

Surprised by Joy Luke 2:8-11

We come today to the third Sunday of Advent—the JOY Sunday. We lit the joy candle on the Advent Wreath. We sang Christmas carols which speak of joy and listened to a joyful anthem by the choir. We understand that we're supposed to be extra joyful this time of year—it's Christmas!--but is JOY really what we're feeling? Or, are we kinda' low on joy about now?

My hunch is, and I hope I'm wrong about this, but my guess is that many people don't really expect to be joyful at Christmas--or any other time of the year, for that matter. They would just as soon not be bothered by anything resembling genuine joy. That may be okay for children, but not for those of us who are all grown up—we've gotten past the joy stage of life. Does that resemble anybody you know?

Well, my prayer for them, for you, for us—is that joy will find a way to sneak up on us in spite of ourselves. May we all get "surprised by joy" sometime before this Christmas season ends.

It seems to me that there's a gotcha' quality about the first Christmas. Think about those shepherds---they were certainly surprised—frightened, at first, but eventually surprised by joy. What happened to them was totally unexpected. Listen to how Luke tells their story in chapter 2, verses 8-11 (KJV):

8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. 10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

Of course, just because the angels told the shepherds to be joyful, that doesn't mean they were—any more than having a preacher like me tell you that we ought to be joyful will make it happen. It's entirely possible to go through the whole Christmas season without one inkling of joy.

But I hope that won't be the case for any of us. Sometime during this sacred season, allow your old "been there and done that" disposition to be surprised by joy. Surprises can be good--joyful surprises are very good!

I shared a story at a funeral last week, and several people told me I should tell it at church some time. Since it's about a time when I got surprised—this seems like a good time right now.

Many of you knew Mr. Harold Walker. Or if not, you may be familiar with his beautiful home on Anderson's North Avenue—the one called Shangri-La. Harold loved Christmas—maybe it was because he was born just two days before Christmas—I don't know. I just know he loved to celebrate the Christmas season.

For years, Harold covered his house with bright lights each Christmas and filled his yard with ornaments. You could see the glow long before you got there. Parents would stop by with their children to see those elaborate displays—it was a fun Christmas tradition.

Well, here's the story. Thirteen years ago, our family had just moved to Anderson. We had been to watch one of our children play in a church league basketball game and afterwards, we stopped by a little diner on North Main Street for a late supper.

We finished eating, paid the bill, and got in our minivan to go home. The moment I turned the key in the ignition, though, the battery exploded. We couldn't go anywhere until it was replaced.

So our whole family piled back into the diner while I explained our predicament to the fellow behind the counter. As I was doing so, a deep, rather distinguished voice called out, "Dr. Thomason, allow me to help you with that. I'm Harold Walker, a member of First Baptist Church. I greet people and hand out bulletins on Sundays."

Well, I had met THAT Harold Walker—and I knew that voice. At church, though, he had white hair on top of his head. That evening at the diner, however, Harold had a baseball cap on his head--instead. It took me awhile to realize it was the same head—sometimes covered with a cap, but at other times, I learned, it was covered with a toupee!

"I have my truck out here—let's go find you a battery," he said. So we left the diner—and my family--and went out and got in his little Datsun pick-up. It was an old truck, full of junk—so much so he had to move some stuff around to clear off a place for me to sit.

Did I mention it was late?--but we finally found an open auto parts store, and I got a new battery. Harold asked me if I had any tools in my van to

install the battery. I didn't, so he suggested we stop by his house to get what we needed.

Now remember, my only introduction to Harold prior to this was a few meetings at church, and now, this trip in a little beaten up truck that seemed for the world to be on its last leg! So you can imagine my surprise when we pull into the driveway of Harold's beautiful home on North Avenue—again, the one called Shangri-La.

Then Harold raised his garage door. That brought another surprise: you've seen those bumper stickers, haven't you, usually stuck to the back side of some dilapidated old vehicle—the ones that read, "My other car is a Rolls Royce?" Well, Harold's really was. There was a Rolls Royce parked in his garage!

When I asked him if it was his, he said, "Oh, yes, but I just drive it to church on Sundays." I was hoping maybe he would make an exception this time—I mean, normally he just saw me on Sundays--but Harold got some tools, and we headed back to the minivan—yes, still in that little "beat-up, junked-up pick-up!"

Now, friends, the reason I told that story at a funeral is this. If we are people of faith, we have the blessed assurance that our loved ones who have died in the Lord are now with Him in His heaven.

But you and I cannot comprehend what heaven will be like any more than I could imagine Harold and his rickety old pickup truck taking me to a house called Shangri-La with a Rolls Royce parked in the garage! You just had to be there!

Now ponder this: no doubt Harold was just as surprised and amazed as he entered heaven several days ago as I was several years ago being chauffeured in such an unusual way to such a lovely home! I suppose, friends, we just have to be there too! What a glorious surprise heaven will be!

God is full of surprises—and most of them are intended to make us joyful. Christmas is one of God's joyful surprises—and not just for shepherds back then, but for all of us now. God knows we need it—and most of us really want to be joyful, don't we?

We sense somewhere deep inside that this Christmas joy is important—that it's vital to our lives. Fact of the matter is, some of us knock ourselves out this time of year trying to find it, or create it, or buy it, or in some other

way, bring it about—but we attempt to do this through our own efforts. And that’s the problem.

This is what’s so crazy about Christmas, friends. Those kinds of efforts never work. They only keep Christmas joy at arms length from our hearts. Maybe, when you get right down to it, the only way we ever get to experience real joy is to be surprised by it.

That’s the point, it seems to me. It’s yet another way that God communicates to us that the truest, deepest blessings of life are not dependent on us, but on what we allow our Heavenly Father to do in us and with us and through us. Somehow joy shows up in the midst of our openness to what God wants to do and in whatever way He chooses to do it—which is always His surprise.

So, by Divine design, joy shows up in places where we would never think to look—like a smelly stable in an insignificant little village called Bethlehem—can you think of anything less expected--and more surprising--than that? Not the stable and the little town, of course—there are lots of those around--but the fact that this is where God’s Only Begotten Son was born.

Jesus is the real surprise, you see. He’s the One who surprises us with joy—the only One who can bring Christmas joy to our hearts. I read recently about an English author and artist named Lawrence Housman. In the early 1900’s, he produced a nativity play called simply *Bethlehem*. It debuted at the great hall of the University of London.

To enhance the beauty and sacredness of Jesus’ birth, Housman decided that instead of using a child in the manger, the infant Jesus would be represented by a light. This light, shining forth from the manger, would portray the radiance of the newborn Savior.

Here’s how it was supposed to happen. It would be quite dramatic. All the lights on the stage would be turned off so that only the light in the manger could be seen. It would be beautifully obvious for all to see: the purpose of the play: to lift up Jesus, “the Light of the World.”

Well, as is sometimes evidenced around here, things don’t always go as planned. The stage hand who was supposed to turn off all the lights except the one in the manger—instead, turned off all the lights including the one in the manger, leaving the entire hall in total darkness.

Housman, the play's author, was seated in the front row. And in the darkness and silence of that moment, his voice was heard by all present when he called out: "Hey, you switched off Jesus."

Now, I couldn't help but think as I read that story that although this was not the message Housman intended—he wasn't trying to be prophetic in that moment—but maybe this was the message that was most needed then—and needed more than ever if the play was being performed for us today.

We know Jesus came as the Light of the World. We know He came to bring us joy. But sometimes our world just seems to be getting darker and sadder instead—and maybe that's because WE are guilty of "switching Jesus off."

Joy goes missing from our lives when Jesus is missing—when we've 'switched Him off' in our efforts to acquire joy in our own ways, by our own devices—something for us to consider as Christmas approaches.

I'm sure there are some people who switch Jesus off because they mistakenly believe that Jesus will stand in the way of their joy—but that's a wrong-headed notion. It may be true of religion in general, including much that gets labeled as Christianity—but it's not true to the person and message of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was joyful. The holier-than-thou types were always criticizing Him for this. They accused him of being a glutton and wine-bibber because he showed up for celebrations like the marriage feast in Cana and Matthew's party—when this brand new disciple invited an assortment of tax collectors and other sinners—his friends—to come and meet Jesus!

When the bah-humbug types, also called Pharisees, complained about the guest list, Jesus said, "Well, at least they know they need a doctor." Matthew had some sick friends who needed what the Great Physician had to give.

Jesus is no "House-type" of doctor, if you'd seen that weird and often sad show. Jesus is a Patch Adams type of doctor who understands the healing power of happiness and prescribes "good news of great joy" that He alone can bring to our lives—because He is "the good news." He is the "great joy!"

Jesus promises to "make all things new" beginning with our lives—not to make us sadder, but gladder! He tells us that we will experience tribulation in this world, but urges us to be of good cheer because He has overcome the world.

“I am come that you might have life,” he says, “and have it more abundantly.” “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” “My peace I give unto you—not the kind the world gives, but the kind that can never be taken away.” All of this is part of the deep and abiding joy that only Jesus can give.

He wants us to have His joy in our lives, so Jesus offers it to us as His gift. It’s His surprise, because we have no reason to expect it and no way to get it on our own. We won’t find it in our favorite store. It’s God’s alone to give.

He made that clear at the outset. The angel announced to the shepherds, “I bring you good tidings of great joy.” Here it is, shepherds. You don’t deserve it, have no reason to expect it, could never earn it or find it on your own. But surprise—here it is—take it or leave it—here’s JOY—Joy to the World, joy to you and me.

We should know by now that our feeble attempts at joy don’t work. So let’s open our hearts to what God has done—and to what He continues to do in the lives of the faithful.

This Christmas, BE SURPRISED by God’s gift of love/ by His grace which is sufficient for our every need/ by our own acts of kindness and sacrificial giving which end up blessing us. Members and friends of First Baptist, let’s let God surprise us with His joy!