



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector



JOY

Sermon for Christmas Eve, December 24, 2014, 5 pm service

Readings: Isaiah 9a:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

Sermon text: 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.

I invite the children to come forward and take a seat in the front pews or on the floor here in front of the altar. I have a story to tell you on this holy night.

The story is called “Joy.”

You know the first part of the story. You might even have played one of the parts in the Christmas pageant. You remember: There were shepherds watching their flocks by night when suddenly an angel appeared. There was a bright light and a sound that was like music, only more than music, as if all the stars were singing. They were scared and yet their hearts were filled with awe and wonder. And then the angel spoke.

“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.”

Then the angel told the shepherds to go to the city of David, the little town of Bethlehem, and there find Mary, Joseph and a newborn baby wrapped up and lying in a manger, in a stable, the savior of the world finding a first home among humble

working animals. They were the first to welcome our Lord into this world.

Imagine your joy on finding the one present you most want in all the world, the one you have asked for and hoped for, but really think you will never get. Well, I imagine their joy was even greater. For here was the answer to the hopes and fears of all the years of Israel, their longing and prayers for a savior, a messiah. And here he was; what joy the shepherds have felt then, to behold the child so long awaited, the Savior so many had dreamed of, now come, here before them. On this holy night, so calm, so bright.

Imagine the joy of the mother Mary who had born the child these nine months, from the awesome moment when the angel appeared to her, through meeting her cousin Elizabeth, getting married to Joseph, that good man, and then taking this dangerous trip over the hills from Nazareth to Bethlehem. How worried she had been along the way. How scary it must have been, just as she began to go into labor, to find no place to stay, and to know no one but Joseph in this strange place. How fortunate that a kind person let them into their barn. But then, after the hours she enduring giving birth, for all the pain and worry along the way, to hold the baby Jesus in her arms and to feed him at her breast, to wrap him warmly and lay him down to sleep. What joy and what relief she and Joseph must have felt as they watched the baby Jesus lying in the manger. I'm sure all parent and grandparents—all of us—can imagine the mother's joy and the adopted father's quiet thanksgiving in reaching this safe conclusion to their journey.

Imagine the joy of the magi. These princely sages had traveled from distant lands, over desert sands and through strange cities, bearing gifts to the newborn king. What joy must they have felt beholding the one whose star they had followed for so many miles, so many months, through so many dangers, toils and snares.

There were more moments of danger and hard journeys to come. The evil king Herod heard about the boy and sent his soldiers to take his life. But Joseph had been warned in a dream and the holy family fled to safety. What sorrow there was among those who had not been able to flee, whose children were lost.

But our story is about joy. Even in a land of deep darkness, even in a world of war and strife, even today when we worry about the future, about the safety of our children, about so many things. Even on us a light has shined.

That light is you, our children.

You show us daily what joy means.

Take as an example children ages 3 and 4. Preschool children. For quite few years, I have had the great good fortune to

be able to have a weekly chapel service with these age children—first at St Timothy’s and now here. There is an amazing ability to have joy at this age. Three and four year old children love to laugh and dance.

But maybe you older children can still have fun. Not always serious, right? Still skip occasionally, still laugh uncontrollably even when the teacher is looking. Still know how to play.

But, looking now at you teenagers and adults, when was was the last time you skipped? At some point, as we grow older we begin to substitute party for play. We stop skipping. We aren’t as silly. We lose a little of the joy that a child has so near to them; just as we learn a little better how to stop from crying and how to do other useful adult things.

We have quieter joys perhaps. We learn to play different games. But I think you children have joy most directly and easily at hand. Jesus said that unless you become as a child you shall not enter the kingdom of God. Maybe this is what he meant. Maybe that’s why God came among us as a newborn baby, to experience the whole span of life from birth to death.

God’s will for us is joy, even eternal joy. Jesus told his disciples that he came so that they might share his joy, God’s joy, and their joy may be made complete. In this life we grow old, we suffer loss and pain, we gain knowledge and wisdom, we get good at doing and making things. But unless we keep the joy that God has made children feel, well, we run the risk of becoming a living body but a dead soul.

This is the night when we remember the great love of God toward all people, a love that gave to us the holy child, the prince of peace, mighty counselor, God with us, Emmanuel. God’s love still shines despite our hardening hearts—we all feel it this night. But let us remember tomorrow and every day that to be a child of God is to be a person of joy, of hope, of courage. We are called to be a light to the world, a world in deep darkness, where many children hear only the trampling of the boots of war. The world needs the children of light, people of good will to go forth into the world, healing and teaching. We need to teach our children not only the story but the meaning of Christmas. On this night a child was born, a Savior Jesus Christ. It was good news of great joy for all people. And that’s why we sing Joy to the World after Silent Night.

Merry Christmas.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector
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