

Arrival: Joy

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Date: 15 December 2024

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[0:00] So welcome here for this Sunday, December 15th. Now that I have the fiasco, everyone remembers at the end of November with all my dates messed up, I now panic.

So I just pause, make sure Sunday, December 15th is correct. My name's Kent Dixon, and it's my joy to be the pastor here. On each Sunday of the Advent season, we light candles to recognize one of the four virtues that Jesus brings us.

And maybe you know this from your past, and you're familiar with this Advent season and all of this process, and maybe you're not. But the four virtues that Jesus brings us that we commemorate during Advent are hope, peace, joy, and love.

So this morning as we continue in this season of Advent, we're lighting our first candle again, which represents hope. Our second candle, which represents, and also our third candle, which represents, hey, well done class.

Well done. Your slightly liturgical pastor salutes you. My Lutheran pastor friends are going, good for you to celebrate Advent.

[1:15] Way to go, you vanilla generic pastor guy. Okay. So are you wondering why that third candle is pink? It's not just because I ran out of purple candles.

It's pink because that's the traditional liturgical color that represents joy. There's that L word again, liturgical. The third Sunday of Advent is also sometimes known as, and you've heard me say this in past years, it's called Godete Sunday.

And it's meant to remind us of the joy that the world experienced at the birth of Jesus, as well as the joy that the faithful, us, have reached the midpoint of Advent.

Today we wish for the world to know the promise fulfilled in our King, the Prince of Peace, the Wonderful Counselor. And we declare, reflecting the words of Psalm 40, verse 5, Many, O Lord my God, are the wonders you have done.

The things you planned for us, no one can recount to you. Were I to speak and tell of them, they would be too many to declare. As we reflect on the wonder of the promise of Christmas, we thank God for all of his promises that are fulfilled in the birth, the life, and death of Jesus Christ and his resurrection.

[2:37] And we rejoice in God's faithful love, which brings us immeasurable joy. Today we have reason to celebrate. We're officially, as I said a moment ago, halfway through this annual journey back to Bethlehem, back to where the miraculous birth of Jesus changed the world forever.

As you're probably aware now, we celebrate the journey through the season of Advent, which is derived from the Latin word adventus, which means coming or arrival.

Arrival. So that's the specific event of the season that leads us to the moment when Jesus arrived. With him, all the prophetic hope and the promise of the Messiah promised to redeem the people of God.

His arrival also gives us great cause for joy in and amongst the people of God who'd been waiting so long for the Messiah to come. The people were waiting for this event.

And today we reflect on this great joy. We recognize that we also have a great reason to be filled with joy because we also celebrate the birth of Jesus.

[3:52] And you think, no kidding, we do that December 25th every year. Doesn't make it less special. And if it's starting to feel less special to you, dig into why that is.

As the beloved Christmas song declares, you know it well, joy to the world. The Lord is come. Let earth receive her king.

Let every heart prepare him room. And heaven and nature sing. Do you think of those words when you sing them or do they just come out?

When you think of Christmas carols and when you sing Christmas carols, we'll be singing, we've sung some today, we'll continue to sing some through and into Christmas Eve. But even when you hear them, if you're out shopping somewhere, think of these words and what they mean. Some of the best theological teaching I've ever heard is in Christmas carols. And people don't realize. That's God's sense of humor to me that the world sings of the arrival of his son, Jesus Christ.

[4 : 56] And yet, do they recognize it? Interesting. So today as we consider the joy that comes with Jesus, we're going to look at a passage from Luke 2. And everybody knows Luke 2 is the Christmas chapter of the gospel.

There are other accounts of Jesus, but of course, if it's good enough for Linus, it's good enough for us. So Luke 2 verses 8 to 9 says, I think it's fair to say that if any of us were in the same situation and circumstances that the shepherds were in, and an angel showed up out of nowhere, we would be terrified.

Is that fair? Have you ever been out in the countryside in the middle of the night, all the light is stars and maybe the moon? Imagine being in a field like that with one or two of your closest colleagues and a whole bunch of sheep, probably relatively dead silent, except for maybe a bit of bleating here and there, bleating here and there, and then light and angels.

Terrified, right? Terrified. So it's notable to me and touching that in the middle of this intense and eternity-altering event, the angel speaks tenderly and kindly to the shepherds.

He knows he's scared them. Luke 2 verse 10 says, but the angel said to them, I imagine there's a whoa, whoa, whoa at the beginning of this. Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa.

[6 : 43] Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Good news and great joy.

Do not be afraid, the angel says. I bring you good news of great joy. So immediately after this great fear that the shepherds must have been feeling, comes this amazing balance of good news and great joy.

So what might this good news have been that the angel was declaring? Now I ask that from the shepherds' perspective, right? They had no idea. We know. I've often said that we have the benefit of knowing things that people at the time in certain Bible stories and accounts did not know.

So I think our tendency at times to say, oh, the apostles, oh, oh, so-and-so, oh, this person, that person. How did they not? Because they didn't know.

They didn't have the context that we have. So what would those wandering shepherds have been thinking about or imagining in the presence of this angelic message?

[7 : 54] Well, we've discussed this a bit already in this series that Jesus' arrival brought the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. He brought the promise of a birth of a Savior into reality.

A promised Messiah would then rescue and redeem God's people. This was the expectation. The birth of Jesus was an incredible sign of hope, as we've talked about.

We talked about that in the first week of our series, that God had not forgotten his people or his promises. So as we look back in time and see how these events played out, we can better, I think, understand that the angels were proclaiming the birth of the promised Messiah.

This is a big deal. It's this specific fact that was the cause for great joy and celebration. In fact, it's the reason that we still celebrate today.

With the season of Advent and other festivities, we celebrate that Jesus was born, that he came to be with us, that he arrived.

[9 : 04] He is both the good news and the reason for great joy that the angel proclaimed in Luke 2. The reason for the season.

Do you use that phrase? Do you like that phrase? Does it annoy you? Does it feel like a Christian cliché? Maybe all of the above. But this phrase, or a variation of it, is such a concise reminder for us that Jesus is our true source of joy through the holidays.

And in fact, every day of our lives. Christmas and the event and the arrival of Jesus is not a one-day thing. It's not an Advent-only thing.

Just as Easter is not. As Lent is not. But phrases like this, that Jesus is the reason for the season, it's a reminder that the true meaning of Christmas is Jesus' birth.

The celebration of his arrival is the central event of our holiday festivities. Or at least it should be. The difficult truth, and we touched on this a bit last week, is that Jesus can often get lost.

[10:16] He gets lost in the hustle and bustle of parties, or presents, or gift wrapping that needs to be done with one shopping Saturday before Christmas left.

So I know I'm not the only one here today. I'm pretty confident. Who feels that the holiday season can be pretty hectic? Anyone? Anyone agree?

Some slight nods. To me, the speed at which time and activities seem to fly between Thanksgiving and New Year's creates this need for a constant reminder for us that Jesus is the reason for the season in which we find ourselves.

We need to not let this season slip by. And as I said, yeah, it happens every year. It doesn't make it any less special. We need to not let it slip by without reflecting and taking time to cherish its deeper meaning.

Sometimes I think we also need to be reminded that Christmas isn't mainly just about gifts. It's not mainly just about presents, or wish lists, or stockings hanging from the mantle waiting to be stuffed.

[11:29] Here's a moment of honesty again. Let's be honest with each other. Christmas has become highly commercialized in many parts of the world. I think we live it here.

I see lots more nods. There's an emphasis on gift-giving, receiving. There's an emphasis on consumerism and consumption and wants versus needs.

Holiday decorations are everywhere. But it's been this way for as long as I can remember. And I joke with people about, well, they say I'm young.

I'm not that young. My back pain betrays my age. But the reality is that it's been this way as long as I can remember.

But it's definitely become more and more that way over time. I recognize that as well. And I'm not saying that to pass judgment or be critical because I love receiving and giving gifts.

[12:31] I love singing Christmas carols. I love decorating and enjoying a tree. One of my favorite things is to sit in our living room by myself, just the lights of the tree on, no other light.

Silence. I love taking in all the bright and beautiful lights that we see around us in the city. But our culture really does tend to elevate and prioritize these extras as I like to see them.

They're extras of the season. And instead of becoming extras, they become the main focus in lots of ways. And I think this is just another reason why we need to keep the why of Christmas front and center.

Why do we give gifts? Why do we plan and attend parties? Why do we go out of our way to make people feel seen and special at Christmas time? Well, I think it's because whether we recognize it consciously or not, we are filled with joy.

We're filled with joy over the greatest gift of all time that we received in Jesus. That gift has already been given to everyone who puts their life in his hands.

[13:44] And I think, honestly, and I said this about the Christmas carol stuff, for anyone who doesn't know Jesus, I believe they also sense and seek and strive for this same joy.

They don't quite recognize the true source, however, or how to fill the joy that they long for so desperately. An eternity of worship really is going to be the greatest party ever.

Am I right? Jesus saw us in our sin and he still humbled himself. He still traded his life so that we could have eternal life.

Jesus showed up for humanity in a way that no human being ever has or ever possibly could. He's the reason for the season forever and for all time for everyone.

Joy to the world. At the beginning of our time together, I quoted a few lines from that popular Christmas carol and it's kind of fun, honestly, to read it in the poem form rather than as the Christmas carol.

[14:56] It's meaningful and it causes you to pause on the words a bit more. So let's hear it again. Joy to the world, the Lord is come.

Let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare him room and heaven and nature sing. You know, these words also remind me of one of the most popular Bible verses of all time.

John 3, 16. Say it with me. Now, hold on for one second. You may hear some different words here and there depending on which translation you memorized in Sunday school, which Bible you know, which translation you know is most familiar to you and that's okay.

Let's say it together. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, or only begotten, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

those precious and powerful words remind us of the salvation of the world that was always, has always been the plan.

[16:13] The good news and great joy of Luke 2, verse 10, was, as the angel said, for all people. God so loved not some people, a select group of people, but all people and he still does.

God loves the world. These are the people that God so loved. These are the people that Jesus came for and the good news is, as Luke 2, verse 11 says, today in the town of David a savior has been born to you.

He is the Messiah, the Lord. Friends, this is the news that we must share. When people ask us why we celebrate, do you ever get asked that?

I have a neighbor down the street, a couple of doors, and we had a little conversation about Christmas a few years ago. We put a pause on that conversation and you'll hear why. We were, I was putting up Christmas lights or something and he said, oh, the Christians, and I thought, oh. And he said, the Christians always get this special time every year and I thought, oh, he doesn't know I'm a pastor. But I said, huh, that's interesting.

[17:30] I said, there's something deeper there that you and I need to talk about one day. We will. He's a tough nut, but I'll crack him one day. God will crack him.

So when we go to church on Christmas Eve, why do we do that? Do you ever get asked? Don't you have anything better to do than go out again to church again? Didn't you already go on Sunday? Or why we get so emotional about putting up nativity sets every year?

We should be filled with so much joy that we can't help but overflow from it. Overflow with this good news that the Savior, not just my Savior or your Savior, but the Savior of the world, Christ the Lord, has been born.

He has arrived. There's an amen moment. Everybody missed it. Nice. Of all the messages in the world that are being shared right now, all the news that is being streamed on one platform or another, tweeted or X'd, like I don't, X must have its own thing, things that are being shared, all of these important messages that people have, this is the only news that can save people.

The world is full of news and messages and everybody is competing for people's attention. But this news is the only news that can save.

[18:59] Christ alone is the reason for this season. And the good news that brings great joy is for all to hear.

As we come to a close, I've got a good old-fashioned Christmas story to share with you. And this is from the Reader's Digest, so it must be true. The writer shared this.

It's been a tough year for my family. Whenever my mom looked over at the tree and scattered presents, she would sigh and warn us, there won't be as much for Christmas this year. Try not to be disappointed.

Christmas had traditionally been a time for my parents to spoil us. In years past, the presents would pile up and spill out from under the tree, taking over the living room. I'd heard a phrase, giving is better than receiving, but thought that whoever said that must have been, well, out of their mind. Getting presents was the whole point. It was the reason I couldn't get to sleep on Christmas Eve. On Christmas morning, we eagerly waited in the hallway until Dad told us everything was ready.

[20:06] We rushed into the living room and let the wrapping paper fly. We made weak attempts to wait and watch while other family members opened their presents, but as time passed, we lost our self-control.

Here's another one for you, said Mom, as she handed me a package. I looked at it, confused. Having spent so much time examining the presents before Christmas, I recognized this one, but it had not been mine.

It was my mom's. A new label had been put on it with my name written in my mother's handwriting. Mom, I can't. I was stopped by my mother's eager, joyful look, a look I couldn't really understand. Let's see what it is, honey. Hurry. Open it up. It was a blow dryer. Though this may seem like a simple gift, to me, it was so much more.

Being an 11-year-old girl, I was stunned. In my world where receiving outweighed giving by light years, my mom's act of selflessness was incomprehensible.

[21:18] It was a huge act. Tears filled my eyes and I thought in disbelief about how much my mom must love me to give up her Christmas so I could have a few more presents.

I've always remembered that Christmas fondly. It had such an impact on me. As an adult with my children and my life whom I adore, I can now understand my mom's actions. I see how she was not giving up her Christmas as I had thought, but was finding an even greater joy in her Christmas because giving truly is better than receiving. my mom's simple act meant the world to me. Friends, you might be thinking, oh, is he going to make a connection between the sacrifice of Jesus and a blow dryer? Kinda. Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice. He gave up his life so that we could find ours in the way God intended. [22 : 21] so that through him we would be able to receive the gift of eternal joy and salvation. The gift that is for all people. How might you share this good news with others this year? Maybe you could bring someone to the Christmas Eve service. how might you or your example of the joy you receive at Christmas be shared with someone else? How might you make sure that Jesus stays at the center of your celebrations? He is the reason for this season. Amen.