

## **FBC Advent 3 Service Sunday December 11 2022 Good News of Great Joy**

If there is a single word that describes what Christmas is all about, **it's the little word "joy."**

Several of our favourite carols mention it: "Joy to the world, the Lord is come," "O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant," "Shepherds, why this jubilee, why your joyous strains prolong?"

"Good Christian men rejoice, with heart and soul and voice. Joyful all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies, with the angelic host proclaim, 'Christ is born in Bethlehem.'"

**I wonder how many of us feel joyful this morning?** It's not hard to feel joy when you come to church and sing these lovely songs. But it's not always easy to feel joyful. Joy can be a challenge to all of us.

Part of our problem is that we've got the wrong idea about joy. We tend to connect it with happiness, and think that joy depends on our circumstances.

You can't have joy by going from one party to another, or frantically racing through the shopping mall. In fact, going to the mall this time of year is an excellent way to lose your joy.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, and we're working our way around the various candles of the Advent Wreath. We've seen that the first candle represents Hope, and the second candle represents Peace.

Today Donna and Joyce reminded us we come to the third candle on the wreath.

You may have noticed that one of the outside candles is a different colour from the other three. There are three purple candles around the outside of the wreath and one pink candle. **The pink candle is the third candle of advent which represents Joy.**

One of the things people love about Christmas is that it truly is a joyful season. All season long we celebrate with music and song and lights and decorations. We celebrate by getting together with family and friends and by exchanging gifts. It is a joyful time of year.

But I can't help feeling that sometimes the world hijacks their joy in the season from the true joy at the centre of Christmas. Because when you come right down to it, the real joy at Christmas comes not from the lights and the decorations and the music, **but from the meaning of Christmas.**

At the heart of Christmas is the astoundingly good news that Jesus Christ was born as a Saviour into this world. From beginning to end the Christmas story is punctuated with various outbursts and moments of joy, and they all centre around the birth of Christ.

You can't get away from it. You can't get around it. You can't spell Christmas without Christ, and you can't enter into the true joy of the season without Jesus.

I would like for you to meditate with me on the announcement of the angel to the shepherds in Bethlehem.

In the darkness of night, where the angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to some unexpected shepherds, He scared the living daylights out of them. That is what it says -- in a rather loose translation. They were terrified, and rightly so, for this was a sudden appearance of a supernatural figure.

**I don't know what angels look like.** Scripture does not describe them very carefully. The best description we have of the appearance of angels, says that they're like young men dressed in white garments. Those were the angels that appeared at the resurrection.

**Never once are they referred to as having wings.** I don't know where that idea came from, unless it came from the concept that angels are free to move about rapidly, and to us that suggests flying.

**But the angel suddenly appeared out of the darkness of the night.** Around him shone the radiance of glory, as the glory of the Lord shone round about the shepherds. And as the King James Version puts it, "*they were sore afraid.*" Luke 2:10:

But the angel said to them, "*Do not be afraid. 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 Lord.*"

Many believe this "glory of the Lord" was a great brightness that engulfed them. I can only imagine the experience being similar to what it's like when you meet someone on the road who has their bright headlights shining in your eyes.

God was not going to strike them dead. The angels had come with "good news"

Thus the birth of God's long-awaited Redeemer was introduced to a darkened, weary, and exhausted world. History tells us that the time of our Lord's birth was indeed a time of weariness and widespread despair among men and among the nations of the earth.

**It's striking that the human emotion that was first encountered by the angelic messenger was that of fear.** People were afraid of many things, as they are today.

There was Herod the Great on the throne. Herod was cruel, and was able to accomplish his anger upon whoever was the object of his disfavour. He had personally put to death many, even in his own family, because of their antagonism to his plans. **He's the bad boy of the Christmas story.**

Then we have the hated Romans, with their proud legions, marching across the face of the earth, holding all before them in an iron bondage by overpowering military might. The people were afraid.

Perhaps the most striking thing to us about this story is that we can so easily put ourselves back into that situation of fear, for we have witnessed on a personal basis the fear of COVID, fear of flu, fear of inflation, fear of world conflict.

**Yet the first word of the angel to those shepherds in the field was "Fear not.** Don't be afraid."

I don't think any greater news can come to us than that announcement.

It came to them, as the angel went on to say, because a Saviour was born in Bethlehem -- a Deliverer. Because of the presence of this baby born, they need not be afraid of anything.

You and I know how frequently we draw the parallel between the coming of Jesus as a babe in Bethlehem, and the coming of Jesus into the human heart. Even our carols do this. The third verse of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" says,

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!

So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.

No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,

Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.

Every Christmas season we remind each other that it's not enough for Christ to have been born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. **What really counts is Christ being born in the human heart.**

Your Bethlehem is when Christ came to you and was born in your heart.

**It's that remarkable parallel that constitutes the good news of Christianity today** -- that Jesus can be born in us as certainly as he was born in Bethlehem.

Therefore to us, the angel stands to make his welcome announcement: *"Fear not. Fear not, for unto you is born this day a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord."*

The words "**Fear not**" appear in the Bible 170 times. Did you ever wonder why? Did you ever wonder why we're not to fear? The reason, of course, is that a Saviour has been presented -- a Deliverer, a rescuer, one who is adequate to free us from any threat and danger in any situation.

**That's why the shepherds were told not to be afraid.** It didn't make any difference what Herod or the Romans would do, or what the clever manipulative minds of men would try to set in motion; there was a Deliverer, a Saviour among them.

A Redeemer had come who would change the situation and use it for his own glory, and bring them through. Therefore the announcement of the angel was **"Be not afraid."**

I think this suggests to us that what the presence of Jesus in our lives ought to bring us, as Christians, is the absence of fear and the presence of joy. And it's not intended to be a once-for-all experience.

**I know that many of us look back to the moment of our conversion as a great moment of joy.** And rightly so! We had a sense of deliverance, a sense of freedom, a sense of release. But Christian joy is intended to be an ongoing process.

We don't face dangerous and frightening situations just once or twice in a lifetime, but anytime something strikes terror in the heart or grips us with the cold hand of fear, anytime we're anxious and troubled and weary, anytime something seems to threaten us or our loved ones.

And for that moment -- for that moment -- we have a Saviour, a Deliverer. Therefore the continuing word of God to us who have such a Deliverer is "Be not afraid."

**That's why the chief mark of the Christian ought to be the absence of fear and the presence of joy.** I'm sure you've heard the often quoted description of a Christian as one who is: Completely fearless, and continually cheerful.

**And oh how that fits!** This is not to be a once-for-all experience, but one that is continuous, day-by-day. It's that presence of joy and absence of fear that marks our genuine Christianity, and proves that we really are what we claim to be.

**I think this is what is missing oftentimes in our evangelistic endeavours today.** I'm not against many of the movements that try to tell the great story of Christianity by various ways and means.

But I tell you this: None of these movements or methods will ever mean a thing, unless they're backed by a life that has this mark of genuine Christianity -- **the presence of joy and the absence of fear.**

Paul said in Romans 14:17:

*The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, (Romans 14:17 NIV)*

That ought to be the mark of every Christian.

And as we look at Jesus -- not as we seek for the feeling or look for the joy, but as we concentrate on our Saviour, as we remind ourselves of who he is and what he came to do and what he can do -- then we will discover again that same wonderful fulfillment of the angel's announcement.

**We need not be afraid.** And there will break upon our hearts and faces a sense of continuing joy.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the atheistic German philosopher, made this surly remark to some Christians one day; "If you want me to believe in your Redeemer, then you've got to look a lot more redeemed."

No matter what the trial may be, the promise of this verse is that we have a Saviour, a Deliverer, especially designed to handle that problem, **a Saviour who is with us always.** If we remember that, and look to him, he will take us through it.

He will strengthen us to face it and will give us courage and peace and joy in the midst of it.

Therefore the promise of the angel was *"Do not be afraid, for 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 Lord."*

**This is what Christmas must mean to us.** And all the days of the year that lie ahead are to be met by the fact that we have in our midst and in our hearts, if we have come to know him, a Saviour, a Deliverer, a Rescuer, Christ the Lord.

**All authority has been given unto him, in heaven and on earth.** No event and no circumstance can come into our lives that will be more than he can handle, more than he can take us through. It's that knowledge that gives the heart peace and puts joy on our faces.

In just a few days Christmas will be here. Families will gather around the tree to open their presents. Already some children are counting the hours until that glad moment arrives.

Two thousand years ago God sent a gift wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Jesus is God's Christmas gift to us.

**But we will never experience Christmas joy until we personally receive God's gift** - the Lord Jesus Christ.

The shepherds never forgot. The wise men never forgot. Mary never forgot. Their lives were changed forever by what they saw in Bethlehem. I hope yours will be too.

**What did change was their heart.** They found a joy that the world cannot deliver and cannot deny.

They found a peace no bank account could produce. They found a love that no person could ever give them. **They found the Lord. And you can too.**

Why not make this a Christmas to remember? Not because of the gift you purchased or opened . . . but because this was the Christmas you went to Bethlehem and saw the King.

My earnest prayer for you all is that like the shepherds, you will experience the joy they found.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come.

**Let's close in prayer.**

Heavenly Father, we're so very grateful for the mercy and the love that You've shown us.

We pray that this passage and this season, would have the effect on our lives that each of us will experience the joy of which the angels sang.

Give us eyes to see the baby Jesus in a new and fresh way this Christmas season.

Give us ears to hear the angels singing.

Give us feet like the shepherds to go swiftly to Bethlehem.

Give us hands like the Wise Men to offer him the best that we have.

Give us hearts of love to worship him. **Amen**