

# **Trinity United Methodist Church**

**December 24, 2019**

**“Under Wraps: God Is Joy”**

**Pastor Dan Elmore**

## **Scripture: Luke 2:1-20**

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you; You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

## Sermon

Would you pray with me? God, we give thanks this night as we join together as family and friends here in Your home. As we come together, we acknowledge that we carry many joys and concerns in our hearts and minds this night. Hear us as we lift them to you in the silence of our hearts. We pray that you would send your healing touch upon those who need it the most; upon all who need it. We pray that you would send your peace which passes understanding and your spirit of comfort to the bereaved and those who especially miss someone close this Christmas. Speak to us by your holy spirit. Open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

So welcome home! Welcome home, especially if you are a first-time guest amongst us. If you have moved into the area recently; maybe you've lived in the area for a while. If you're looking for a church home, this is your answer from God: You have found it, you are home, and you are welcome. Welcome home.

If you're visiting from out of town, welcome home. For those who grew up in this church but haven't been home in a while, welcome home. And to you who we haven't seen in a while and those who we see all the time, welcome home.

Christmas is one of those times of year in which our thoughts turn to thoughts of home. Often we get caught up in the sentimentality of it, especially as crooners sing on the radio, "I'll be home for Christmas." When I think about Christmases from my childhood, especially, I remember when my grandfather and my aunt and uncle would come over for breakfast and exchanging of gifts on Christmas morning, and then my parents and I would load up and we would go to my other grandparents' home for the rest of the day. It was one of the only times of the year that I would see my cousins.

In previous churches in which I served, we actually celebrated Christmas early a few times, on Christmas "Adam." It's December 23<sup>rd</sup>...Christmas *Adam*, then Christmas *Eve*, get it? (Laughter) Ask people that are here every week; I'm full of this stuff all the time. But on those years, I enjoyed being able to go to my home church.

And home, for many, brings much joy. Home often means, and should mean, a place of belonging. But the thing about these memories that I carry from childhood and on through my life, is that if it weren't for pictures, I really couldn't begin to tell you, especially in any amount of detail, what these places and buildings looked like from my childhood. I couldn't begin to tell you about every gift that I ever received under the tree.

Because it's often not *what* we remember, but rather it's *who* we remember when we think of home. And it's *who* we remember that especially brings us joy.

And then there's the joy of making a new home and new relationships. I remember our first Christmas as a married couple, and babies' first Christmases as well.

For some, though, thoughts of home are not quite as joyful, especially as we lose loved ones through the years. Many live in outright poverty. Many live in homes of abuse and neglect. And when we or our loved ones experience this type of home, or even if we simply read about such situations, I hope it reminds us that there is truly only one home in which joy can always be found, and that is our spiritual home. The thing is, our spiritual home, as beautiful as it is, is not this space. It's not this or any particular church building. Our spiritual home is not connected to any particular pastor or any certain style of music or any kind of specific traditions.

Where might we find our true spiritual home? Where might we find true joy that lasts? It's the same questions that the people of God were struggling with when we open the first few pages of the New Testament. By the end of the Old Testament, most of God's people were in exile, far away from home, taken there by their enemies through a series of wars and foreign conquests. The Old Testament ends, though, with promises of restoration. Of God making things right, of God bringing His people back home and bringing great joy to His people. And the way God was going to do all this was through His Messiah, His Anointed One. God's King who would rule on David's throne forever. And he would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. When the Messiah was to come, God's people would know eternal joy at last.

But then some 400 years passed between the end of the Old and the beginning of the New Testaments, during which, for 400 years, God seemed largely absent. Some of God's people were living at home in towns like Nazareth and Bethlehem and in cities like Jerusalem, but home wasn't a place of joy. There was the Roman occupation and oppression. And the people of God were likely wondering, "When will we be at peace? When will we find joy? When will we be truly at home?"

And so in Luke 2 we read of a young couple, required by the government to leave their home. Tradition tells us that at least Mary rode on a donkey, but it's not mentioned in Scripture. And so they might have actually had to walk. A pregnant woman, walking that far...poor Joseph, *and* poor Mary. They came to Bethlehem, and they came seeking shelter and safety. And while they were there, the time came for the baby to be born. And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. Even in the midst of extenuating circumstances, it's amazing the joy that new life can bring. Yet this was not just any baby. This was the Son of the Most High, and he was to be named Jesus, for he

would save people from their sins. *Finally*, after 400 years, God was showing up again. After 400 years, God finally had something to say again. After 400 years, God had a birth announcement to make.

But in Luke, this announcement wasn't made to Caesar, or King Herod, or anyone else society would deem important. It was announced to the shepherds, living out in the fields and tending their sheep. The angel appeared and announced good news; good news that would cause *great joy* for all the people. For today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you. He is this long-awaited Messiah, the Lord.

Think about it. After 400 years of silence from God, this is good and joyful news indeed. And the good news is that in Jesus, God was making His home with us.

John chapter 1 speaks of Jesus as "the living word of God." And in verse 14 he says, "the word became flesh and made his *dwelling* among us." I love how Eugene Peterson puts it in his paraphrase, *The Message*. He says it this way: "The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood."

Friends, this is the meaning of Christmas. Not that we find the joy of our spiritual home in a church, or any special music, or any certain traditions, or even finding joy in a manger. But that through a manger in Bethlehem, the God of joy makes His home with us and through us and among us. Before we ever think of coming home to God, God always prepares that home for us in Jesus Christ. And that's the gift that God had kept under wraps until that first Christmas. And that's the gift, as I spoke with the children, that will stay under wraps until we choose to open it for ourselves, before any of the other gifts that we are looking forward to opening this Christmas.

There are many gifts I've thought would bring me joy over the years: An electronic keyboard, a Nintendo entertainment system (the original, with Duck Hunt), new clothes, new gadgets. And many of them did bring me joy. That is, as always, until the newness wore off. Until the next thing came along. There's many sources today to which we look for joy. Our jobs, our careers, money, food, drugs, illicit relationships and more. These, we think, might even provide us a sense of home. But all of these fall short of giving us true joy.

Saint Augustine said it this way: "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in You." Let me rephrase that. *You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are homeless, loveless, and joyless until we find home, and love, and joy in You, God.*

Friends, the gift of joy is wrapped tonight in swaddling clothes. God has made His home with us. Joy to the world, indeed. Welcome home. Amen.