Frosty the Snowman.” “Frosty the Snowman”! I’m sitting there, staring at the balcony, thinking to myself, “O my God!” I hoped it was a one-off and they’d transition into something like “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” But no. Next up on the playlist was “Jingle Bells”. Then “Deck the Halls”. Then “Have a Holly, Jolly Christmas”, “Santa Claus is Coming to Town”, “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus”. It was a train wreck! It was exactly what we did *NOT* need to prepare us to celebrate with quiet solemnity the birth of Christ on Christmas Eve.

But, 24 years later – now that I’ve finally calmed down – here’s my thought: At least the brass quartet had the right spirit. Yes, the lyrics were a complete swing and a miss, but they were a brass quartet – they weren’t singing “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus” (thank God). No, they were playing music. They were playing jolly music, happy music, noisy music, joyful music. In fact, they were playing exactly the kind of music the shepherds were humming on their way back from the manger.

* * *

Friends, Christmas is about Jesus.

- Which means Christmas is about good news.
- Which means Christmas is about mega-joy.
- Which means Christmas is about praise and noise.

Remember – that’s what the Grinch hated most about Christmas. More than the decorations and the feasting and gifts and the toys – it was the noise, because it was the noise of joy.

So, don’t out-pious yourself this Christmas. Celebrate, rejoice, because Christmas is about flat-out, unfiltered, joy.

So, instead of closing in silent prayer – let’s make some noise!

[CUE: “Joy to the World”]

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