

Overwhelmed With Joy

3 – Watching For the Light Lessons and Carols and Leaving

December 17, 2023

Third Sunday of Advent

Rev. Dr. Edwin Gray Hurley

Gen. 3:8-15, 17-19

Isaiah 9:2,6-7

Isaiah 11:1-6

Luke 1:39-55

Luke 2:1-15

Matthew 2:1-11

John 1:1-14

*As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy.” Luke 1:44
My Spirit rejoices in God my Savior” Luke 1:47*

“When they saw that the star had stopped over the place where the child was, they were overwhelmed with joy.” The theme today is Joy! This third Advent Sunday focuses on Joy! This is a service of Lessons and Carols. I thought of calling it “Lessons and Carols and Leaving!” But Joy is at the heart of all our worship today!

Wise men are overwhelmed with joy. Expectant mothers rejoice! Both are recipients of Divine favor, one older miraculously pregnant beyond her years, one younger, miraculously pregnant beyond human agency. These two mothers-to-be, old Elizabeth and young Mary, cousins, meet for intimate girl talk of sharing, rejoicing over how God’s goodness and grace has miraculously come upon them, and rejoicing for what God has done and will do through them.

Joy explodes in their midst. As soon as Mary steps across the threshold of Zechariah and Elizabeth’s house down in Judah, south of Bethlehem, Elizabeth exclaims loudly, “As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy!” John the Baptist six months Jesus’ senior, senses what is up. There warm, secure in his mother’s womb unborn overjoyed John recognizes the presence of this one greater than he. this one who will be King of kings and Lord of lords, and from within that dark warm safe spot in the womb of his mother, he leaps for joy! Witness the sacred valve of the newborn! And Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, exclaims to Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Elizabeth recognizes that the Lord has entered their house within his mother Mary, and she rejoices!

Mary, upon receiving Elizabeth’s’ greeting rejoices,

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.”

Today we rejoice over all God has done and all God is doing! Today, South Highland rejoices! Today guests who have joined us rejoice! Oh sure, some no doubt rejoice because Hurley is finally heading out! Yet more broadly, we all rejoice that, in spite of Hurley, or even perhaps sometimes because of Hurley, God has been at work here! For us as a pastor and family and as a congregation, this is a day of great Joy!

Certainly, we Hurley's as a family rejoice for the privilege of living and serving among you over the past 22 years and 2 months as pastor and family. Within 41 years of ordained ministry. Stuart and Peter were juniors in high school when we moved here from Kentucky. Catherine was just starting the seventh grade. Remember I told you she was the new girl in town who was not selected as a cheerleader or a Dorian, as she had been in Bowling Green, KY. But she was persistent. She never gave up! Her Senior year she was selected as "editor and chief of the Yearbook at Mountain Brook High School!

Remember I told you some of the antics the boys pulled over their growing up years! Among them, in our first summer your new preacher and family, when we were on the team in Piedras Negras, Mexico building a house with that incredible outreach led by Dianne Davis through which over 800 houses were built. I found Peter and Stuart enjoying a six pack of beer in their room! Not realizing Dad might use the other key and pop in unexpectedly.

And look at them all now, all grown up, honest tax payers, flourishing with their spouse, Hunter and Tracy, and girlfriend Harmony and four precious children of their own, Winfield, Henry, Gray, and another little Hurley girl on the way! Kelly, and we are blessed with fabulous in-laws Ginger and Alan Mize who are here and Lau Ting and Wilson Ng. And at the center of all this brood, every bit as central to our story as Mary and Elizabeth are to the biblical story, is my greatest joy, my precious spouse of 44 years Gayle.

A few years ago, when we got the lake house Gayle told me, "Now I'm going to be pulling back some on my church activities. Right! Oh, it's true, she is no longer children's choir director or artist for the F2:19 service. But she does help teach her Upper Room Sunday School Class, participates in her wonderful Monday morning rings in the handbells, sings in the choir, and is always blessed to be part of Abby's Tuesday Prayer Group- who are so actively praying for this congregation, especially in this season of transition. I know, I know, you had to take me to get Gayle! Today we rejoice in the blessings that have come to us as a family through the rich relationships we have grown to experience through sharing with you here. Today we rejoice as a family.

Today we rejoice as well as a congregation. This past week I reflected back on a few of the initiatives God brought about here over these 22 years, the contemporary worship experiment of our F2:19 service, "You are no longer strangers but members of the family". And the repeated experience that - contemporary or traditional - all who find their way here are treated as truly members of the family! The beginning and continuation of STAIR tutoring. There was the Young Singles fellowship Jeff Bonner led. There have been several generations of new Young Adults Classes, led by Noelle and Denny Read, Jim Truesdell, now with the Young Adults Class Cort Gatliff teaches, being the largest Sunday School class in the church, and meeting in the room previously housing our then largest class, the Builders' Older Adults Class- most of whom I have been honored to preside over at their Witness to the Resurrection Services.

I think of Advent and Lenten series we have undertaken together, sometimes all studying the same materials throughout the congregation, of the community outreaches, hospitality extended to the

neighborhood with barbeque and bluegrass up on the Dewey White Parking Lot, and Fourth of July hospitality offering ice cream and hot dogs while folks watched the fireworks from our parking lot.

I think of visiting choirs and preachers who came for our inspirational series, and of the steady dependable gatherings of Presbyterian Women circles Bible studies, and seniors' adults, now called Shalom, trips to Missouri and North Carolina and Mississippi and Georgia, of youth groups going to Montreat, winter retreats to Chattanooga and some years the beach, and for so many years intergenerational building teams traveling to Piedras Negras, Mexico to build houses. And music – glorious music – the fruit of incredibly great music through the years you are experiencing today, as music leads us deeper into the holy mystery of a more profound Alleluia!

Maybe you heard of the time the organ virtuoso, (can I call him Kenny Lewis? No, I really can't because Kenny would never act like this), the organ virtuoso was playing a concert in a church on a large old organ with hand powered wind coming from behind the screen where a man pumped the bellows up and down, up and down throughout. After each of his pieces the organist would say, "And now I will play for you." And now I will play for you." This went on many times until finally after he again said, "And now I will play for you," a voice from behind the screen shouted, "Say we or I won't pump!"

At South Highland it is indeed "we"! This church works because of the many parts of the body: committed members and gifted committed devoted staff, we all working together pulling in the same direction, living into our vision of being, "Fully Alive With The Passion of Christ!"

I think of the incredible individuals who have served and are serving on the staff here-making so much of our ministry possible. The list is long, the talent they possess incredible. No pastor has ever had three more outstanding encouraging predecessors than me, in Dr. Dana Waters and Dr. Frank Alexander and Dr. Sterling Edwards- each of them always encouraging, upbuilding, affirming.

So many staff in previous years taught me so much and memorable among them Jane Wilson, Eleanor Garner, Dean Vandergrift, Charles Rountree, Joyce Jennings, Jamie McLemore, Philip Copeland, Matthew Grauberger, Denny and Noelle Read, Jim Truesdell, Daniel Killilea, Susan Laney to name just a few. And what a fantastic crew we have here on staff at present. We are so blessed in the people who have answered God's call and come to serve God here. Those of you here, past and present who have served, and are serving, will you please stand.

I think of the rich relationships that have grown throughout the larger Birmingham community, and throughout the world because you South Highland encouraged me to extend your witness of passion for mission throughout the world by visiting and building relations with people and congregations and schools and refugee centers and health clinics in many countries, from India and China and Bangladesh, to Kenya and Mozambique and Zimbabwe, to Pakistan and Poland, and Lebanon and Syria and Egypt and Israel, and beyond. Because you sent me South Highland is known in these places and has an ongoing impact in lives that are being changed. Today we rejoice in God's grace and goodness, or maybe it was God's sense of humor, in bringing us to you, and sending me to them.

I think of the incredible interfaith friendships that have grown among local congregations, particularly among congregations here on the Southside. A number of pastors and a rabbi made numerous international trips to learn the ways of others and build bridges of peace. Rabbi Jonathan Miller, my dear friend and teacher, had a knack for finding Presbyterian Grant money!

I think of one trip a group of us made to the three countries emerging out of Communist Yugoslavia; Roman Catholic Croatia, Muslim Bosnia and Orthodox Serbia. We met with government officials and faith leaders from various traditions, including the Chief Imam of Bosnia. Out of that we came back and drafted "Ten Principles for Living Together in Community." We welcomed this Chief Imam of Bosnia, a brilliant University of Chicago Ph.D. to Birmingham, where we welcomed him at a special Wednesday night dinner here, and then crossed the street and packed out Temple Emanuel where the first time ever a Muslim cleric was welcomed in a Jewish Synagogue pulpit and spoke to a large interfaith congregation about peace and mutual respect and dignity among all people!

And most every year we have welcomed African American congregations and pastors for fellowship programs and partnership events here. We twice welcomed Mayor Woodfin. We celebrated the 50th anniversary of MLK's Letter from a Birmingham jail. We are seeking to be part of the racial healing from Birmingham's past. "Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in His sight." These are a few of the community outreach efforts we have undertaken together.

God has been at work among us, and we rejoice. I think of so many weddings and baptisms and funerals and confirmations. I think of those who have entered the Ministry of Word and Sacrament from this congregation over these years: Elizabeth Goodrich, Scott Jeffries, Shawn Thomas Smith, David Randolph, and soon, Daniel Killilea. Over our years together we have shared moments of joy and sadness, moments of stretching and set-backs, moments of successes and failures. God has been at work among us, and we rejoice.

The search committee who came to visit us in Kentucky in 2001 was so impressive. They served you well, and included some amazing people, like Glenn Davis who was chair, Jeff Bonner, himself now a pastor in Gardendale. There were the wisdom people Helen Davis, John Benton and Larry Hagood. Larry was the first to contact me, and in our very first phone conversation, he said, "Dr. Hurley, this is Larry Hagood from South Highland Presbyterian Church in Birmingham. And I do believe you are going to be our next Sr. Pastor. I just have to convince the rest of my committee!" There were two young brides, Kelly Troiano, who carried within her for a visit with us in Kentucky, like Mary carried Jesus to Elizabeth and John unborn, Lillian Troiano growing inside Kelly, and now she is a college student in Tuscaloosa, and another young bride Leslie Lloyd, who came even before any of her three amazing boys were born.

God has been at work among us here and has blessed this church to be a blessing. This whole business is about **3 G's – God, Grace, and Gratitude**, all of which can be seen in this beautiful interlude of Mary and Elizabeth in the little Judean village.

I

We start with God. Mary rejoices, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." The first words of the Bible are "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

Presbyterian Christians are all about God. We live by the first answer of the Westminster Catechism, “What is the Chief End of Man?” - “Man’s Chief End is to Glorify God and Enjoy him forever.” We are made to live in loving relationship with our Creator.

We trust in God as the Creator of it all, heaven and earth, you and me, God who is not remote and unmoved and indifferent, but personal and passionate. The God who is here with us, and loves us, and, as Christmas Gospel celebrates supremely, comes down to be with us where we are, Emanuel! The God who humbled himself to be born as a helpless baby who grew to become our Savior, the very Mediator, the Go-Between between Holy God and Sinful People. As John Calvin said, (You know I have to leave you with a little more Calvin!)

“He was made man like us, but that He so emptied himself that scarcely was He reputed to be of the rank of men. He was, as it were, banished from every house and fellowship. There was nothing except a stable and a manger to receive Him.”ⁱ

II

We start with God. **We go on to Grace.** Life is purposeful and has meaning because God first comes to us by grace, not waiting for us to climb our way up to him. Comes all the way down to a feed trough, in an animal shed, in a backwater village, for people who would not make a place for him. “By Grace we are saved through Faith.” “While we were sinners Christ died for us. ““God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.” God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” **All this enterprise is about God, and it is all about Grace.**

III

And finally, it is all about Gratitude. We try to live as good people, faithful people, promise-making and promise-keeping people, aspiring to be gentle and compassionate people, and kind and generous and honest people, not in order to persuade God to love us, but precisely because God is love, and already loves us and claims us by grace, and promises to be with us every day of our lives and beyond. So, all we can do is try to reflect his love in our lives and thank God our whole life long! “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!” How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways! For from him and through him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen

All we can do is rejoice, sing and celebrate with music and laughter and prayer living under God’s grace and mercy and peace. All we can do is make our lives a continual thanksgiving to God. “There is in this faith of ours a deep and profound joy, laughter, and lightness of being - profound joyfulness!”ⁱⁱ As William Blake wrote, “We are put on earth a little space That we may learn to bear the beams of love.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We are put here by the grace of the God of love. We are put here to learn to love. You have loved us Hurleys so magnificently. And we love you dearly. We treasure these 22 years and 2 months we have shared together with me as your pastor. After the end of December, our relationship will

change. I will no longer be your pastor, although Gayle will still be a member. And we will still be supporting the ministry and mission here. We will be away from you awhile. But we will still be your friends, and we will hope to see you as friends. After all I know where most of you live! We believe the future is bright for South Highland! He who is mighty has done and will do great things -for you and through you!

God, Grace, Gratitude, that is what all this life is about, the life that Jesus said he came to give us, “I came that that you may have life, and may have it more abundantly.”^{iv} Frederick Buechner, as you know one of my favorite authors and pastors, writes in his book, Telling The Truth – The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale, this – and with this I’m done. Buechner writes,

“There is the joy of it, this tale of a light breaking into the world that not even the darkness can overcome. That is the Gospel, this meeting of darkness and light and the final victory of light. That is the fairy tale of the Gospel, with, of course, the one crucial difference from all other fairy tales, which is that the claim made for it is that it is true, that it not only happened once upon a time but has kept on happening ever since and is happening still. To preach the Gospel in its original power and mystery is to claim in whatever way the preacher finds it possible to claim it, that once upon a time is this time, now, and here, is the dark wood that the light gleams at the heart of like a jewel, and the ones who are to live happily ever after are... all who labor and are heavy laden, the poor naked wretches wheresoever they be.”

“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit!”

“Now unto the King eternal,
immortal, invisible, the only wise God,
be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen”

God Bless you all!

ⁱ John Calvin, Sermons, “Sermon on the Nativity of Jesus Christ”, p. 36

ⁱⁱ John Buchanan, from a sermon preached near the end of his pastorate at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

ⁱⁱⁱ William Blake, lines often quoted by Thomas Merton

^{iv} John 10:1

^v1 Timothy 1:17, KJV