

# God with Us Brings Joy

## Luke 2:8-11 New International Version (NIV)

<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

“Great joy for all the people” What is great joy?

Joy is a lot like trying to put a puppy in a box for Christmas. It comes spilling out to love and lick everyone that’s around. Fortunately, Joy is not as hairy and doesn’t make a mess, but joy is boundless and uncontainable. Joy overflows, and when you’ve experienced joy, you want to share it with someone else—or as many people as you can. Joy bubbles over and touches everyone it comes in contact with.

Joy is what we are celebrating on this third Sunday of Advent.

If you’ve been journeying with us the past two weeks toward Christmas, you know that we have been celebrating Advent. As a quick recap, the word *advent* means “coming” or “arrival,” and the season is marked by expectation, waiting, anticipation, and longing. It is a season that links the past, present, and future. 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 the coming of Christ’s kingdom when He returns for His people. Each week, we focus on a different attribute of God represented in the coming of Jesus: hope, love, joy, and peace. Because Jesus is Immanuel, “God with Us,” He is the embodiment of these traits, who has entered our world and who fills us with them all.

## Great Joy Overcomes Great Pain

If you were here with us on the first Sunday of Advent, you remember we talked about Zechariah. 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 Jesus, 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. 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 1:13–15).

The catch was that Zechariah and Elizabeth were old. Elizabeth was beyond childbearing years, and the couple had never been able to have kids. So, besides the shock from talking to an angel, Zechariah couldn't get over the fact that it was possible for his wife to have a baby. And as a result, his voice was taken away until the baby was born.

But today, let's look a little closer at Elizabeth, because in the story of God with Us, she deeply experienced joy in the midst of the miraculous events she found herself suddenly in the middle of.

At first, Elizabeth might have dismissed the lack of a pregnancy. Maybe the timing just wasn't right to conceive. Or maybe, like many of you in this room have probably experienced, there was a pregnancy. Joy and hope would have leaped in Elizabeth's heart when she realized that a new embryo had sprung to life in her womb. Maybe she even told people she was pregnant. But then—something happened, and there was a miscarriage. While physically hard and emotionally painful, Elizabeth might have dismissed the first one or two as a fluke. But as many times as a pregnancy began, it came to an end prematurely.

Friends and family probably offered encouragement and shared her sorrow. They might have offered advice that while well intentioned was just plain hurtful: "Maybe there is some sin in your life you need to confess," they might have said. "When we tried this, it helped us get pregnant. Maybe something's just wrong with you."

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, that she could not have a child. At some point, the social stigma would have stuck. "Barren," they called her. It became a shameful and permanent mark. Elizabeth would have grieved over the loss of ever being a mother. She would have accepted the loss of the status that came in her culture from bearing children. She would never be considered as worthy or esteemed as other women. She accepted her fate as a failure in the eyes of her society.

And then God came.

On an ordinary day with Zechariah at work in the temple, the angel Gabriel showed up out of the blue with that miraculous message. Zechariah couldn't even tell his wife what the angel had said. He would have had to either write it out, or use signs and gestures to give his wife the news.

Elizabeth must have thought she was getting the wrong message at first. It seemed too good to be true! Hope must have kicked in her heart like the thump of a baby in the womb. Could she even allow herself to go there? Could she open her heart to the possibility after hoping and waiting and praying for so long, only to be let down again and again and again?

From what we can tell from Luke's account, it seems Elizabeth had an easier time of accepting the miraculous news than her husband. And soon she

was pregnant, saying, "The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people" (Luke 1:25).

What we do know is that in her sixth month of pregnancy, Elizabeth experienced a deep encounter with joy brought by the coming Messiah, whose human life had just sprung into being in Mary's womb. As we discussed last week, young Mary left her home shortly after her own angelic visit and came to stay with her cousin Elizabeth for three months. As soon as she arrived, Elizabeth's baby "leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:41).

Elizabeth's joy overflowed, and she greeted Mary with a beautiful and insightful blessing: "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. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" (Luke 1:42-45).

The puppy was out of the box now. Joy was flowing. And true to its nature, joy was contagious.

Mary burst into her own song of praise and thanksgiving as she gave words to the miracle happening through her.

Already Immanuel, God with Us, was unleashing joy on earth.

And already His joy began rippling outward. When Elizabeth gave birth to John three months later, the joy of her miracle spread through her village and family. "Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy" (Luke 1:57).

Perhaps there is no joy greater than that of a mother holding her newborn child. For Elizabeth, the joy must have been especially overwhelming. She was

experiencing a miracle, and it was a miracle that healed a lifetime of hurt, pain, disrespect, and shame. And it was only the beginning of the miracles she would witness in her lifetime.

## Great Joy has a Great Source

What would you and I give to know such joy? To see the scars and shame of our life washed away so dramatically?

Most likely we won't see it happen through such an obvious miracle, but the joy Elizabeth experienced is available to us. This is the joy brought into our world by Jesus, God with Us. And though we are living long past His time on earth, His life and His joy are available to us now.

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).

An inexpressible and glorious joy. That's deep stuff.

This is stuff that runs much deeper than happiness. We love to be happy. We love to feel good. But happiness comes and goes as the circumstances around us change by the hour and the minute. Happiness can come from many things: Birthday parties and balloons. 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 enjoyable things to be savored and enjoyed for sure—but all are fleeting.

Joy includes happiness, but it runs much deeper. Joy permeates our souls.

Joy comes from God with Us—Jesus is the source of our joy. Peter called it “an inexpressible and glorious joy” that is part of the inheritance we are receiving in Christ. With His life and the promise of eternal life beyond this world, we find the deep kind of joy that fills us no matter the pain that we still face on this earth.

As Jesus explained to His disciples about His coming death and resurrection, “So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy” (John 16:22).

As we turn our eyes expectantly to Jesus in this Advent season, and as we walk with Him beyond toward the day when He will come again and fulfill His healing work, we can experience His joy in the process. And we can know with confidence that an even greater, unending joy awaits us one day. One day we will receive it in full. Yet even now, we find hope and joy in what Jesus has done and what we know He will faithfully do in the future. 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).

## **Great Joy is Greater Than Our Circumstances**

We compared happiness and joy a little bit ago, but if there’s one defining characteristic of joy that I hope you take away from our time together today, it is this: Joy defies our circumstances.

Happiness comes and goes with positive events or experiences. Joy flows deep even in the face of challenge, hardship, or suffering. Joy drawn from Jesus, God with Us, sees the big picture beyond the immediate pain.

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

Joy understands that there is more than meets the eye. That God is at work always, even in the tough stuff of life. And that eventually God will make everything right and healed and whole, including us. Because of that, we can experience joy in the here and now, no matter how bad the here and now looks and feels.

Sure, there's a process involved, and that's part of the point. As we continue to practice opening our hearts to God's Spirit, immersing ourselves in His Word, and aligning our thinking and perspectives to His ways, we 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 as we journey toward Christmas? What are the situations that are stealing your joy? Or the hurts where pain seems to overrule?

I don't mean to make light of what you are going through, because I know the pain is real for us all. But can I encourage you to take a look from another angle? Can I encourage you to ask God to give you another view—to show you His big picture?

You may not experience a miracle as clear as Elizabeth's, but in Advent and in Christmas there is a miracle for us all: the miracle of God come to earth to be with us, to heal us, to forgive us, to redeem and restore all our pain, to turn it into good. This is a cause for joy even in our darkest days.

Last week, for the 54th consecutive year, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* was broadcast on a major network to a national audience. It's still as good as it ever was.

It's interesting that the scene that stole the show almost didn't happen.

Do you remember it? As the gang is preparing for their local Christmas play, everyone gets mad at Charlie Brown for buying a pitiful, almost hopeless, tree.

Dejected, he says, "Everything I do turns into a disaster. I guess I don't know what Christmas is all about." And he cries out: "Is there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"

Linus says, "Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about."

He then steps center stage and recites the Nativity story from Luke 2 — the story of the angels appearing before the shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus.

When network executives previewed the program, they objected: "You can't read long passages of the King James Version on broadcast TV; you'll lose your audience."

Peanuts creator Charles Schultz was adamant. He said, **"If we don't tell the Christmas story, who will?"**

The scene stayed in, and it turned out that the network executives were wrong. After the program aired, critics praised Linus' reading, calling it the "dramatic highlight of the season."

Schultz has a point — one which every church, every preacher, every believer would do well to consider. "If we don't tell the Christmas story, who will?"



I'm referring to more than merely repeating the sequence of events found in Matthew and Luke. I'm referring to proclaiming the message of the season ... the meaning of it all. – GREAT JOY!

Some may never know, if they don't hear it from you or me, that Christmas means that God is in our presence: *Our loving Heavenly Father sent his Son to take life's journey with us, to make right that which had gone wrong, to save us from our sin and ourselves.*

In the coming days you may encounter a Charlie Brown, beaten down and discouraged, who wonders what this season — or life itself — is really about.

Be sure to let them know.

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). Jesus, come to be God with Us, has brought us joy—no matter what we are facing.

## Great Joy is a Great Choice

Before we close today, I'd like to look at one more aspect of joy that we can apply as we continue our Advent observance. That is the fact that joy can be a choice, and joy can be an action.

We've talked about Mary in previous weeks, and we talked about her today as she spent time with Elizabeth. Remember when Mary showed up at Elizabeth's house? Elizabeth was overcome with joy, which spread to Mary. 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).

These are important words—with the key word being *rejoices*. It’s the active form of joy, the verb. And this is Mary choosing and embracing joy in the role she had been given by God.

She didn’t have to.

Mary could have looked at her situation a little bit like this... She didn’t ask to be the mother of God’s Son. If she had been asked, she might have stepped backward.

But in Mary’s words we see her response: She rejoices. She chooses joy. She focuses on the big picture and embraces her difficult role.

In a similar way, in our own situations and seasons, we can do the same. We can choose joy. We can rejoice. We can embrace the miracle of God with Us and align our vision with the work He is doing in and through us.

The Bible is filled with verses exhorting and encouraging us to rejoice. Probably because we all need lots of reminders.

Philippians 4:4 tells us, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

Romans 12:12 offers, “Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying” (NLT).

These are only the beginning, but the message and the takeaway is the same: We have reason for joy because God is with us, and we can choose to embrace it.

Friends, let’s choose to make this a season of joy. Let’s rejoice as we figuratively await the arrival of Christ, and let’s celebrate His birth with joy. God is with us. And so joy is with us—a joy that flows deep within our spirits and

outward because our King, our Savior, is with us, always loving, always working, even in the midst of any hardship we will face.

### **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

# Order of Service

1. Angels We Have Heard On High - 5
2. Opening Prayer - 5
3. Sunday School Recognition - 10
4. Announcements - 5
5. Offering - 5
6. Children's Play – 10:45 (20)
7. BGMC - 5
8. Greeting – 5
9. Worship – 11:15
  - a. God Is With Us Now - 5
  - b. We Lift You High - 5
  - c. I Stand In Awe - 5
10. Message – 11:30 (30)
11. Volunteer Recognition – 12:00