

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
December 14 & 15, 2013  
John Crosby  
REJOICE: Joy in Discovery  
Luke 2:8-20**

The choir has told the old story well, but it's an old story and like a lot of old stories, it can get dull in the repetition. Let me just put into one paragraph what they were trying to say.

The time came for Mary to give birth to her first baby, a son. She wrapped Him in cloth and placed Him in a feeding trough because there was no room in the inn. 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 they were terrified but the angel said, "Don't be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy for *all* people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you," and the shepherds went to find the Savior. When they had seen Him, they spread the word they had been told about the child and everyone who heard it was amazed, but Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned to their fields, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen just the way it had been told to them.

And that's what happened. Then all of a sudden, it was Tuesday afternoon and they were back at the sheep-shearing business, arguing about the price of lambs' wool. All of that last-weekend thing probably started to feel like a dream. What really happened there? But for Mary, who treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart, it stayed alive. I wonder how often she remembered, "Don't be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy for all people. Today a Savior has been born." And it brought her joy.

Part of this passion for joy we are expressing this Advent season is our belief that joy has the power to change lives. C. S. Lewis wrote, "Joy is the serious business of heaven . . . where music and laughter are the languages of the realm." He was a committed atheist at Oxford, and he kept being surprised by moments of joy. He felt wounded by these little stabs of joy because it spoiled him for a worldview that stopped at death's door. The tiny tastes of joy we get that never last make us realize that something is missing here on earth and they point toward something more.

I was at Starbucks this morning before I came here. One of their baristas is a co-conspirator in this kingdom of conspiracy. She had written up on the board, "If I find in myself desires nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world—C. S. Lewis." Lewis became a Christian reluctantly, coming to believe that there really is a good God, that joy is a gift from God to bring His children home, pointing toward home. He wrote a spiritual autobiography called *Surprised by Joy*. His journey to find joy that lasts resonates with me. I want to find joy that lasts, not that comes and goes, here and gone, never when I really need it. I want joy that lasts. That's the message of Christmas: tidings of comfort and joy.

But what if you don't feel that this morning? What if the kids were just cute kids but you don't get it? Your life is not ruined, but it's deadly normal. What if the shepherd's words were just words? It says, "Mary pondered them in her heart." Over and over and over, they churned in her heart through good times and hard times, through terrible times. Then she sees joy in the life of her Son who grows up. Yesterday they were babies. Even worse, tomorrow they will be in college. Each step of the way, she saw joy break out, but it is not until the end of her Son's life that she finds out about joy. Some joy is a gift only discovered at the end. John, chapter 16, is near the end of Jesus' life. He is talking to His disciples, including, I am sure, His mother.

**16** Jesus went on to say, "In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me." **17** At this, some of his disciples said to one another, "What does he mean by saying, 'In a little while . . . . We don't understand what he is saying.'" **19** Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them . . . . **20** Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. **21** A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. **22** So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice,

you will be filled with joy,

and no one will take away your joy. **23** In that day

**in just a little while,**

you will no longer ask me anything.

You will have no more questions. I'll come back to that later. At the end of His life, Jesus referred back to the story of birth, probably the story of *His* birth, probably because He has only heard the story of His birth about a million times, the way you have told your kids about a million times what it was like.

There were these angels, you see, and then some shepherds showed up at the edge of the stable and then foreigners from another country came and they brought us gifts. And right after that somebody came and warned us and we had to run away. We spent a couple years in Egypt.

Your birth! There was never anything like it! Jesus must have heard that story again and again, so He says, "It's like when a woman is in labor. There's a lot of pain but as soon as she delivers the baby, she doesn't remember the pain because the joy is in that child." Really? I don't think there was all that much pain but, you know, if there is, don't you forget it right away? Really? I don't know.

Our baby, our last baby, just got married this last Memorial Day Sunday. Maggie has been working in Washington, D.C., about a thousand miles away. She is a fairly strong-willed young lady, I don't know where that comes from, and her mother is trying to serve her and make the wedding perfect. You can't believe this but things didn't go exactly according to plan. There were actually a couple of fairly tense times in the weeks and months leading up to the wedding. There even may have been times when tears were involved, I don't understand why. On the

night of the rehearsal at the rehearsal dinner, Maggie and her mother are seated at the head table just talking to each other and Maggie turns to her mom and says, "Mom, I know it's been tough." Translation: I know I've been tough. "Mom, do you know what I think? I think this is like when you have a baby and there is all this pain but as soon as you have the baby, everything is okay and you forget the pain. Don't you think that's the way it's going to be, Mom?" And Mom said, "Well, honey, I think the joy *is* stronger than the pain and, yes, it is worth it."

Jesus is born in pain in order to bring joy, but then Jesus gets killed, crucified, and the pain is overwhelming. They can't see Jesus anymore because He died, but it is not the end. Joy comes back when He's risen and the joy is overwhelming. Then He leaves again, and they don't see Him but the joy stays.

Joy is the mark of the early followers of Jesus. Before it was even called a church, all these people who trusted in Jesus were marked by joy. Their lives were really hard. They didn't have snowplows to get rid of the snow. They didn't have space heaters when it was zero outside. They would be beaten and even in the beatings, it says, they rejoiced. What kinds of people do that? The early followers were unjustly imprisoned. They were clapped in chains and put in dungeons, but they would sing songs until late at night because it was the only way they knew to express the joy that was in their hearts even in the hardest times. These early followers of Jesus were incredibly poor. They had nothing for the most part. They were mocked by society and yet the apostle Paul said of them, "Out of their extreme poverty and their joy came abundant, generous giving." They gave their money away like crazy people. Jesus was exactly right. He said, "Nothing would take their joy away" and nothing took their joy away. They were children of the Resurrection, just like you, just like me.

I guess my question today is, has something stolen your joy? Is something squeezing joy out of this Advent life for you? The apostle Paul does not make it an observation about Christmas. He makes it a commandment. He says,

**4** Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! [Philippians 4:4]

Be filled with joy! He believed that only God can provide a persistent, pervasive sense of well-being for all of creation. Nothing and nobody else can do that. That's why the only joy that lasts, the only joy that matters, is the joy in the Lord. That's why Nehemiah says,

**10** . . . the joy of the LORD is your strength." [Nehemiah 8:10]

The joy of the Lord does not mean joy I feel only at church or when I'm reading the Bible or singing a hymn or something like that. It's the joy that comes from knowing that I and all of creation are in the hands of an immensely good and supremely competent God. *That's* the joy of the Lord. Nothing else is going to last. Jesus is trying to tell us that in John 16. "It's like when somebody is having a baby. They are filled with pain but the joy is worth it." Jesus ends with a promise about joy that is so wonderful, it's hard to believe.

John Ortberg points out something I'd never noticed before. It has to do with this passage and all the questions His followers were asking. The disciples were always pestering Jesus with questions. All through the Gospels it's just, "Hey, Jesus, can I sit at Your right hand?" "Hey, Jesus, how many times do I have to forgive this guy?" "Hey, Jesus, why was this man born blind from birth?" "Hey, Jesus, how come we couldn't cast out this demon?" "Hey Jesus, what does

this parable mean?” “Hey, Jesus, should we call down fire from heaven to blast the Samaritans?” “Hey, Jesus, how’re we going to feed all these people?” “Hey, Jesus, which one of us is the greatest?” “Hey, Jesus, what do You mean, You’ll be back in a little while?” Did you ever notice all the questions all the time? All the time, it’s “Hey, Jesus.”

How many of you have ever had that experience with a two year old? One more question will drive you over the edge. “Hey, Mom.” “Hey, Dad.” “Hey, Grandma.” “Hey, Jesus.” I wonder if Jesus ever got tired of all the questions. But underneath all those little questions, there is really only one question that everyone here has—“Why?” People often say to me, “You know, John, when I die and I see God, I’m going to ask Him . . . .” That’s the question. “Hey, Jesus, why did this little six-year-old boy have a brain tumor?” “Why is there yet another shooting in Colorado?” “Jesus, why is there a disaster in the Philippines when they are already under water?” “Jesus, why did my kid run away?” “Hey, Jesus, why has my marriage gone cold?” “Why has my love fallen apart?” “Hey, Jesus, how come I have this crippling depression and I can’t make it go away no matter what I do?”

Those are the *why* questions, but it is interesting how rarely we ask, “Hey, Jesus, why did you create this incredible sunset that I get to share with people I like?” But when we have *why* questions, Jesus says, “Let Me give you the answer to that. For a little while, you won’t see Me and things will not look right. You’ll see terrible things in this world. You’ll see cancer and hunger and injustice and war and hatred, bodies crippled by stuff we should have cured a long time ago, and betrayal and abuse and violation. Then **in a little while**, it will seem like a long time to you but in the scale of eternity, it’s only a little while, in a little while, in just a little while, in a very little while, **the world will be reborn**. I’m coming back. You will see Me again and I will set it all right. Its birth pangs will be forgotten and joy will win. On that day, not today, not tomorrow, maybe, but on that day, you will ask Me no more questions.” What a good day that will be!

Theologian Rudolf Bultmann said, “It is the nature of joy that all questions grow silent and nothing needs explaining.” Then we will see the goodness of God. Then this world will be reborn and sin and guilt and pain and suffering and death will be defeated. Then there will be no more questions. If you’re tempted to get impatient and if you wonder when this will ever happen, I will tell you, “**in a little while**, in just a little while, in only a very, very, very little while . . . .” So this Advent as you are waiting and waiting and you get impatient, and if you wonder when this will ever happen, I will tell you in the words of Jesus, in a little while, in just a little while, **in a very, very little while, He’ll be back**.

He starts to answer the questions by coming in a feeding trough. He shows how much He loves by dying on a cross. He gives a sign of hope by coming back, and **in a little while** . . . . That’s why Christmas is marked with joy in its DNA. That’s Christmas! Shepherds and wise men and boys and girls and slightly older men and women in choirs here and in heaven all bring the same message, “Don’t be afraid.” Fear is the joy killer. “Don’t be afraid. I bring you good news.” If this is not good news, you are in the wrong church. “I bring you good news of great joy.” To a very select few people? No! To *all* people! All people deserve this joy. “Today in the town of David, a Savior is born to you,” **and in just a little while, only a very, very, little while** . . . .

Lord Jesus, I thank You so much for reminding me that Your clock does not work on the same time table that mine does and that in my doubt and anger and fear and impatience, I can squeeze out the joy that you offer Your children. I pray for my friends here. I ask You to give them a twinge of joy before they leave the building. I ask You to fill them with

joy for a season tonight. I ask You, between now and the holy day, that Your joy would cast out their fear and enter in, because when our joy is with You, our joy will be complete. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, we give You thanks with joy, and all His children said,

[All:] Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*