

[1]
***Living in HisStory: Revealing the True Wonder of Who God Is
Joy for All People***
Luke 2:1-20
December 17, 2017, Jeff Germs

In Leadership Journal a few years ago someone sent in this story about their niece who was in a Christmas play at her school.

"My 5-year-old niece, Olivia, and her best friend, Claire, were participating in a nativity play at school. Claire was playing Mary, and Olivia was an angel. Before the show, a young boy was going around the dressing room repeating, "I'm a sheep, what are you?"

Each child responded politely, including Olivia, who proudly declared she was an angel. The boy then turned to Claire, still struggling into her costume with her mother's help, and repeated the question to her: "I'm a sheep, what are you?" Claire simply said, "I'm Mary."

Realizing he was face to face with a lead character, he felt he needed to justify his own role. "It's hard being a sheep, you know," he said with all the seriousness of a 5-year-old actor with a big part. Claire's equally serious response was humorously profound. "Yes," said Claire innocently, "but it's also hard being a virgin, you know."

That is the understatement of the millennium, and especially in Mary's case. We are going to take a look at the passage in Luke 2 that describes the birth of Jesus. I want to look a little closer at his mother, Mary this morning and her attitude. She seemed to be one of those people who went through life joyfully, no matter how tough the obstacles she faced.

Have you ever met people like that? They are great to be around and their joy seems to rub off on the people around them. That is what God has called us to. I'll be the first to admit, though, that it is difficult to maintain a joyful, grateful heart when things are not going my way.

[2]

But I really do believe it is possible, by the grace of God, to cultivate that kind of heart attitude with some practice and cooperating with the Holy Spirit.

Let's set the scene of Luke 2.

Remember, everything we have looked at in this series since September has been moving to this point where the Messiah would be revealed. Last week we looked at that a little closer in the genealogy of Jesus where we saw very clearly that all of the Old Testament narrative leads to Jesus. We looked at the scarlet thread that weaves its way through the pages of Scripture to its climax right here at the announcement of Jesus as Messiah.

Luke 1 recounts Gabriel, God's angel, making some announcements to various people to prepare the way for Jesus. The first person he encountered was Mary, a young girl, probably in her early teens, in the tiny village of Nazareth. She was set to be married to Joseph, a carpenter, and a fine young humble man of integrity.

Gabriel announced to Mary, who was a virgin, by the way, that she was she was going to become pregnant, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary was obviously taken aback by this pronouncement.

[3]

Luke 1:29–38 (NLT)

29 Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. 30 “Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God! 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!”

[4]

34 Mary asked the angel, “But how can this happen? I am a virgin.”

Mary was no dummy. She knew how this was supposed to work. She had had that conversation with her mother about the birds and the bees. She knew it was impossible for her to be pregnant.

35 The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.

This revelation that Mary was going to become pregnant as a virgin, and would give birth to the Messiah would be pretty tough to explain. It would look like Mary had sex outside of marriage and had cheated on her fiancé. She would always be known in their small village as ‘that woman.’ This was a pretty big deal. No wonder she was confused and disturbed by the news.

[5]

God knew she was going to need some encouragement and affirmation that she was not going to be alone in this. ***30 “Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God!***

Let’s stop here for a minute. What this looks like, at first glance, is that Mary was “good enough” for God to choose her. It looks like she had found favour with God because she was upright in character, or that she was the kind of person who could do the job God had called her to. “I’ve been watching you, Mary, and I can see that you have all the right skills and experience on your resumé to carry and raise the Messiah, and you are more nice than naughty, so I am choosing you.”

That’s not at all what this means. That word 'favour' is the Greek word *charis*. It is many times translated grace, unmerited favour. What Gabriel meant when he said that Mary had found God’s favour was, “Don’t worry, Mary, God is going to give you all the grace you need to do this very difficult task. No, *you* are not up to it, but God is. I know you don’t feel adequate. That’s okay. As a matter of fact, that is good. He is going to give you all the grace you need to do what he’s called you to do, not because you are good, but because he is good.”

That is exactly what God says to us when he asks us to do something. Have you ever felt the nudge of the Holy Spirit to do something hard and then thought, “I can’t do that. I don’t have what it takes. I don’t have the gifts. I’m afraid.”

Remember Moses in Exodus? He made up all kinds of excuses why God should choose someone other than him.

Here's the deal.

[6]

God calls us to move outside our comfort zones so he can give us his grace, so he gets the glory.

It has to be that way. I don't have what it takes to do the job God has called me to. I am reminded of that every day. But, I am also reminded of the fact that God has exactly what I need to do the job he's called me to.

Gabriel continued:

[7]

³⁶ What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. ³⁷ For the word of God will never fail." ³⁸ Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her.

This is a very amazing response from Mary. She knew the way forward would not be easy and still she said, "Yes." She knew it would not be easy; however, she had no idea just how hard it would be. She didn't know that she would have to travel by donkey while being very pregnant. I have no idea how you women do it. Women are so much tougher than men in so many ways.

Mary was not only very pregnant, but I can only imagine how uncomfortable it would have been to ride a donkey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, while pregnant. That's about 150 km. Mary was a very determined woman. And then once her baby was born, she and her new family would have to run for their lives to get away from the deranged paranoid King Herod who wanted to kill her baby because he had been told that this baby was the Messiah.

When Mary said yes to Gabriel, she knew the way forward wouldn't be easy, but she had no idea that her son would grow up and gather a huge following of disciples. She had no idea that the entire Jewish religious system of that day would conspire against him. She had no idea that he would be painfully crucified on a cross and that he would die there for the sins of the world, and that he would be raised from the dead three days later. She knew the way forward was going to be hard, but she really had no idea just how hard.

Have you ever gone through something very difficult and when you were in the middle of it, said, "If I had known it was going to be this tough, I never would have agreed to do it"? That is Mary's experience to the extreme.

Gabriel also told Mary that her relative Elizabeth, who was past child bearing age and without children, was going to have a child as well. That child would be John the Baptist whom God would use to prepare the people for Jesus' ministry.

Armed with this news she went to visit Elizabeth.

[8]

Luke 1:39–45 (NLT)

³⁹ *A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town ⁴⁰ where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.*

[9]

⁴² *Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, "God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. ⁴³ Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? ⁴⁴ When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. ⁴⁵ You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said."*

I want you to notice the word **blessed** here. It's used three times.

[10]

But they are actually two different words in the Greek. The first two times it is used in verse 42, "**God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed.** The word **eulogeo** (yoo-lo-ge'-o) in Greek is used here. Can you guess which English word derives from this? (eulogy) It means **to speak well of, to religiously bless, to thank or invoke a benediction upon, or to praise.**

So, when we do a eulogy at a funeral we say words that speak well of the deceased – words that bless. So, in verse 42 what Elizabeth is saying is that she has heard good things about Mary and the baby that she is carrying. She is eulogizing, speaking blessing to her.

In verse 45 the word "**blessed**" shows up again.

[11]

In this case though it is a different Greek work. It's the word **makarios** which is translated 'fortunate' or 'happy'.

It has the idea of a deep seated joy... something that is not based on circumstances. And that is the same word Jesus used in the beatitudes in Matthew 5. "**Blessed are the poor in spirit..., blessed are those who mourn..., blessed are the meek...**"

And finally, in verse 10,

[12]

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness..."

[13]

Matthew 5:11-12 (NLT)

¹¹ **"God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. ¹² Be happy about it! Be very glad!** [be exceedingly joyful] **For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way.**

Does that sound crazy to you? Could Jesus actually mean that we can be exceedingly joyful when people mock and persecute us, or when they say all kinds of evil things about us? If that is true, then this blessing here is obviously something deeper than the happiness we experience when things are going our way.

[14]

So, here's the difficult question for us this morning; **how can we have this true joy even when life is hard?** How can we have true joy when we know that our circumstances are not what we want them to be? When our relationships are falling apart? When we don't know our future? When we don't know how we are going to make ends meet financially? How do we have that deep seated joy when we have to go through another lonely Christmas...? Or whatever your situation is. Where does that deep seated joy come from? The secret is in what Elizabeth said to Mary.

[15]

45 You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said."

I want you to imagine that God is speaking to you right now. He's telling you he has a task for you to do. Should you choose to accept this mission you will go through some very difficult times. As a matter of fact you will go through times that will be so difficult that you will want to forfeit your very life just to make it end. You will be publicly humiliated and ostracized. People will actually think that you are a bad person even though you are doing God's will. There will be long periods of uncertainty in which you will wonder where God is, and perhaps the times of uncertainty will eclipse the times of clarity.

You have a choice. God says, "This is my will for you. If you choose my way you will have many difficulties, but you will also have the joy of knowing that you are part of my greater plan. You will have the joy of knowing that your life is in the palm of my all-powerful hand. And most importantly, through it all, you will have the joy of knowing me, the God who created you with purpose and for a purpose, intimately.

Or you could choose the easy road. You could go on with life as usual, but knowing that you missed an opportunity to be a part of something that I, the God who created the universe, the God who infinitely and unconditionally loves you, the God who has enough grace for you, am doing in this world."

What would you do? Would you avoid the pain and take the easy way? Or would you take God's way? Now, this sounds like a hypothetical question, but it is actually what he has called each of us to. Life is not easy. Things do not always go our way. Many times a day we have choices to make about our attitude when things don't go as we planned. We can choose joy, or we can choose self-pity. The choice is ours.

I know that I make it sound much easier than it is. For some people, depending on your history, and your emotional or neurological makeup, this is going to be much more difficult than for others, but with practice and training with Jesus it is possible. I know because I am someone who has struggled with deep depression in my past.

A couple years ago I read an excerpt to you from a book called, *Champagne for the Soul*, by Mike Mason. I first read the book when it was first published over ten years ago and it is one of the things that has helped me overcome depression and be on my way to becoming a joyful, grateful person. I'm going to read it again because I think it's very appropriate.

Mason wrote the book as part of a ninety-day experiment to see if it was possible for him to be joyful each and every day. To be clear, he admitted that he was someone who had always struggled with depression, so this was not an easy exercise for him.

Here's a quote from the book.

[16]

But you object: I can't be happy, because I'm sick, or, I can't be happy, because my husband has left me, or, I can't be happy, because I'm sad. Don't you understand? Happiness is the very weapon you need to surmount all these conditions. Happiness doesn't come to those who sit around waiting until life gets better. Happiness comes to those who grab hold of its proffered hand in order to rise up and conquer their struggles.

[17]

The one prerequisite for happiness is the acceptance of whatever is. Am I over tired? Fine. Sick? Very well, then. Unemployed? Okay, I'll work with that. To accept what is doesn't mean I do not try to change it. All change, however, begins with acceptance. I cannot change or heal what I do not acknowledge.

[18]

We're so sure we'd be happy if only we could get free of our troubles, but going through life without troubles is not an option. While trouble-free times may come, at best they endure briefly, and they may even create a false sense of security. As it turns out, being happy has nothing to do with having trouble or not having it. Rather it's one's attitude toward trouble that makes all the difference.

[19]

Life is full of problems. Learn to be happy in spite of the problems, because they aren't going away. Yes, many will go away, but only to be replaced by other problems. Be happy with the problems you have, because the ones that are coming may be worse. Meanwhile the feast of life has been prepared just for you. Sit down and enjoy.¹

Let's look at Mary again.

[20]

God sent his angel Gabriel to her and asked her to carry the Messiah. Mary was a virgin. She, at least, knew some of the implications of God's offer. She knew that to go along with it meant that people would look at her as if she had been unfaithful to her fiancé. Back then having a baby outside of marriage could very likely have meant a death sentence by stoning.

Mary was a young woman, probably in her early teens, with a bright future ahead of her. She had plans. She was pledged to be married to this upstanding young Jewish man named Joseph, and they were now in the year long betrothal stage of the Jewish marriage tradition. She probably had dreams of having a normal life – a dozen kids... a little house in the suburbs... a couple of the latest model donkeys parked in the driveway, maybe out for tea with the neighbour ladies a couple times a week.

Mary was of upstanding character. She wanted to honour God with her life. And then she gets a curve ball thrown at her. The angel Gabriel shows up to announce to her that she is pregnant, or going to be very shortly.

Let's fast forward now. Both Joseph and Mary have been made aware by Gabriel of God's plans to use them. They have each accepted the assignment knowing that the way forward is going to be fraught with uncertainty and hardship, but not even coming close to comprehending the full extent of what would lie ahead.

¹ Mike Mason, *Champagne for the Soul*, 2006

[21]

Luke 2:1–20 (NLT)

1 At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. 2 (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. 4 And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee.

[22]

5 He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. 7 She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them. 8 That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep.

[23]

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!

[24]

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."

[25]

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.

[26]

18 All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, 19 but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. 20 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.

Our Advent theme for today is joy. Joy is one of the gifts that God has offered the world through Jesus.

[27]

It's amazing; when you look at the people God chooses to do his work he typically doesn't choose people you would expect. Jesus chose a bunch of no account fishermen to be in his inner circle while he was on earth.

Remember the genealogy of Jesus and who is included in it? You would not be very proud to mention many of those names if they were a part of your family tree.

He chose some lowly shepherds to announce the coming of the Messiah. Shepherds were not at all well thought of in those days. But, God chose *them* to receive the message of the Messiah from a host of angels. He chose a young virgin girl and her fiancé to take the most important role ever in the history of the world so far, to give birth to and raise the Messiah. That's a pretty important role.

[28]

There was nothing special about Mary. She was not sinless. She was just as broken as you and me. But, she had a humble heart towards God. She believed him and stepped out in faith. *She was willing.*

God, for whatever reason, chose Mary and gave her the grace she needed to do what he called her to do. And here's the deal, he chooses you as well.

I hope that's as encouraging to you as it is to me. God chooses you, and if he chooses you he will give you all the grace you need. He will give you exactly what you need so you can joyfully do the work he's called you to. And the joy, is in believing that God will do what he says, and walking forward in faith. That is where joy comes from.

Look at what the angel said to the shepherds who were shaking in their sandals when they saw the angels.

[29]

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!

Part of the good news Jesus brings is that joy is possible for all people, no matter what you are experiencing. It *is* possible to choose the joy of Jesus no matter what.

After this announcement by the angel, a whole army of angels joined in and showed themselves to the shepherds, praising God in front of them. I cannot even fathom what that would have been like, but it must have been spectacular. It would have been a sight they would never forget.

When the angels left, the shepherds went to find Jesus. Here's what happened.

[30]

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...

That is what will happen when we have encounters with Jesus. It is so life changing that our only response will be to tell someone else about our experience with him.

God has chosen you and me. And if he has chosen us, he will give us the grace we need. That should fill us with joy that overflows and gets on those around us. Let's spread the word and watch what God does.

Advent Reading
Joy
by Ruthie Germa

This is the third Sunday of Advent, celebrating Jesus' arrival on earth, when he 'moved into our neighborhood.' Today we are lighting the candle of joy.

As with hope and peace, God has had joy in his vocabulary for as long as he has been communicating with us. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word 'simkaw' means 'glad, merry rejoicing,' even 'glee and mirth.' The New Testament words mean 'cheer, delight, gladness,' or 'exultation, welcome, jump for joy.' It all certainly sounds celebratory!

The angel announced Jesus' arrival with the words "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ, the Messiah, the Lord" (1). There was great celebration in the skies, and the shepherds ran to welcome the Messiah, glorifying and praising God.

This is what happens when Jesus comes into our world.

Think of the joy the Samaritan woman felt when Jesus went purposefully to meet her at the well that day in Samaria. He didn't write her off because of her past. Instead, he took time to meet with her, on purpose. He put his stamp of dignity and value on her life. He artfully crafted a conversation with her, patiently answering her concerns. He lovingly exposed her thirst for truth, meaning, and God. Then he astounded her with the words that he was who she was looking and longing for! She said, "I know the Messiah is coming. When he arrives, he will make sense of everything." He said, "It's me! I am the Messiah! I'm here. I came here especially to meet you" (2).

This is what Jesus wants to do with each one of us. He came to earth, on purpose, putting his stamp of dignity and value on our lives.

This interaction with Jesus changed the woman's life. She immediately went to share her discovery and her joy with her village. As a result, they too met Jesus, and welcomed him with joy.

As with hope and peace, the joy God gives affects us profoundly and affects our behaviour. It causes us to celebrate, and share our joy, and the one who gives it to us, with others.

God chose the lowly shepherds to announce Jesus' birth to. He chose this woman who felt so much regret, to meet with personally and announce that he was the Messiah. The result was joy. And he chooses us. He came to be with us, and give our lives his meaning and purpose.

1) Luke 2:10-11 NIV 2) John 4:25-26 Paraphrase mine 3)