

Great Joy

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve 2022

Joy is woven all through the story we tell and hear this night. It's a thread sewn through the narrative that Luke tells. Or, to change the metaphor, in the stories about Elizabeth and Mary, and the birth of John and Jesus, joy is a steady current running deep below the surface. It's everywhere.

When Gabriel shared the news with Elizabeth that she would have a son, he promised, "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth..." (Lk. 1:14). After Gabriel announced to Mary that she would bear a son whose name will be Jesus, she went to visit Elizabeth. When Mary arrived, Elizabeth said, "as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy" (Lk. 1:42b-44). Then joy and gladness fill Mary as she breaks forth into song, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior" (Lk. 1:46b-47). Joy, and rejoicing, drive the narrative of Luke's Gospel. And then shepherds abiding in the fields encounter the glory of God and hear the angel say, "Do not be afraid, for see—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" (Lk. 2:10-11). There's no doubt: Luke wants the world to know that the birth of Jesus means joy.

In a few moments, we will sing "Joy to the World." My favorite carol. It beautifully captures the wonder and, well, joy that comes with the birth of Jesus and all that he brings to the world. But is this *our* joy? Do we feel it? Perhaps it's tough singing this carol when one doesn't feel joyful. Maybe it feels forced or false. You can't make someone be joyful. Given the news of the world these days, singing about joy might feel misplaced. On Tuesday, the Drug Enforcement Administration said it seized more than 379 million deadly doses of fentanyl this year, enough to kill every American. The nation remains bitterly divided. Authoritarianism is on the rise. There's economic instability, inflation, and fears of recession. Refugees flee violence at home, risking everything so their children might have a better future. Teenagers, young adults, people of every age are anxious about the future. The people of Ukraine defiantly defend themselves against Russian aggression and, tonight, try to keep warm without electricity and heat. Closer to home, countless here seek warmth and shelter from the bitter cold. We all know people, family, and friends, who are fighting their own battles, people just trying to hold their lives together, dealing with health issues, struggling with addiction, weighed down and numbed by grief. It's a good reminder to be kind for everyone is fighting a hard battle.

And if we think things are bad today, the world that Jesus was born into, "in those days" of Caesar Augustus (Lk. 2:1), was dark. Ruled by a foreign, oppressive force, an empire with alien gods, a world where the arrogant and prideful, the rich and powerful get away with murder, stand in the way of God's justice and crush the bodies and spirits of God's people. A world where people suffered terribly, desperately in need of mercy, compassion, grace, healing, peace, justice, and wholeness.

So, then, where is the joy? What is this joy? None of this sounds especially joyful—or hopeful. It's easy to fall into despair. The angel that announced good news knew full well that

the world needed saving. Those needing a savior are open to this joy. To hear the joy, know the joy, feel the joy, we need to be close to the world, get within earshot of the cries of God's people, and get close to places of darkness in the world and within ourselves because the light of God's joy shines there. The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light (Isaiah 9:2). This doesn't mean that for people of faith, the darkness goes away. Instead, we know that something else is going on within the darkness (John 1:5). Underneath the apparent suffering and sorrows of the world, there is a deeper joy. Cole Arthur Riley writes in her beautiful, recently-released book *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us*—she has a chapter devoted to joy—writes, “that those who refuse or neglect to tap into the sorrows of the world may find joy elusive.”¹ The good news announced to the shepherds is joy for the poor. Joy for the marginalized. Joy for the overlooked, lowly, and long silenced. They hear the message because they are more open to it—we are all especially receptive to this message when life is anything but joyful.

This joy is something other than being happy. It has little to do with happiness. Several years ago, Marie Kondo told us we could declutter our lives by picking up an object; if it sparks joy, keep it. If it doesn't, let it go.² She said this applies to books too, which I have a real problem with—I have a lot of books. But I digress. That's not what the Bible means by joy.

Joy sits deeper in us than happiness. The Greek word for “joy,” *chara*, is related to the Greek word for “grace,” *charis*. Joy, like grace, can't be earned. Joy, like grace, is a gift that we receive. It's given to us. Grace comes toward us, comes upon us, overcomes us. And grace elicits a steady, sure, deep response that we call joy.

In his final circular letter to his friends, written on 29 November 1942, before his arrest by the Gestapo in 1943, written in dark, despairing times, Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) said, “Joy abides with God, and it comes down from God and embraces spirit, soul, and body; and where this joy has seized a person, there it spreads, there it carries one away, there it bursts open closed doors... The joy of God goes through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross; that is why it is invincible, irrefutable.”³

Because of the good news we celebrate this night, we can be both realistic and brutally honest about the world *and* still be joyful and full of hope. Both-and. Jesus was born into a dangerous, scary world, but that world could not rob the shepherds of their joy. Their joy is grounded in God's good news for all people. It's deeper than despair. It's a joy given by God, which the world cannot take away. The birth of Jesus means joy. God's joy. For you and me, for us, together. It's shared joy that the church gives to the world, for the sake of the world, for the healing and hope of the world.

And that joy, as Mary knew, causes the heart and soul to rejoice, and rejoicing is defiant against all that seeks to rob God's people of hope. It's defiant joy. Baltimore poet Lucille Clifton (1936-2010) captures this, and she invites us to share the joy. “Come celebrate with me that everyday something has tried to kill me and has failed.”⁴

Defiant joy.



Great joy.

One of the leading theologians of our time, Willie James Jennings, said, “Joy is an act of resistance against despair and its forces.”⁵ Despair does not want us to reach the promised land. It does not want us to find peace or hope or meaning. Our work together, church, is to resist despair, for the light shines in the darkness.

Allow God’s joy to live and breathe and come alive in us and be our song.

Joy to the world! The Lord has come!

Image: Nativity from the Missal of Eberhard von Freiffenklau (Dutch, 1446), Walters Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD.

¹ Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stores That Make Us* (New York: Convergent, 2022), 164.

² See Marie Kondo, *Spark Joy: An Illustrated Master Class on the Art of Organizing and Tidying Up* (Ten Speed Press, 2016).

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Circular Letter of 29 November 1942, written to former students of the Finkenwalde community or seminary, a training center of the Confessing Church, may be found [here](#).

⁴ Lucille Clifton, *The Book of Light* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1993). Cited in Riley, 169.

⁵ See Willie James Jennings’s [interview](#) with Miroslav Volf, “Joy and the Act of Resistance Against Despair,” Yale Center for Faith and Culture. Also cited in Riley, 168.