

"The Joy Virus"
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Christmas Eve

Edina Morningside Community Church; December 24, 2016

Luke 2:1-14

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "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. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

I noticed something new this year at Christmastime: all the carols mention joy. Of course, there's "Joy to the world!" but also, "Joy, joy, for Christ is born" and "joyful all you saints arise"! See if you can finish these: "Tidings of...comfort and joy!" "Peace on the earth, good will to all...great news of joy we bring." "O come, all you faithful...joyful and triumphant." and "Good Christian friends...rejoice!" You get the idea.

Here's another thing I've discovered. "Joy" features in all these Christian songs, but not in *any* of the popular secular songs for Christmas. Joy is not mentioned in "Jingle Bells", "White Christmas", or "Little Drummer Boy". You will not find the word "joy" in the lyrics of "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year", "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas", "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas", "Walking in a Winter Wonderland", "I'll be Home for Christmas", or "The Twelve Days of Christmas". "Joy" even goes unmentioned in "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer"! Happiness and cheer are mentioned repeatedly in secular music of the season. But "joy" seems to show up mostly, or only, in Christmas music of the church. Why do you suppose that is, and what difference does it make?

Let me suggest that happiness and pleasure are emotions of a different sort than joy. They come and go, depending on outside circumstances. Joy, however, is a state of being and a habit of the heart, regardless of what's going on in the world. The truth is that it's hard to be happy all the time. Even—or especially—at Christmas time. Imagine that first Christmas we just heard of. Was there much to be happy about, or to find pleasure in? The Roman Emperor Augustus used the social media of his day—official proclamations, statues, and inscriptions on money—to declare himself a global peacemaker, which ought to have been good news. But his actions belied his words, because the world continued to have just as many wars as before. If you were a poor shepherd, a carpenter, a woman, or a slave, happiness was hard to come by. It's hard to be happy when Augustus has the power with executive orders to cause country-wide disruption by ordering a return to birthplaces. It's hard to be happy when Quirinius is the governor of Syria who puts these policies into action, trying to make a national registry for the purposes of taxation. It's hard to be happy with the militarization and state-sanctioned violence going on in Judea by Roman soldiers who act like occupiers rather than keepers of the peace. It's hard to be happy when millions of people face resettlement because of the policies of Caesar Augustus. Yes, it is sometimes hard to be happy, even at Christmas.

But that's not what the angel announced, is it? The birth of Christ does not simply give us a fleeting emotion, happiness that is here today and gone tomorrow. No—we heard what the first angel who spoke

to the shepherds said: “I am bringing you good news of great **joy** for all the people.” Happiness is largely based on what is visible here and now—but joy arises from the Good News that what we see now is not all there is. That is why even when it’s hard to be happy because of the state of the world, the angel still declares “good news of great joy”. What the shepherds will discover, what all who seek Christ may know, is the joy that comes from knowing God born in human flesh, here among us. Joy because God has chosen such a path, has chosen us, has chosen this very world with all its brokenness and grief, to be born into as Jesus Christ. Joy because the child born this night comes as the visible presence of the invisible One, declaring God’s ways and showing God’s mercies. Joy because even when Christ himself was arrested and condemned by the same sinful powers thirty years later, he told his followers: “So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and **no one** will take your **joy** from you.” (John 16:22) Not even the emperor.

This is the joy of faith in Jesus Christ. This is why we sing, and why we gather this night. Because God has come to be with us in Jesus Christ, walking beside us through pain and suffering, confronting the powerful and shielding the weak, then hallowing even the grave itself as a doorway to eternal life. This is the irrepressible, infectious joy which has come among us in Jesus Christ.

Several years ago, the flu season was so bad that churches took months-long breaks from “Passing the Peace” because they were afraid of passing germs instead. There is another kind of bug to be aware of in the church this night. Listen to how a global pandemic started with the first Christmas Eve, in the words of Michael Coffey’s poem “Sympathy for the Emperor at Christmastime”:

*The outbreak of newness was contagious as a song
containment was unmanageable even with
the emperor’s hierarchy and stranglehold of peace
The first case was reported in a barn where
people and domesticated animals share germs
freely and misery and hunger and cold and labor
From there it was thought to spread to a small band
of sheep herders and a rustic village pub where they
drank pints and harmonized, that may have been where
the traveler was infected with the joy virus
and spread it upstate to an unsuspecting pessimist
who took drugs at first to stop the unusual feeling
From there no one is sure how it became global
other than the emperor and all inoculated like him
did their royal best to control and spin the good news
birthed that night, but the more they pressed down
the more it lifted up, the more they schemed
the more the glad spirit frustrated their ways
so that anywhere the ease of God disrupts the disease
of power, hidden births of faith and love and mercy
appear and people sing and someone else catches it*

Beloved of God, the joy virus is loose in the world. Patient Zero was Jesus himself, and that joy has been shared through the centuries since. Once infected, we learn to recognize that the powers of the world and the news of the day are not all there is—not by a long shot. We find the ability to dance unreasonably in the mysteries of children, snowflakes, peacemaking, and other fragile things. How will joy spread in the world next? Through you?

Let us pray: *God of joy, fill us with the awe and wonder of that first Christmas night, then send us forth as your contagious messengers with good news of great joy in Jesus Christ. Amen.*