

“The Appropriate Place of Joy”

Luke 2:1–20

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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In an article she wrote for *Baptist News Global*, university professor and ordained Baptist minister Susan Shaw describes a T-shirt someone recently gave her. It says, “In a world of Grinches, be a Griswold!” I’d like to get one of those shirts. As some of you know, I have portrayed the Grinch in costume at Toy Joy. And the Grinch’s heart does grow at the end of the story. But the message of the T-shirt resonates with me. It is a message about the appropriate place of joy.

Shaw says she is a Griswold who loves Christmas. She goes all out with decorations. There are lots and lots of lights, though hopefully no cats biting live electric cords... And it all brings her joy; absolute, extravagant joy. This is what Christmas should be about, Shaw insists. We often focus on sin and repentance and all that is wrong with the world, and that focus has its place. There are things from which a Savior comes to save us. But to get stuck there at Christmas is to turn Christian faith into obligation and drudgery. It is to put the em-Pha-sis on the incorrect syl-La-ble. It is to miss the point which is joy, pure joy!

Consider the experience of those who celebrate the first Christmas. The angel who delivers a message to the shepherds is obviously joyful. “Do not be afraid,” the angel says, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord...” A multitude of the heavenly host join in, saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace and goodwill among people!” There is nothing dark and dismal about these messages. They are all pure joy!

The shepherds begin in fear which is why the angel says, “Do not be afraid.” But once they hear the angel’s message, they go with haste to Bethlehem to see the child who is born, they tell everyone what they have experienced, and they return home glorifying and praising God for all they have seen. They are consumed by joy!

Mary and Joseph are more subdued. They have been through a lot, but even they are moved to a sense of awe and wonder. Mary treasures the shepherds' words about her child and ponders them in her heart.

The birth of most children brings joy, even in the midst of exhaustion, which is not something any man has the right to say, but I think the statement is correct. The birth of this child, though, has layers of added meaning. There are no words to describe the thoughts and emotions going through Mary and Joseph's minds and hearts, but joy is part of the experience. Christmas is about joy for everyone involved.

To be clear, we are not talking about the kind of self-focused happiness that is insensitive to the suffering of others, like the woman in another setting who chided me for not having a Sweet-Jesus smile on my face right after I led the funeral for a father who left two young children. The narrative of Jesus' birth is a down-to-earth story in touch with every aspect of the human condition, including suffering and hardship. For goodness sakes, Jesus is born in an animal shed! And he will spend his life and ministry addressing suffering and injustice.

Nor are we talking about the kind of superficial emotion that is dependent upon current reality, things like health and wealth, sometimes simply the success of our team. It's fine to feel good when our team wins, but this has nothing to do with joy. Not only are sports not worthy of our deepest emotions, and I say this as a former athlete, but there are always winners and losers. In God's realm, everyone wins. The angel speaks of good news of great joy for *all* the people. And this joy comes to rich and poor, able bodied and differently abled, insider and outcast.

What we are talking about is a deeper condition of the heart shaped by the compelling reality of incarnation, God-With-Us. We are talking about an awareness of the ultimate trajectory of life that depends not simply on what we say and do but on who God is and what God does. We are talking about the ability to recognize the preciousness of life, the wonder of each moment which nothing can take away. Like the Whos who know joy at Christmas even when the Grinch takes away their gifts and food, we can know joy regardless of the circumstances of our lives.

It's what our children exuded and inspired in us as they retold the Christmas story last Sunday evening. How could we not feel joy with a free-

range chicken roaming about, angels appearing from the choir loft, dancers gliding across the floor? It's something many of us have witnessed in the people among whom we have served in mission work around the world. How can we not be moved by people who seem to have so little, at least by our cultural measures, who live with violence and warfare, and yet still exude joy and express gratitude for life?

This is what we mean by joy. The question is — how do we experience it? In part, it is simply a gift. As God enters the world in a Bethlehem stable, God shows up in our lives — in the wonder of children retelling the Christmas story, in the people among whom we serve in the clothing ministry or at Toy Joy, as we sing a familiar carol under candlelight or eat a piece of bread and drink from a cup. It just happens, we realize God is with us and life is sacred, and we are filled with joy!

But joy is also something we can prepare our hearts for, or as Susan Shaw puts it, something that requires practice. We have to teach ourselves to look for it until looking for it becomes habit. For many of us, the default approach to life is to presume a negative outcome, and we have many reasons to embrace this perspective. Joyful experiences are followed by tearful ones. Periods of peace are followed by conflict and violence. Progress of any kind is followed by setbacks. And the enduring impact of a medical pandemic, rivalled only by the social pandemic of fear and division, has only deepened our cynicism.

But the reality is there is still cause for joy. We just have a difficult time seeing it because we are so distracted by our struggles. There is an old saying that goes like this. “Two men looked out from prison bars: one saw the mud, the other saw the stars.” Robert Fulghum once talked about standing knee-deep in the river and dying of thirst. It is easy to see only mud. It is easy to be dying of despair while standing in a river of joy. We have to choose to look for joy, even in the midst of struggle, ever trusting that it is there; it is here, deep within us.

So, what will we experience this Christmas? Some of us have heavy burdens to carry. Many of us are exhausted because of the pace of life and all the changes we have had to make. But joy still has a place. “O come, all ye faithful, *joyful* and triumphant,” we sing. Joyful... if for no other reason, because a child is born, this child is born.