

# **Sermon Text for December 13, 2015**

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Zephaniah 3:14-20, Luke 2:8-20

## ***“The Shepherds Visit the Babe”***

Let's have a quiz on the Advent candles and on their significance. The first candle is hope: the expectation that good things are right around the corner. Last week we learned that Jesus is the Way and His way is that of humility. This week the candle is what? That's right, Jesus is our joy. Jesus is our joy. We can all think back on experiences of joy that have filled our lives. The Bronkema family this past week had an experience of joy that we wanted to share with you. As a pastor's kid your life is an open book. But are we able to identify experiences of joy that have lasted for years, even for our lifetime. Just so that we are on the same page, joy is not happiness, something that is subject to our moods and life circumstances. Joy is not a feeling, it is something deeper, far more fundamental. Joy is at the core, at the center of our beings. Jesus is our joy.

Let's invite Julia back up here and get to know her a little better.

Do you have any pets?

What is your favorite animal?

If you could be an animal, what would you be?

Have you ever been in a barn?

Describe it for me.

There is something about getting ready for Christmas that fills the atmosphere with happiness. It is a time when you look around and even the houses and the trees and the borough and the church looks cheerful with lights that twinkle and smile at you. People for the most part are in a better mood and giving is at its highest.

Do you remember when you were a kid and it was Advent and you were getting ready for Christmas. What were some of the most memorable moments? Lighting the Advent candle every Sunday and every night around the dinner table. Waking up in the morning a little earlier just to see what was in the Advent Calendar. Helping unwrap the ornaments and getting the house ready. There is something festive contagious about this time of year that is seen only in this time of the year. It can be seen everywhere, and I wish I could call it joy, but I can't because I want it to last forever.

That is what joy is all about. Joy is something that can not be taken from us no matter the circumstances. Today we are going to see a group of people who that first Christmas day were able to keep their joy forever. Not only on Christmas but even after when everything was put away and they had to go back to their humdrum every day life. Wouldn't that be great? Yes, allowing joy to last forever because we recognize that our joy is based not upon the season but upon the fact that Jesus Christ has been revealed to us and is a part of our lives, forever.

I used to get weekly diaries from a Palestinian Christian who lives in Bethlehem. It is amazing the different type of Advent they have. The sounds of the Advent season with Christmas carols and laughter and joy have been replaced with the sounds of bullets and bombs. Bethlehem has not been traditionally a place for unrest because of the high tourist population that comes in and out of the city. I remember visiting Bethlehem and it was a fairly peaceful city then. But it was also a very difficult city to get into. It is perched on top of a hill, a very rocky, barren that must have had a very difficult trail that Mary and Joseph had to take. All around the city are these craggy boulders in open fields with tufts of grass that grow here and there. When we got there the sheep were grazing and the sun began to set and it hit me that it could have been on that hillside that the angels had proclaimed their good news of great joy for all the people.

The Christians in Bethlehem this year even toyed with the idea of decorating their trees with strings of bullet shells that litter the ground just to fit in with what was happening around them. They didn't because they noticed something strange. Even though happiness was not part of their celebration this year, there were no kids laughing in the streets and the mood was generally that of mourning, yet they realized the intense need they had to celebrate Christmas because of the joy they felt about Christ in their lives. This is crucial, they noticed that regardless of the situation, that even in the midst of the death and the destruction around them Jesus Christ was coming, Jesus Christ would be born and dwell among us, be one of us in this dark world. This is the joy that no one can take from you. This little town of Bethlehem, where Jesus Christ was born and that we read about in Luke is not still at all these days. And yet this joy remains in Bethlehem and they would never cancel Christmas, it just is beyond them, because the joy that they feel is deeper than the decorations, the carols, and yes even the trees and the lights. The joy of Christmas that they feel is based upon the birth of their Savior that calls to them where they are, in the midst of the darkness of the world.

How are we able to keep this joy of preparing for the Christ and the joy of expectation that we are experiencing during this time of year. How can we make sure that it doesn't merely become happiness that comes and goes depending upon our mood swings? When Christmas is over it does not have to lose its luster. The joy of expecting the Christ child that we are to experience during this season of Advent will not be drowned out by the sorrow and pain of any situation in our lives. If our joy is in Christ, then nothing can separate us from the love and the joy that we have in him.

The evening that joy came into the world must have been an unseasonably warm one, kind of like this winter. The shepherds were able to take their sheep out of the fold in December when usually they are penned up for the winter. There were a handful of shepherds together with their flocks on that hillside. Some were sleeping, others were talking about their days' adventures and others were finishing their dinner. All of a sudden the sky is filled with light, light so bright that they had to hide their faces, it was, after all, the light of the glory of the Lord. A voice spoke to them, it was a messenger of God, an angel who told them as Luke states the good news of a great joy for all the people. This is the formula that will help you, like the shepherds keep the joy of Christ forever in your heart and not let it evolve to a mere feeling that comes and goes with the seasons. Jesus is the good news of a great joy for all the people.

Jesus is the good news of a great joy for all the people. What a message. Good news, what better news can we receive than that a Savior is born, one who is Lord and will rule our life if we allow him. This term good news in Greek is really the root for the word Gospel. The shepherds received the Gospel message that evening, the good news. We get so much news these days that it is enough to brainwash you. Think about it, there are probably a dozen news channels that you could watch 24 hours a day and all they do is give the news. Then when you jump in the car there are another half a dozen that give you the news. Most of it is bad news. That evening the shepherds received from God's anchorman, the angel, good news. This is the root of our joy, the good news that Jesus Christ is born for us. How great that must have been to receive the good news told to us from God, instead of the usual chatter we hear on the news.

What is this good news? The angels call it great joy. This is the analysis of the birth of Christ, it is great joy. From this time on everything that happens will be compared with the joy that Christ brings to people. From now on our joy will have its beginning and its end in Christ. It is not joy, it is great joy, abundant joy, everlasting joy.

This is the good news that we don't have to base our joy upon our family, our jobs, our love life, our health, our money, or even our politics. Our joy is dependent solely upon one thing and one thing only and that is Jesus Christ. If he is born into our hearts then his joy will remain with us forever.

Did you notice who is able to receive this good news and take part in this great joy? It is for all the people. No longer is it just a certain race, one people, but all people can live in the joy of the salvation of Christ. This good news is getting better and better. As proof of this, God sends the angel at the birth of Christ not to Mary and Joseph, not to the wise men, not to the spiritual leaders, but to some innocent, poor, sleeping shepherds. Nobody is left out of this Gospel message. The Savior was born for all people. This great joy is for all.

It is a joy that all can share in but it is a joy that is very, very personal. Did you hear what the angel told the shepherds: "To you, is born this day..." to you. Not the traditional Isaiah verse that states for unto us. That would have made it more communal. But this makes it more personal. Unto you shepherd boy, unto you blue collar worker, unto you single mother, unto you young girl, unto you retired woman, unto you and you should hear your own name being called by that angel, a Savior is born. The angel makes it personal. Now why did he have to do that? It would be so much easier if it were us, then we wouldn't be singled out.

This good news of great joy is personal. We are able to personally share in the joy of Christ. Salvation has come to you as an individual. Christ our joy came into this world not only to save the world but to save you. When Christ enters your life, when Christ accepted you on that Christmas morning, your joy is born. With the birth of Christ all of the good news, all of the joy is now focused on Jesus Christ. During Advent we are building momentum until Christmas day when joy explodes out and showers the earth with the Good news that a Savior is born to you.

The shepherds were able to keep that joy as they made their way home. That is the hardest hurdle to jump. Keeping the joy once the occasion is over. Getting back into normal routine life once the excitement was past. If you find that your life has lost its joy, then maybe you are basing your joy upon the things around you, and not upon the one who is in you, Jesus your Savior. Go out and live joyfully not because of the light and the cheer, which should add to your joy, but because Jesus Christ has come into the world and into your heart. Amen.