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“Joy that Overcomes Despair”

Luke 2:8-20

Brett Younger
Senior Minister

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In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, “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. This will be a sign for you: You will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom God favors!”*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”

So, they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:8-20

Chevrolet has a new Christmas commercial. It is almost too long to be a commercial—five and a half minutes. The ad, “A Holiday to Remember,” begins

with a family gathering at the grandparents, though the grandmother, who has Alzheimer's, is in another room away from the others. She has a vacant look on her face. The grandfather explains to his daughter that on most days her mother does not remember his name. This leads to a granddaughter deciding to take her grandma out for a drive in grandma's blue 1972 Chevrolet Suburban.

Tracy says, "Let's make today a good day,"

She drives through their small town while John Denver's *Sunshine on My Shoulders* plays on the 8-track. They drive by grandmother's childhood home and her high school. You can see the grandmother begin to remember. She starts to sing.

Tracy points to the drive-in theater, "That's where grandpa kissed you for the first time."

Grandma says, "No. I kissed him. He was too shy."

Then she shouts, "I need to see Bill."

They return to the house, where the longtime couple hold each other. They kiss with tears streaming down their faces. She is back and they are together. He has her with him, even if it is just for a moment.

Social media is filled with people writing, "Tears streaming down my face," "boohooing like a baby," and "grab a Kleenex and watch."

The ad has been watched over 800,000 times. Chevrolet worked on the ad with the Alzheimer's Association. They think of it as an example of reminiscence therapy, which works, sometimes. It is not a cure, but memories are powerful.

Like anyone with a heart, I cried the first time I saw it,

and the second time. It is a great ad. I really hate it. 6.7 million Americans are living with Alzheimer's. My mother has Alzheimer's. My mom loved life and made the rest of us love it, too.

My mom was smart, salutatorian at her high school. She only made one B at seminary. My dad knew how lucky he was to marry her. She spoiled my father and my brother. It is amazing I turned out as well as I did.

She was a great mother. She read to her children. She played with her children. She stared at her children from the choir during worship.

When mom laughed, which she did a lot, she would begin to shake. Her voice would go to a pitch audible only to dogs. Her face would turn a beautiful shade of red and her bright blue eyes would start dancing. Joy was in the air around her.

My father died in January and I miss him, but not as much as I miss my mother. She is with my brother and his family in Colorado. *We Facetime.*

Mom repeats our names, but she does not know who we are. Marshal says she does not know anyone. She gets frustrated and does not know why. She has not walked in two years. She is not much like herself.

We try the stuff in the Chevy commercial. We show her pictures of people she does not recognize. A year ago, she could sing *Amazing Grace* and *When We All Get to Heaven*, but that does not work anymore. John Denver definitely would not work, so the commercial is one of many reasons I will not be buying a Chevy Suburban.

This has been a tough year for a lot of us. We hope Christmas will make us feel better. We play Christmas

songs. Darlene Love's *Baby, Please Come Home* never gets old. Wham's *Last Christmas* does get old.

We eat cookies after dinner, between lunch and dinner, and between breakfast and lunch. We eat cookies for breakfast when no one is watching. We try to make gingerbread houses with our children, but end up making gingerbread houses for our children. We will try again next year.

We watch *It's a Wonderful Life* and wonder why Uncle Billy was not being treated for Alzheimer's. We do not go looking for *Elf*, but if it is on, we watch for a few minutes: "Son of a nutcracker."

We make origami star decorations for the tree. A few of us miss those horrible silver icicles. We invite relatives to visit and secretly hope some of them do not come. We do something for someone else, someone we do not know—toy drive, clothes drive. Once in a while, we try to make our family remember the real story, "Before we eat, we're going to read the story of the first Christmas from Luke, chapter two." Most children are not as delighted by this as we might wish.

We want Christmas to be magic. We want to hear bells. We want it to snow. We want everything to be wonderful. Lots of the fun stuff is genuinely fun, but it is, fun. It does not last as long as we want it to.

We have moments when our tinsel gets tangled. We sit in front of a dead tree eating candy out of socks. Real joy is elusive. At Christmas, sick people are still sick, lonely people are still lonely, and tired people are still tired. Charlie Brown speaks for a lot of people: "I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming, but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel."

I just don't understand Christmas, I guess. I like getting presents and sending Christmas cards and decorating trees and all that, but I'm still not happy."

If we are usually unhappy, frustrated, or cynical, then the week after Christmas, we will probably be unhappy, frustrated, or cynical. If we do not like our job, if we would like a better place to live, if we are bored with our lives, we cannot give ourselves the joy that will change everything.

The shepherds do not like their job. They do not have a place to live. They are homeless. They sleep outside. They are bored and worn down. They are sad that they have to work on Christmas—even though they do not know it is Christmas.

The religious people do not like shepherds. The shepherds are not allowed in the temple. They think shepherds are dishonest no accounts who graze their disgusting animals on other people's land.

On this cold night, the shepherds pull their wool caps down over their ears. The campfire is low, because no one wants to go for more wood. The wind makes the shepherds too miserable to think about how hungry they are. They divvy up the shifts and try to sleep. They have hard, solitary lives.

God turns to the angel and says, "Gabriel, people need to know what I'm up to. Go tell a few."

Near daybreak, without any warning, the air is alive with an angel whose voice sounds like a flute. The shepherds—who are used to fighting wolves and poachers—are terrified.

The angel tries to calm them down, "Don't be afraid." Angels say that a lot. "I bring you good news of a great joy,

not just for you, but for everybody. Today, your hope was born, but you don't have to take my word for it. Go and see for yourself. Here's the sign that I'm telling the truth. You'll find the baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in, of all things, a manger."

What kind of sign is that? Not a star, like the wise men get, but a rag-wrapped boy in a feed box. The sign sounds like a joke—not what you would expect for the Messiah.

The backup choir cannot resist an encore. The sky splits open, and like a thousand falling stars, brilliant, dazzling light pours down. The angel choir fills the sky.

Trumpets overwhelm the flutes as they sing, "Glory to God in the heavenly heights, peace to all with whom God is pleased."

The song ends as suddenly as it began. The sky closes, leaving a deep blue silence. The shepherds do not speak for a while, but then they hurry to see what has happened.

As they make their way, they ask: "Why did this happen to us? Why would heaven sing for shepherds? Why didn't the angels go to Jerusalem where the important people live?"

But they hurry through the snow down the hill. They might have heard a baby cry. They stagger through the stable door and see the baby lying in the kind of manger in which they feed their sheep. Maybe it is their manger.

The baby is just waking up. He is lying on a blanket on the straw. His mother picks him up. The shepherds start rummaging through their pockets for a baby gift—a woolen scarf, a ball, something. They tell Mary and Joseph about the angels. They tell other people, too, who act amazed, but then forget about it.

What would it be like to carry that joy around with you the rest of your life? The shepherds got to see it.

They were there. It happened to them.

They did not have to be told about it. They did not have to read about it. They did not have to figure it out. They did not have to prepare. They did not have to work for it. They did not do anything.

For the rest of their lives, they had this experience of joy that no one could take away. There were nights when they were not sleeping well, dealing with the flu, feeling old and left out and on those nights, they would remember this night and feel that joy again. No matter what happened, they would always have this joy that would never leave them.

There is not a word in the Bible about anyone doing anything to deserve the joy of Christmas. We cannot work hard enough to earn the joy that comes as free as the snow falls from the sky. We cannot be successful enough to force ourselves to feel joy. We cannot buy what we can only be given.

Our mistake is thinking we are in charge, when our job is to recognize joy when it shows up. God will astonish us with a moment when we open a gift, and pretend it is what we want, but we cannot imagine how the giver could ever picture us in a fedora. A moment when we see our brother and sister at peace—and know that it must be divine intervention. A moment when our child gives us a handmade Christmas card with a big glittery silver star on the front—and, for reasons we cannot explain—our eyes mist up. A moment when we think of someone who was with us last year, but is not this year. And along with the sadness we have gotten used to feeling at their absence, we are surprised to feel joy for the time we had with them. A moment when your mother who has Alzheimer's smiles. You are not sure she is remembering anything, but you

A moment when we can almost hear the songs of angels, and cannot figure out why it would happen to us.

We cannot make Christmas joyful, but we can take the spotlight off the extras and look for the star. We give up our expectations of how we can make ourselves happy and open our hearts. We push aside our cynicism and let God help us feel joy again. We listen for the songs God is always singing, and join the chorus.

We remember that God comes in babies who are easily ignored, hungry people we seldom feed, and lonely people we barely hear. On that first Christmas night, the shepherds discovered that God was with them. We do not just need to remember their story, we need for it to be our story, because Christmas happens when we are awake enough to feel God's joy.

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