

## Joy of Jesus • Luke 2:1-11

The first candle on the Advent wreath stands for hope, the second for peace and the third for joy. “Joy” is clearly a Christmas word. When Jesus was born God sent his angel from heaven to earth to tell the shepherds, “*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 Savior has been born to you: he is Christ the Lord.*”

We sometimes confuse joy and happiness although they are not the same. Happiness is temporary; joy is lasting. Happiness is on the surface; joy is deep down inside. It is not unusual to have joy without happiness and it is not unusual for some who have happiness not to have joy.

The Progress Paradox by Gregg Easterbrook documents enormous improvement in the American way of life and standard of living over recent generations. Average life expectancy in the United States has doubled since 1900. Undernourishment was a major problem, but now we are “over-nourished”. Central heating used to be unusual and few homes had central air conditioning. Today medical care is much more sophisticated and available. Easterbrook says that if ever the Western world has had a Golden Age it is “right here, right now.” Yet, we are not happier. If anything, Americans are less happy than we were one hundred years ago.

One reviewer in the Wall Street Journal wrote, “Paradise was not enough to satisfy Adam and Eve.” Not that we live in paradise, but it does seem true that no matter how much we get we never seem to be satisfied.

It’s not that food, clothing, shelter and relationships aren’t important. They are very important but they are not the source of joy. My heart breaks for those going through tough times. But, I have seen joy in difficulty that astounds me. At the same time, we have all seen people who seem to have it made and yet their misery is legendary.

***Joy... is the ability to adjust to things beyond our control.***

So, what is joy? One UCLA researcher, focusing especially on marriage and joy in marriage, says that a couple’s joy in marriage is determined by each partner’s “ability to adjust to things beyond their control.” That is a good working definition for joy in marriage or in any other circumstance of life. And that is a good beginning to understand the joy of Christmas—because in the Christmas story there were lots of people for whom life was out of control. We read about that in Luke 2:1-5:

*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 his 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 the line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.*

Historians have not been able to identify exactly which census this was. Taking a census was not unusual in the Roman Empire. Counting the population was not the only purpose. This was a way to keep conquered nations under control. It was a means of taxation—with a head tax charged for every person registered. Sometimes the census could be used as a draft to conscript men into the Roman army.

All things considered, a Roman census was not a good experience. It was decided in Rome by politicians who had never been to Israel

and probably had never heard of Nazareth or Bethlehem. They didn’t care about the impact of their decision on the everyday lives of the people who had to register. However, they made sure that their census was enforced by the heavy hand of the Roman army.

This particular census required that people return to the communities of their family origin. Because Joseph was a descendant of the famous King David, he and his immediate family were forced to register for the census in David's hometown of Bethlehem. There were no hardship exemptions for pregnancy. Joseph had no choice but to transport his nine-months-pregnant wife more than sixty miles from the lowlands of Nazareth in the north to the higher elevation of Bethlehem in the Judean hills to the south along a caravan route that was dangerous. There were bandits and all types of risks to face. It could not have been an easy journey.

For them, money was a problem. They were a poor young couple who could not afford the tax. We know that from other pieces of their biography because they claimed exemptions that were allowed only to the poorest of people within the society. They had to hurry and get to Bethlehem. This was a head tax and, if the baby was born along the roadside, that meant that when they arrived in Bethlehem their taxes would go up fifty percent because there would be three to register instead of two.

Political pressure is part of every generation. Governments go to war. They legislate taxes, marriage laws, divorce regulations, education and public health policy. In our generation insurance companies determine if we can have surgery or afford medicine. Judges decide who gets the children and how the inheritance is divided. Some laws are moral and some are not. Some decisions help us and others are extreme burdens. The bottom line is that most of us have no control. Rarely can one person take on the establishment and win. In a sense, we can all share the forced journey to Bethlehem.

When Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem the city's lodging was sold out. Bethlehem was a small town. There were no hotels like in modern cities; no "Bed and Breakfast" places to stay. Bethlehem was the kind of small town people chose to leave when they grew up. Even the most famous native son, David moved away when he grew up and never lived there again. The census required everyone to register at their ancestral

family village. All the descendants of the people who had moved away were coming back to Bethlehem.

Why didn't Joseph and Mary just stay with relatives if that's where they were from? Probably there weren't any relatives left that they knew. The family was so long gone that there was no family left.

My mother was born in White Haven in the north of England. Her father died when she was a young child leaving my grandmother with three small children under the age of five. She and her family immigrated to the United States when my mother was in her twenties. To my knowledge there are no known relatives left in the north of England.

My father was born in Camden, New Jersey. The house where he grew up was torn down for redevelopment many years ago. No relatives have lived in Camden in fifty years. If I were required by some government to return to White Haven or Camden there would be no place for me to stay.

There was no place for Joseph and Mary. It's not because Bethlehem was a bad place. The innkeeper was not greedy or insensitive. There was just no room. What were Joseph and Mary to do? Where were they to go? Mary was full term. Labor was beginning. She had to have a place for this baby to be born. But they were poor and desperate. The whole situation was way beyond their control. There was no Plan B. There was no safety net. They needed something they could not have.

We like to have life under control. I do, at least. My idea of the way to go on a trip is to take multiple credit cards and plenty of cash. Take two cell phones, have an extra rental car reservation, a full-size spare tire and a granola bar, just in case. But then come those times in life when nothing is under our control. There isn't enough money. The insurance company won't pay. The diagnosis is certain. The divorce is final. The bankruptcy is inevitable. All of life is beyond control. There is no one to turn to, no place to stay. Luke 2:6-7 tells us:

*While (Joseph and Mary) were (in Bethlehem), the time came for the baby to*

*be born, and she gave birth to her first-born, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*

Joseph and Mary were not the only ones having an out-of-control Christmas. According to Luke 2:8-9,

*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.*

They were terrified. That is as beyond control as life gets. These shepherds were poor ordinary people. They were doing their jobs—living out in the fields while the town was busy and full of people. Life was hard but routine and predictable. Sometimes boring can be good. Suddenly they were caught in the headlights of an angel. The glory of God surrounded them so there was no place to escape. This was not their doing. This was totally out of their control.

Terror is intense fear, extreme anxiety, rough breathing, pacing hearts, sweat-covered hands. Although the angel meant well he started out as a terrorist as far as those shepherds were concerned. How helpless they must have felt. They were caught in the crosshairs of God and there was nothing they could do. Life was beyond their control.

And so in the Christmas story in Luke 2:10-11, to those whose lives were out of control, the angel announced the joy of Jesus: *“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 Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”*

How could the birth of a baby, Jesus, possibly be good news of great joy when life is out-of-control? The answer is powerful and profound. Jesus has control. He will handle what we cannot. He will do what we cannot do. He is more powerful than the government. He will make

room where there is no vacancy. Jesus will settle the terrified heart.

To be a Christian is to trust Jesus to take control. It is to be responsible for those areas of life that we can control, but then leaving the rest to him. It is the deep conviction that Jesus will handle what we cannot and he will do it well.

Do you remember that UCLA researcher’s definition of joy? It is the ability to adjust to things beyond our control. This is not surrender and it is not fatalism. It is faith. Joy is adjusting to Jesus. It is adjusting to Jesus’ salvation, believing in him to save us from our sins. We can’t fix our sins and secure our own eternal destiny, so we adjust to Jesus’ salvation. We adjust to his teaching. We believe what he says. And we adjust to Jesus’ leadership. We obey what he wants us to do.

There is a sense in which we can never experience the joy of Jesus until life goes beyond our control. As Christians we deeply trust Jesus for great good no matter when or what. In the best and worst, the happiest and saddest, we trust the control of Jesus and have joy. Joy, not happiness. Joy in Jesus not in circumstances. *“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 Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”*

“But,” you say, “they could walk into town and see this baby. They could reach out and touch

Jesus. That’s where they got their joy. But, what about us? We can’t go anyplace and see him. We can’t touch him.” Well, good news! The angel’s message is for those of us whose lives are out of control. With that in mind St.

Peter wrote in I Peter 1:8, *“Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.”*

There are those who say that the worst years in the entire history of Europe were during a period called The Thirty Years war from 1618 until

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the peace of Westphalia in 1648. It was a time of famine, economic depression, terrible epidemics that took tens of thousands of lives and relentless war for thirty years. It was as bad as it has ever gotten.

In 1636, during the worst of those times, there was a godly pastor named Martin Rinkert. In one year he conducted 5000 funerals for the people of his parish. He averaged about fourteen funerals per day for 365 days. In the midst of that misery he wrote a table grace for his young children that later became a Christian hymn. Martin Rinkert wrote:

Now thank we all our God,  
With hearts and hands and voices,  
Who wondrous things has done,  
In whom his world rejoices.”

In the worst of circumstances was the joy of Jesus Christ. May you experience the Christmas joy of Jesus, trusting him when your life is out of control.

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