

**Summary:**

“The Lord is Come: Incarnate Joy,” a Christmas Eve message in our series “Heaven and Nature Sing,” by Rev Jay Anderson at Church of the Master United Methodist, Westerville, OH, Tuesday, December 24, 2019.

**Detail:**

Hello, my name is Jay, although as a child in school it was often, ironically, misprinted as Joy, and I’m a recovering retailer. For three months out of every year, for nineteen years in a row, I literally sold Christmas.

The old reel-to-reel tape player in our stores churned out the same collection of Christmas music, in the same order, non-stop, beginning on Thanksgiving Day through Christmas Eve, 14-16 hours a day, every day, for every one of those nineteen years. And in those weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas, I resigned myself to not seeing my family, to working 60-70 hour weeks, to not being in church on most Sunday mornings of Advent, and to seeing people at both their best and their worst - their best when you helped someone find the perfect gift they were looking for, their worst when you ran out of the Cabbage Patch doll, Playstation Game set, or the fill-in-the-blank big toy that was all the rage that year and that would mean the end of life itself if Johnny or Janie didn’t find it under the tree at Christmas. To think me a Grinch about Christmas, was to underestimate how much the real Grinch truly loved Christmas! But that was the life I had resigned myself to in those years, until that is, I resigned from that life.

I’m not going to stand here and tell you that there was a Christmas miracle ala some Hallmark Channel Christmas movie - I did introduce

myself as a “recovering” retailer. God is still working on me, although ironically, if you think about, I’m still selling Christmas. I’m just working on the other side of it now.

You see, there are parts of Christmas that I absolutely love. Like this. I love planning and leading worship at Advent and Christmas.

I love the hymns and carols we sing, I love Christmas Cantatas and Children’s pageants and the Hanging of the Greens. I tear up when Jimmy Stewart’s friends and family flood him with love and support in “It’s A Wonderful Life.” Every time. I get choked up when I see the look on a child’s face, especially my grandkids, when they see Santa Claus, or presents under the tree.

These parts I love. Other parts, well not so much.

This year during Advent I invited the congregation to read one chapter of Luke’s gospel each day in December. There are 24 chapters in Luke, so if you read one chapter each day you had the opportunity to read the entire story of Jesus, from his birth, through his life and teachings, to his death and resurrection, all by Christmas Eve.

It’s the only gospel that is set up in such a way as to allow that to happen so easily.

And I don’t know how many of you did that daily reading - I know some of you did but I’m not asking for a show of hands or anything - but as I did it I found myself connecting to Luke’s account in ways I hadn’t before.

I’ve always said that Mark’s gospel is my favorite, but Luke’s is now a close second. And the reason for that is that Luke portrays Jesus in a

way that resonates closely with what I've always thought Christmas, and Christianity, was supposed to be about; caring for the least, the last, and the lost; lifting up those who are marginalized; and sharing the good news with those who aren't normally the first to hear good news.

Luke, it seems, also knows how to sell Christmas.

The scripture we read from Luke's gospel, the story of the birth of Jesus, is one of the most familiar passages in the entire Bible.

It has been read in churches across the world, in languages familiar and in tongues we've never before heard, every year on this night for nearly two thousand years. For some, they first heard this passage - or perhaps have *only* heard this passage - in the Charlie Brown Christmas Special where Linus recites *these* words in answer to Charlie Brown's question about the true meaning of Christmas. This passage provides a good answer to that question, if we allow ourselves more than just a token amount of time to consider it.

In our weekly worship we've been exploring JOY for the past four weeks. Packaged in worship experiences built around the theme of "Joy to the World," the hymn we sang earlier that celebrates 300 years this year, we've explored Hopeful Joy, Loving Joy, Unabashed Joy, and Peaceful Joy.

Tonight in our exploration of the song and the theme, "Joy to the World," we encounter the idea that "The Lord is Come," revealing "Incarnate Joy." Joy made flesh.

But even as we get to this message tonight after four weeks, I do not mean to suggest to you that Joy only arrives tonight; joy has been with

us all along; joy is born into the world and into us again and again. Sometimes it's just harder for us to see it.

Purportedly, we come to worship tonight to celebrate joy made flesh, (some of you, I know, came because Mom or Grandma said you had to, or because "you've always done it this way, or to avail yourself of a church potluck meal) so it makes sense, as we listen to the music and hear read our texts, that we be mindful of all our senses and how they receive this message as well.

The commentary on Isaiah notices, and with our ears we hear, the joyful noise of the passage: the voice of a messenger, the cry of the sentinels or lookouts, the song of a city. We're invited to see the beauty in the feet of the messenger who brings the good news.

If we really put ourselves into this passage, we could also, perhaps, feel the stone and sand under foot that the messenger felt as he/she brought that good news.

Likewise, in the Luke passage, if we allow our senses to do the work God created them to do, we might hear the sounds of a donkey, smell the aroma of hay and of animals gathered nearby, hear the sounds of a young woman, a girl really, crying out in labor and the welcome cries of the newborn on what was not really a silent night at all, at least not during the early part of the night.

All the passages are full of movement: the feet upon the mountains, shepherds and angels coming and going, God breaking in, birthing in. What better way to celebrate joy made-flesh, Incarnate Joy, than with movement and sound, with our whole bodies, our whole selves.

At the same time, though, this is a story that should not even have been noticed, let alone told again and again over these past twenty centuries.

After all, countless young girls around the world gave birth that night and we remember none of **them**. Luke, however, juxtaposes the “smallness” of Mary’s story by setting it in a larger context: *“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus... while Quirinius was governor.”* We expect dramatic narratives when the subject is Emperors and Governors, Presidents and Potentates, but not so much when it’s an unwed teenage mother giving birth.

We tend to look down on them as a society. Yet Luke places this simple story amid the powers and principalities of the age to make a claim: The child born to this young mother will change the course of history, and the fates of leaders and common folk alike hang in the balance of his destiny.

Looking back at this story we’ve maybe heard at least as many times as we are years old, we probably don’t realize just how audacious, if not downright outlandish, Luke’s claim is. So accustomed to the familiar images in this passage, we may miss the irony of setting newborn beside emperor as if the two could possibly have anything to do with one another.

Or conversely, at a deeper level, however, perhaps we do recognize something of the absolute, even absurd vulnerability of Mary and her child, and that their very vulnerability may be a large part of what moves us.

Few of us, after all, have much experience with anything truly miraculous, unless of course you're a fan of the 1969 New York Mets, in which case you've actually experienced a miracle, or a Cleveland Browns fan, in which you continue to experience an eternal season of Advent, just waiting and waiting...

Yet we're moved by this degree of vulnerability, aren't we? We recognize the vulnerability of a newborn, the fear and hope of a new mother or father.

These are things we can relate to, these are sensations we all have felt, along with others.

After all, as much as we come together tonight to celebrate joy, there are some among us this Christmas Eve who come with trepidation, with fear about the economy, about their job, or about a faltering relationship. There are some of you in the pews tonight who come to worship while overshadowed by illness or immersed in grief - I know that's kind of where our family is right now - filled with foreboding about the safety of loved ones who are serving abroad, or who come weighed down by the responsibility of caring for an elderly parent or a disabled child.

So what does this story mean for them?

Where is the joy for these of our friends and family?

The simple truth of the matter is that each and all of us, whether dressed in our holiday best or not, have been indelibly marked by the everyday hardships of this life and so are well acquainted with the sheer frailty of the unlikely lead characters in Luke's tale.

We instinctively feel for them, and each Christmas we are simultaneously surprised, humbled, and encouraged to hear the promise that God is at work through them for us.

But to revisit Charlie Brown's question about the true meaning of Christmas, I believe that somehow, someday, the meaning of Christmas is lodged somewhere, someplace deep inside who we are - you and me; it is enfleshed in us just as it is enfleshed in the Christ child.

And if I can get you to entertain that notion for just a few minutes, then, you might actually have an embodied experience of a rather baffling and bewildering doctrine called Incarnation in which we believe, but at the end of the day with which, if we are honest, we hardly know what to do.

What does the incarnation really mean? As theologian Karoline Lewis points out,

“...it means that God chose to enter into our humanity, in all of its fullness and foibles, its power and pain, its joys and sorrows. ...it means that God would even experience death itself, only to defeat its determined grip on our lives and turn it into eternal life.”

But then she also challenges us to consider what it really means for us, here and now and today?

And she offers,

“The incarnation means that at the same time the incarnation is a revelation of God, it is also a revelation

of who we are. We begin to realize that in God's decision to become human that **our** humanity matters.

We begin to recognize that in God's commitment to bodies that **our** bodies matter. We begin to remember that in God's determination to be known in the flesh means that **doing ministry** in the flesh matters. What you do, how you are, who you are, matters. That Christ came to be one **with** us, one **of** us, means that Christ is in us...and in our neighbors; the neighbors we like and the ones, well, not so much; the neighbors who bring us joy and those neighbors who suck the joy out of life; those neighbors who come alongside us and those who send us over the edge.

Christ is enfleshed in the people in the choir and the people in the pew, in the people with riches and the people in rags, in the powerful and the powerless. Incarnation means that God is present in this sometimes Christmas crank of a clergy person and in whatever emotions and feelings you bring to this season as well.

The message of Christmas that Luke offers us is that God came, not to dwell with the high and mighty, but with the lowly, the unexpected, those considered "nothing" by this world. Here, amid the weakness and vulnerability of human birth, God makes God's intentions for humanity fully known. God is love, John writes, and here Luke portrays that love made flesh, as God takes human form, the infinite becomes finite, and that which is imperishable becomes perishable.

The genius of Luke's story, of course, is that he portrays all this through the simple, sympathetic, and even everyday characters of a young mother and common shepherds. If God can work in and



through such ordinary characters, we're invited to wonder if, perhaps, God can also work in and through us.

Luke wants, I think, to make sure we realize that it is not just human flesh "in general" that God takes on in Christ; it is *our* flesh. And it is not simply history "in general" that God enters via this birth, it is *our* history and *our* very lives to which God is committed.

So here is what you need to know about the meaning of Christmas and Incarnate Joy: That God was born, was human, means that you matter, that I matter -- that we are special.

Not in some sort of narcissistic, egocentric, kind of way but because to be human can never be a generalized claim. To be human is to be you. So be you.

And no, it's not *all* about you, but it is *everything* about you. The incarnation is this radically reciprocal reality. God's commitment to being human in Jesus is God also saying, "I am committed to you being you and being fully you." It is God saying "I love the truly you."

Karoline Lewis quotes Richard Rohr, where he writes, "The True Self -- where you and God are one -- does not choose to love as much as it *is love* itself already (Colossians 3:3-4). The True Self does not teach us compassion as much as it *is compassion*... From this more spacious and grounded place, one naturally connects, empathizes, forgives, and loves everything.

We were made in love, for love, and unto love.

This deep inner 'yes,' that is God in me, is already loving God through me. The false self does not really know how to love, in a very deep or broad way.

It is too opportunistic. It is too small.

It is too self-referential to be compassionate.”

This story from long ago in a Galilee far, far away is not only about angels and shepherds or a mother and her newborn. It's also about us, all of us gathered here tonight amid the candles and readings, carols and prayers. God came at Christmas for us, as us, that we might have hope and courage amid the dark and dangerous times and places of our lives, that we might know the joy that God's gift can bring, regardless of the baggage we carry into this season.

This, in the end, is why we gather, so that as God entered into time and history so long ago through the Word made flesh, God might also enter ~~our~~ lives even now through the Word proclaimed in Scripture, song, and sermon.

Christmas is the gift from God of God's very self for the sake of you being your very self so that the world might indeed know God's love -- in, through, and because of you. So whether you're still in Christmas recovery like me, or if you are easily mistaken for Will Farrell's character in the movie Elf, may the joy of this season find you where you are and as you are, and may the love of God made flesh in this child remind you that you, too, are a beloved child of God. Amen.