

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Sunday School Christmas Service – December 20th, 2009

Luke 2:20

“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.”

Dear Friends of the new born Savior,:

The Forbes list for the “Happiest States to live in 2008” came out not too long ago. They said that they surveyed over 300,000 people to make this list. As I read the list, I wondered what criteria they used to determine happiness. Was it money, health, jobs, emotional well being or something else? It said that it used all those areas to determine which state was the happiest, and which states were the least happy. Although they did say that money was a key factor in the people's decision on whether they were happy or not. Those states where people made more money ranked on average higher than those who made less money. That is interesting, isn't it? Money played a major role in whether people were happy or not. Does that surprise you? What would determine whether you were happy or not. Would you need to have lots of money? Would your physical and emotional state have to be very good in order for you to be happy. Those are interesting questions, aren't they.

And just in case you wanted to know, the happiest state to live in 2008 was Utah and rounding out the top 5, 2. Hawaii (no surprise there). 3. Wyoming (that was surprising to me). 4. Colorado and 5. Minnesota. And for those who like to see the rain wreck, the bottom five was, 46. Arkansas. 47. Ohio, 48. Mississippi, 49. Kentucky and last was 50. West Virginia. For the curious Wisconsin ranked 24 (middle of the pack) which was at least higher than the 31st ranking of our neighbors to the south.

As we look at the words for our text today, we are going to look at it through the eyes of the shepherds living outside the city or small town of Bethlehem. The shepherds at the first Christmas must have felt somewhat like outcasts. They were considered by many to be unclean physically and spiritually... and they must have felt abandoned and forgotten. They must have felt like nobody really cared about them. If we would have surveyed them do you think that would have ranked their lives as happy or not so happy? Outwardly speaking, people may have said that their lives were not full of happiness, but on that first Christmas night we will see that their lives as simple as they may have been was filled with joy and lots of happiness and it had nothing to do with their wealth, health or economic status in society. So this morning let us use the shepherds and our example to answer the question for our sermon theme for today.

Theme: Are You Looking For True Joy?

- 1. Not the joy found in this world**
- 2. The joy found in the manger**

I always look forward to our children's Christmas services. I enjoy listening to them tell the Christmas story. I especially enjoy watching the three year olds and four year olds in our preschool and nursery classes. But not just when they are singing and reciting! Some of the most interesting times are when they are supposed to be sitting there quietly, and our teachers are doing everything within their power to hold in check the pent-up energy that is in little children just before Christmas. A quieting hand here and there. “Shhh! Shhh!” It is hard to keep excited children quiet.

There is something we can learn from these little children. They are excited at Christmas time! Their excitement may not be based solely on the deep spiritual significance of Christmas. But they are excited. And many of them will shout aloud when their time to recite finally comes.

That excitement that we see in the kids is not always the excitement that we as adults feel. And why might that be? We can make all kinds of excuses like we have more things to worry about and our lives are way more complex, but it really boils down to the fact that we have a sinful nature inside of us that is trying to rob us of any and all the joy that God wants us to have. We are not born into this world with the kind of joy that we are going to be talking about today. Spiritually speaking, you and I are unhappy. We are the most unlikely people that God would ever bring good news to. Listen what God's Word has to say about our spiritual condition: "**All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.**" (Rom 3:23) "**For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.**" (Jam. 2:10) "**Your iniquities have separated you from your God;**" (Is.59:2) And "**...the wages of sin is death.**" (Rom.6:23) God has made it pretty clear that you and I have failed his demand of perfection, and that if He really is a just God who wants what is right, we must be punished for that. But it isn't His fault! It is our fault! Our sins separated us from Him! There isn't a lot of JOY in that, my friends! Not for us! And not for God!

But the shepherds found a reason for JOY on Christmas night, and so do have we. The story is told of a preacher who really got emotional during his sermons. One Sunday morning, as this minister was shouting and pounding the pulpit, he began to look around the congregation for someone to single out. He spotted a family in the front row, a father and mother with 5 kids squeezed between them to be sure they would behave in church. The preacher pointed to the father and said: 'You there! Do you have faith?' 'Yes, I have faith,' the man answered. The preacher said, 'If I put a 2x4 board down there on the floor, do you have enough faith to walk across it?' 'Yes, I could do that.' 'But,' said the preacher, 'what if I took that same 2x4 board and placed it across the top of the two tallest buildings in New York City... would you have enough faith to walk across it then?' 'No, I don't have that much faith,' the man answered. 'But what if somebody were standing on the other end,' said the preacher, 'and dangling one of your children off the side... would you cross the board then?'" The father turned and looked down the pew at his 5 kids, and said, "Which one?"

I'm not sure if he was serious, but the point I want to make is this: Our Father God does not say, "Which one?" He doesn't say, "Which one should I lay my life on the line for?" God so loves the world... He wants to bring us ALL into the circle! He comes with the open arms of grace - underserved love - for all of us. To each one of us, He says, "You are valued. You are included. You are wanted. You are precious to me. This is for you." And He did that, not by just sweeping what we have done under the rug. He took it out on his Son, instead of taking it out on us. The mercy is indescribable! We can only stand trembling in thanks!

Or we can do what our Bible tells us many times. Be Joyful! The LORD says our hearts should be filled with joy and gladness and our mouths should overflow with praise! Why? Scripture says, "**The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.**" If the punishment for our sin is gone, and if that great enemy of ours, death, has been removed, we can be filled with a great joy. We have a gracious God!

Steven Spielberg's movie, "Schindler's List," is a graphic, shocking story about one of the worst times in the history of the modern age as millions of human beings in those Nazi death camps of World War II were brutally beaten and killed. Oskar Schindler was a most unlikely hero, but through the efforts of this one man, some 1200 persons were saved from certain death. He put them to work in his factory where he could protect them. Jesus saved more than 1200 people from certain death. Jesus saved the whole wide world from a worse enemy than the Germans. Jesus saved us from the triple headed monster of Sin, Death and the Devil. Jesus loved everyone, no matter what their spiritual background or economic background was. Jesus' blood paid for the sins of all people as he destroyed our spiritual enemies.

Indeed. Power...real power is found in forgiveness... and that's the Christmas gift God offers us in Jesus. Martin Luther once became so frustrated with the evil he saw going on around him that he shouted, "If I were God and saw people acting the way they do, I would smash the world to bits!" We might have,

but not so with God. God comes into the world offering the gift of forgiveness: "I pardon you. I forgive you. I want to reclaim you."

That is exactly what He did. Isaiah, the prophet that foretold much about the coming Savior, said about Him, "**He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.**" (53:5). The punishment our sins deserve was placed on Christ. Regarding the new covenant that God would establish in Christ, the Lord asserts through Jeremiah, "**I will forgive their sins wickedness and remember their sins no more.**" (31:34). The shepherds were so filled with joy when they found their Savior that they couldn't contain that joy. As we sit here today in God's house so close to the celebration of our Savior's birth, I pray that our hearts are filled with that same joy.

A little boy named Paul, who is 4 ½ years old now, said to his mother, "Momma, I love Christmas almost as much as I love you." His mom said, "Well, tell me Paul, what do you love about Christmas?" And Paul answered, "I love the lights. I love the presents, and Mom, there's one more thing, and you are going to like this best... most of all I love the Baby Jesus." Paul was right. His mom did like that best, because she has taught him that Jesus is the reason for the season. In Jesus, we are assured that God is with us!

The gift of Christ is the best Christmas gift of all! Hands down! I pray that everyone of us gathered here today would answer the same way that small child did. I love Christmas because it is all about a baby named Jesus – who was the very Son of God. I pray that our hearts are filled with joy as we once again are reminded that true happiness is not found in a paycheck, a good doctor's visit or how smooth our life is running right now. True happiness is found in the manger. Did you hear what our text said? "**The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.**" Their hearts couldn't contain all the joy that was in their hearts. As we sit here, I pray that the message of the birth of the Savior of the world fills your hearts to overflowing. I pray that you will leave here today as the shepherds left the stable that day that they saw their Savior – with joy and praise and thanks. That is true joy. It doesn't really matter whether Wisconsin is ranked 24th or 1st in the happiest state. What really counts is on the inside where forgiveness and true spiritual peace has been given to us by our good and gracious God. May the Lord's peace fill your hearts this Christmas season and every day of your life. Amen.