

Sermon Series – Some Gifts are More than Just a Gift.

#1 – God’s Gift of JOY

Luke 2:8-12

Introduction: Advent is a season of hope. The word advent means “coming” or “arrival,” and this season is marked by expectation, waiting, anticipation, and longing for the coming of the Messiah. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, which is today.

Advent looks back in celebration at the hope fulfilled in Jesus Christ’s coming, while at the same time looking forward in hopeful and eager anticipation to Christ’s return.

In a season often marked by hectic hustle and bustle, Advent is an opportunity to prepare our hearts and place our focus on a far greater story than our own—**the story of God’s redeeming love for our world.**

STORY: During World War I the newspapers ran the story of a letter found in the pocket of a soldier who had been killed in action. As his pockets were emptied and mailed to his mother, these words were found by her written on the back of a letter: "**The Greatest Verse in the Bible.**"

For God--the **Greatest Lover**
So loved--the **Greatest Love**
The World--the **Greatest Audience**
That He gave--the **Greatest Event** (Christmas)
His only begotten Son--the **Greatest Gift**
That whosoever--the **Greatest Offer**
Believeth in Him--the **Greatest Simplicity**
Should not Perish--the **Greatest Security**
But Have Everlasting Life--the **Greatest Possession**

Turn with me to a Christmas verse that is not found in Matthew or Luke but in 2 Corinthians 9:15. We often don't associate it with the Christmas story, but it says, "**Thanks be to God for his indefinable gift!**" (NIV)

That verse was written by Paul the apostle, inspired by the Holy Spirit. He trained under the rabbi Gamaliel. He was a master of the Greek language. He was a capable communicator. He wrote about half of the New Testament. And yet he pauses when he comes to this simple four-letter word "**gift**," because he cannot find one prefix that would be adequate to portray God's grace. So, he simply says it's **indescribable**. Paul chooses a word that is not used anywhere else in Scripture. We would say he coined a word. God's Indescribable Gift.

The title of my sermon series this Christmas is: Some Gifts are More than Just a Gift.

When Michael Jordan got a basketball, it was more than just a gift. When Babe Ruth got his first baseball bat, it was more than just a gift. It became their life's work. It's what we know them for.

What does Benjamin Franklin's kite, Tom Brady's first football, Sidney Crosby's first pair of skates, Richard's Petty's first car, Billy Graham's bible, Joshua Bell's violin, David's sling, all have in common – **they were more than just a gift, they were life changing.**

If you were to ask anyone what is the most joyful time of the year? Without question, it would be Christmas. It should be Christmas, especially if what we are celebrating is the birth of Christ – God's indescribable gift.

In 1719 Isaac Watts wrote a hymn that came to be entitled, '**Joy to the World.**' The interesting thing about this song is, the only stanza that relates to Christmas and the birth of Jesus, is the first one that announces "the Lord is come." There is no mention of Mary, Joseph, the angels, the Shepherds, the manager, or the Wise Men. Yet, it is one of the most beloved Christmas carols because it captures the essence of Christmas, which is **JOY**.

So, the first gift that is more than just a gift this Christmas that I want to talk about is **God's Gift of Joy.**

JOY is: *"the settled assurance that God is in control of every detail in my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything will be all right, and the determined choice to praise God in all things."*

Watts was right when he titled his carol ‘**Joy to the World**’, because Christmas is not just a national joy, or a cultural joy. It is not just for the rich or the educated. It is not emotional joy, or a physical joy, it is universal JOY.

If there is any one word that is supposed to describe the Christian life, it’s *Joy*. When Christ was born, the very first thing the angel said in Luke 2, is “...**10But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord. (vs.10-11, NIV)**

He did not say great faith, great love, or great peace, but *great JOY*.

Let’s PRAY

In the biblical account of the Christmas story, JOY is mentioned 8 times! The arrival of Jesus is THE MOST joyful event in history!

I want us to look at 4 things about JOY that I find in the Christmas Story:

I. Joy is Life Changing.

1. Joy Overcomes Shame and Disgrace

Luke 1 tells the story of Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth. They were the parents of John the Baptist, who was sent to prepare the way for the Messiah. Zechariah was a priest who received a visit from an angel that told him, “**Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.**” (vs.13, NIV) [Now just a thought, this couple is old, way past having kids. So, is this an answer to a recent prayer or an old prayer.]

“He will be a JOY and delight to you, and many will REJOICE because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord” (Luke 1:14, NIV).

I want to first focus on Elizabeth. To understand her joy, we must first understand a little bit about her shame.

Psalm 127 says, ***“3Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him. 4Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one’s youth. 5Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.*** (vs. 3–5, NIV).

Children allowed a family to pass on its name and heritage. They provided more hands to handle the daily tasks of life. Most importantly, children were viewed as a gift from God and a sign of His favor.

So, to be childless was a source of great frustration, sorrow, and shame. And Elizabeth would have known this despair for years. Who knows how long it took, but gradually, year after year, Elizabeth’s hope would have slowly died as she came to terms with the fact that something was wrong, and she could not have a child. At some point, the social stigma of being called “Barren,” would have followed her wherever she went.

And though she carried her emotional burden beneath the surface, she and Zechariah remained faithful to God. We know this because Luke 1:6 described them like this: ***“Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly...”*** (NIV)

And then Gabriel showed up with that miraculous message. It seemed too good to be true! But soon she was pregnant, saying, ***“The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”*** (Luke 1:25, NIV).

We know that in her sixth month of pregnancy, Elizabeth experienced a deep encounter with joy. The bible says in Luke 1:41, as soon as Mary arrived, Elizabeth’s baby ***“... leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.”*** (Luke 1:41, NIV).

Elizabeth greeted Mary with a beautiful blessing saying: ***“Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for JOY!”*** (Luke 1:42–44, NIV).

Think about this: Jesus was already unleashing JOY on earth, and He is in Mary’s womb.

When Elizabeth gave birth to John three months later, the bible says, ***“Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they SHARED IN HER JOY” (Luke 1:57, NIV).***

We see that Joy is life-changing because, it overcomes shame and disgrace.

2. Joy Overpowers Fear and Anxiety

Hard to be ***joyful & anxious or joyful and fearful*** at the same time.

Think about how **Mary faced a lot of fear and anxiety with the birth of Jesus.**

- could have been as young as 13 or 14!
- *a virgin birth*- no other birth like it!
- engaged to be married when she got pregnant. Scandal!
- “God is the Father” Believe that? Joseph?
- Angel had to keep saying, “Don’t be afraid.”

WHEN MARY WAS AFRAID, SHE CHOSE TO TRUST GOD & ACCEPT HIS PLAN

LK.1:26-30 “In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” 29Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.

What the angel said next created even more anxiety! ***“You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.” (vs. 31-32, NIV)***

Then Mary asked the obvious question & Gabriel’s answer created even greater anxiety! ***LK. 1:31-37 “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” 35The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.” (NIV)***

LK 1:38 *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled. Then the angel left her." (NIV)*

Take-Away: If you are anxious about anything; *the antidote is: TRUST GOD & ACCEPT HIS PLAN! YOU were created & chosen for God's purpose! But you will miss it – if you don't choose it!*

EVENTUALLY *Mary said in Luke 1:46-47: "...My soul glorifies the Lord 47and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant." (NIV)*

The result of accepting God's plan is always JOY:

Joy Overcomes Shame and Disgrace...Joy Overpowers Fear and Anxiety

3. JOY Overshadows HURT AND RESENTMENT

While Mary struggled with FEAR AND ANXIETY. Joseph struggled with HURT & RESENTMENT. *He had every reason to feel hurt, angry, wounded, and betrayed!* But you cannot be *resentful & joyful* at the same time. And so, we see that Joseph did not attack Mary in his hurt.

WHEN JOSEPH WAS HURT, HE CHOSE TO OFFER GRACE & LET THE PAIN GO. God *could* have told the plan to Mary & Joseph together, instead God tested their faith & character, separately.

MT. 1:19 *"Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly." (NIV)*

God tested Joseph and let him try to decide what to do, but He did not leave Joseph in the dark for long: **MT. 1:20-21** *"But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."*

21She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”” (NIV)

Joy Overcomes Shame and Disgrace...Joy Overpowers Fear and Anxiety...Joy Overshadows Hurt and Resentment

4. JOY Offers Guidance during times of **CONFUSION**.

Just so you know, when Christ was born there was a lot of confusion!

MT. 2:1-3 “**1After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. 3When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.” (NIV)**

The Wise Men had to deal with confusion over direction! They knew *something* was happening – *but not sure exactly where!* They had to ask for directions! **The key is that: WHEN THE WISE MEN WERE CONFUSED, THEY CHOSE TO FOLLOW GOD’S LIGHT one STEP AT A TIME**

Note several things about these Wise Men:

- 1st They were **SEEKERS** of God.
- 2nd They were serious enough to invest time & energy!
- 3rd They headed out in faith with the light they were given.
- 4th Seeking Jesus upsets other people.

We want God to give us a MAP with our life all laid out, but He does not because: 1. It would scare you! 2. It would not require faith!

(God gives us a COMPASS & a GUIDE. His Word and His Spirit. “Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light to my path.” Ps. 119:105)

Take-Away: Don’t wait to understand all the details of God’s plan. Start your journey with the light or revelation God has already given you.

MT. 2:7-8 “**Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child.**

As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

King Herod was jealous & deceitful and had no intention of worshipping Jesus.

MT. 2:9-10 *“9After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw the star, they were overjoyed!” (NIV)*

MT. 2:11 *“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.”*

Notice what true worship looks like; they presented themselves first and then gave their gifts.

Joy is Life-Changing because it: Overcomes Shame and Disgrace...Joy Overpowers Fear and Anxiety...Joy Overshadows Hurt and Resentment and Joy Offers Guidance amid Confusion

If you are anxious today, *Mary & Elizabeth teach us to: TRUST GOD & ACCEPT HIS PLAN!*

WHEN JOSEPH WAS HURT, HE CHOSE TO OFFER GRACE & LET THE PAIN GO

THE WISE MEN WERE CONFUSED, But THEY CHOSE TO FOLLOW GOD’S LIGHT one STEP AT A TIME

Today you might need to pray what David prayed in **PSALMS 51:12** *“Lord, restore to me the **JOY of Your salvation!**”*

So, First, Joy is Life-changing...

II. Joy Defies Our Circumstances

If there is one defining characteristic of joy that I hope you take away today, it is this: **JOY defies our circumstances.**

Joy flows deep even in the face of challenge, hardship, or suffering. Joy drawn from Jesus, is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

James famously said it best right at the beginning of his book: ***“Consider it pure JOY, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1:2–4).***

We can have Joy when we understand that God is always at work, even and especially during tough times. There is a process involved.

As we continue to immerse ourselves in His Word, aligning our thinking to His ways, we will experience His Spirit working within us, bringing us clarity, understanding, and strength to trust and see and act in the joy He provides.

What are the circumstances you are facing right now? Can I encourage you to ask God to show you His big picture? It will bring you JOY!

You may not experience a miracle like Elizabeth or Mary but in Christmas there is a miracle for all of us: the miracle of God coming to earth to be with us, to heal us, to forgive us, to redeem all our pain, to turn it into good. This is a cause for joy even in our darkest days.

This was the message of the angel long ago announcing the arrival of Christ to the terrified shepherds outside of Bethlehem: ***“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great JOY for all the people” (Luke 2:9–10).***

Joy is the birthright of every child of God.

Every child of God ought to have **considerable** joy.

Every child of God ought to have **conspicuous** joy.

Every child of God ought to have **continuous** joy.

Every child of God ought to have **contagious** joy.

And if you are not living a life of joy, you are living beneath your privileges as a Christian or under the weight of all the problems that you are trying to carry on your own.

Pastor and Author John Piper says, ***Christian joy is a good feeling in the soul, produced by the Holy Spirit, as he causes us to see the beauty of Christ in the WORD and in the world.***

All through Scripture, Jesus' ministry was characterized by joy. When he sent the seventy-two followers out to preach the coming of the Kingdom and to heal the sick, it says ***"they returned with joy."***

When Jesus was resurrected, it says the disciples and the women who were following him ***"were filled with joy."***

The Bible says that the new church that was formed in Jerusalem, ***"worshipped with great joy."*** When speaking of the churches Paul often wrote, ***"Whenever I pray for you, I pray with great joy."***

The Bible says in Luke 15 that every time one person puts their faith in Christ, ***there is joy and rejoicing in heaven.***

A lot of people think that following Christ is all about rules; but Romans 14:17 says ***"The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and JOY in the Holy Spirit."***

The deeper you get rooted and established in Christ, the more righteousness, peace, and joy you are going to have.

Joy is Life-changing, Joy Defies our Circumstances...

III. Jesus is Our Source of Joy

Philippians 4:4 says, ***"Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice!"***

How is it possible to always be joyful? ***Here is the key: in the Lord.***

That phrase – ***in the Lord or in Christ*** – is used 167 times in the NT. Every time it says "in Christ" it is going to show you a benefit. There is a benefit for being in Christ – for putting my faith in Christ, for loving Christ, for being a part of Christ's family.

The key to the Christian's joy is its source, which is the Lord Jesus Christ. If Christ is in me and I am in Him, that is always a reason for joy.

The joy that Mary and Joseph, Zechariah and Elizabeth, the shepherds, and the wise men experienced is available to us. This is the joy brought into our world by Jesus.

The apostle Peter wrote, ***“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, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” (1 Peter 1:8–9, NIV).***

We love to be happy. We love to feel good. But happiness comes and goes as our circumstances are forever changing. Happiness can come from birthday parties and gifts. Your favorite song on a perfect summer day. An encouraging message from a friend. Winning the big game. A delicious meal. These are good and pleasurable things, **but** all are momentary.

Joy *includes* happiness, but it runs much deeper. Joy permeates our souls. Joy looks like the birth of your child. Your wedding day. Being declared free of cancer or healed of sickness.

Joy is rooted in gratitude, meaning, and hope, based in our relationship with Jesus. Joy comes from God which makes it one of those gifts that is more than just a gift. It is life-changing because Jesus is the source of our joy. Peter called it ***“an inexpressible and glorious joy”*** that is part of the inheritance we receive in Christ.

And like Nehemiah of the Old Testament, the Jewish leader who faced great odds in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, we can experience the truth that ***“the joy of the LORD is your strength”*** (Nehemiah 8:10).

JOY is Life-changing...JOY Defies our Circumstances, Jesus is the Source of our JOY...

IV. Joy Is a Choice

But before we close, I would like you to remember **that joy is a choice.**

It would be great if we felt joyful ALL the time. But the truth is there are... *Barriers* to joy, that **block it from entering your life.**

Depleters of joy, that **drain** the joy out of you.

Enemies of joy, that **fight against** you being joyful.

Destroyers of joy, that **steal** the joy God wants you to have.

Have you noticed what I meant when I said that at Christmas, JOY shows up everywhere!

Joy shows up throughout Scripture as a profound, compelling quality of life that transcends the events and circumstances which may trouble us. It is a fruit of God's spirit. Joy is a divine dimension of living that is not shackled by circumstances.

The Hebrew word means, ***"to leap or spin around with pleasure."*** ***[It is what I see my grandchildren and other kids doing.]*** In the New Testament the word refers to ***"gladness, bliss and celebration."***

The arrival of Jesus is THE MOST joyful event in history!

Remember when Mary showed up at Elizabeth's house? Elizabeth was overcome with joy. When it did, the beginning of Mary's expression went like this: ***"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:46–48, NIV).***

These are important words—with the key word being **rejoices**. It is the active, verb form of joy. In other words, Mary is choosing and embracing the role she had been given by God. Mary chose joy. Joseph chose joy.

In your situation right now, choose joy, and rejoice. Embrace the gift of JOY and align your vision with the work God is doing in you and wants to do through you. Don't wait until circumstances are perfect or you get it all figured out because you can't. When did Joseph and Mary get it figured out.

Romans 12:12 says, ***"Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. (NIV).***

Matt Redman has written a song called ' "Help from Heaven," it says.

*There is a moment every heart needs a rescue.
There is a season every soul needs a breakthrough.
Help from heaven. We all need help from heaven.*

When the world is on our shoulders,
And we need a hand to hold us.
When no miracle is found, still believe!
When the sea of night surrounds us,
And all questions try to drown us.
Just believe...just believe...in help from heaven!

**HAVE YOU LOST YOUR JOY? Then you need HELP FROM HEAVEN!
AND THAT HELP is found in Jesus.** Let's celebrate His birth with joy. Let's choose to make this a season of joy.

Let's PRAY: God, I don't want to live a *joyless* life! But I've let anxiety & hurt & resentment & confusion & a lot of other things- steal my joy. This Christmas I need help from heaven! Thank you for sending Jesus to be my Savior. I don't understand it all, but like Mary, I'm choosing to trust you & accept your plan for my life. And like Joseph, I need you to fill me with your grace, so I can let go of all the pain that has hurt me. I want the joy of the Lord to be my strength. And like the Wise Men I want to follow the Light you give me, one step at a time.

Benediction: *"But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for JOY. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you.."* —Psalm 5:11, NIV