

Surprised by Joy
Christmas Eve – Dec. 24, 2011
Dean Feldmeyer
Luke 2: 8-14

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.¹⁰ 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:¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

IF IT WEREN'T FOR BAD NEWS WE'D HAVE NO NEWS AT ALL

The carol shouts "Joy to the world, the Lord is come!" In another the musicians are instructed to "play the oboe and bagpipes merrily." In the little town of Bethlehem "we hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell." The songs of Christmas are filled with "Hark!" and "Gloria!" and "Hallelujah!"

The angels tell the shepherds to be not afraid because they are bringing "good news of great joy."

The Advent/Christmas season is one filled to overflowing with Joy. No wonder the secular world embraces our religious holiday so enthusiastically.

It isn't just about money. It's about joy.

So why are so many Christians so angry? Why have so many of us who claim Christ as Lord chosen anger, bitterness and resentment as our go-to posture for this season of joy?

Is it all the bad news we hear on the television news? Let's be honest, it has seemed unrelentingly dismal this year, hasn't it?

The war in Afghanistan is entering its eleventh year, making it the longest war in our nation's history with no real end in sight. The war in Iraq is winding down but we're all hard pressed to figure out what, if anything, has improved for the Iraqi people, and no one wants to ask, much less answer the question, "was it worth it?"

The stock market is on a roller coaster that makes it impossible to plan for a future, whether we're talking about our children's education or our own retirement. Even when the market goes up, no one actually believes that the good news will last, that it will stay up for more than a few days.

People have been celebrating, actually celebrating the fact that unemployment has come down to 8.4 percent from the 9 percent that seemed to be the new norm. When was the last time an unemployment rate of 8.4 percent was considered good news?

The European union is in a state of near financial collapse, Syria is poised on the edge of civil war, the Arab spring is about to become the winter of global discontent.

Here at home, we look in vain for someone we can trust. From the right we hear that we can't trust the big government and, from the left, we are told that we can't trust big business and, if we are honest, we realize that they are both right.

Automobiles are being recalled nearly as fast as they are being manufactured. The safety of our food is being questioned almost daily. Our prisons are full and our 401(k)'s are empty. The post office has announced that they are going to raise their rates and reduce their services.

Politicians have chained themselves to principles that make compromise and cooperation impossible. Even when they come up with a possible solution to our problems they are afraid to voice it for fear of becoming mired in the quicksand of partisan politics that is now the norm in Washington and Columbus.

And if all that wasn't bad enough, we are about to enter an election year where we will inevitably be told, over and over, that fear should be the deciding factor in how we vote. Be afraid. Be very afraid.

It sometimes seems that if it weren't for bad news, we'd have no news at all. Is that why so many Christians are so angry, bitter, and resentful? Because, sad as that would be, it would, at least be understandable.

No, as it turns out, the source of their gall is not, as we might assume, the worldly burdens of fear, doubt, and worry. The seed of their discontent is simpler and more prosaic than that.

THIS MEANS WAR!

It's not the continuing plight of the poor and the hungry, or the never ending war, or global terrorism, or even the ongoing oppression of powerless people all over the world that has kindled our righteous ire. No, the thing that has really got us going is the, so called, "War on Christmas."

Notice, please, that it's not just a difference of opinion or even a disagreement. It's not an argument or a debate. It's a "war."

That pretty much crushes any hope of a civil discussion, a free, open and respectful exchange of ideas and perspectives. No, once you call it a war you've determined how the subject will be broached. There will be fighting and wounding and even killing, all, one would hope, of the metaphorical type.

Those on either side of the debate will be identified not as good people trying to do the right thing, but as "enemy."

Just in case you missed it, the enemy, in this case, is all of those retailers who, in their slavish devotion to "political correctness," insist on wishing us a Happy Holiday. Good and righteous Christians, we are told should take umbrage at this intolerable theological insult and treat it as a call to arms.

At the very least, we should firmly chastise and correct anyone who is so misguided that they fail to validate our religious preference every time we buy something at their store.

And while we must strive to be ever vigilant in our fight against this wide and complex conspiracy, this year, Christmas is winning the war, or at least some important battles, by a very small but significant margin.

This margin does not consist of the fact that people are given time off from work and schools are dismissed so we Christians can celebrate our favorite holiday. Neither is it evidenced in the stretching of the Christmas season all the way back to mid-October. It is not to be found in the silly red hats that retail clerks are required to wear or the inflatable manger scene's on our neighbors' lawns, or even in the thousands of hours of advertisements and commercials reminding us of our duty to provide gifts for everyone we have ever known, from the postal worker who delivers our mail to the girl who watered our plants when we were on vacation last summer.

No, the real evidence that Christmas is winning the war is that, because we rose in righteous indignation and joined our voices in a unified threat to boycott, Walgreens has, according to the *Houston Chronicle* decided to put the word "Christmas" in front of the words "tree ornaments" in their ads and flyers.

And Christmas is winning the war, because, when Rhode Island Governor Lincoln Chafee insisted, *insisted* on calling the big Blue Spruce in the R.I. Statehouse a "holiday tree," in honor of the religious tolerance upon which the state was founded in 1636, Rep. Doreen Costa erected a Christmas tree, that's right, a CHRISTMAS tree in her office. So take that, Mr. Governor.

We Christians are winning the "War on Christmas," we are told, not because we are living examples of the peace, hope, love and JOY that have marked this season for Christians for roughly 2000 years, but because we are angry and fed up and tired of being victims and we are standing, arm in arm and marching in lock-step, up to those cash registers and demanding that those clerks, regardless of their personal feelings or religious beliefs, wish us a Merry Christmas...or else.

A couple of years ago my daughter spent the Advent/Christmas season working as the manager of a small retail store in an outlet mall. This was during the height of the "War on Christmas" media blitz.

Occasionally Sarah would commit the grievous and unimaginable insult of extending a wish for "Happy Holidays" to a fragile and hyper-sensitive Christian shopper who would respond with outrage and indignation. The reactions of these dear folks would generally be of two sorts. Some would snap back, "It's not a holiday; It's Christmas!" Others would sigh, close their eyes, purse their lips, shake their head and wearily respond, "No, dear. Merry Christmas."

Sarah says that, though she never did it, she always wanted to say, "Oh, you're a Christian. Please forgive me. I had no way of knowing."

GOOD NEWS STILL GOOD

It's a little hard to see how all of that righteous indignation, that anger, bitterness and resentment jibes with the Hope, Peace, Joy and Love that are represented in the candles of the advent wreath. It's hard to reconcile that sense of victimization that we insist on adopting when someone wishes us a Happy Holiday with the "good news of great joy" that was announced to the shepherds on that first Christmas eve.

Look at the scripture passages that are attached to this season. There's no escaping it: It's about joy.

In 61st chapter of Isaiah which is always read at this time of year, the prophet's message is one of "good news to the oppressed." He will "greatly rejoice in the Lord." And not just with his mouth but with his "whole being!"

Christmas, for him, isn't so much a baby shower as it is for us, as it is a wedding reception. Everyone puts on their finest duds and dances and sings and eats and drinks and celebrates. This is a time of laughter. The lost have been found. The ruined have been restored. The devastation of the past has been repaired. The brokenhearted are being healed even as we speak. Prisoners of war and conscience are being set free and restored to their families.

Think of the happiest moments in our lives, says Isaiah, and that is what the "Day of the Lord" will be like...only more so.

John the Baptizer likens the coming Messiah as a light breaking into darkness. It is, he says, as though we were all groping in the dark, trying to find our way and, suddenly, someone lights a candle. There is no need to stumble anymore, no more stubbing our toe or barking our shin. No more running into walls and no more falling down. Suddenly we can see. We aren't lost any more. The safe path is present and clear.

When Mary is told that she has been selected to be the mother of the Messiah, the first words she speaks are, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my whole being rejoices in God my Savior."

When the Magi encounter him they fall on their knees and worship.

When the shepherds see him they leave glorifying and praising God.

This is an occasion of joy. Such a simple word. Just three letters. One syllable.

Why is it so difficult for us?

SUCH A LITTLE WORD

Have you seen the Geico Insurance commercial with the Guinea Pigs rowing the boat? It begins with a man telling us how his electric bills were getting too high so he figured out a way to save some money. He trained three Guinea Pigs to row a tiny boat that would generate electricity for his computer. Actually, he says, only two do the rowing. The chubby one coaches them, saying "row" every few seconds.

He tells us in a completely serious deadpan delivery that it took him six months to train each Guinea Pig, eight months to train the one to say "row." Then he shakes his head in disbelief and says, "And it's such a simple word."

That's kinda what joy is like for us. It's hard to define.

We know it isn't happiness, exactly. It's more than happiness. Deeper, heavier, more substantial and important.

Happiness is a commodity that is sold in television commercials.

Buy this and you'll be happy. Buy her this and she'll be happy. We have, we are told, the ability to make other people happy by the things we give them and the things we do for them.

This ring, that toy, this car, that gift card. These are the things of happiness. And no one is saying they aren't. I have things and there are other things that I would like to have and, I won't lie, I would be happy to get them.

Why, I even wrote a list and gave it to my wife and kids.

"I would be happy to get one of these things as a Christmas present, thank you."

But I wasn't so foolish as to believe that they represented the kind of joy that the angels were talking about when they sang to the shepherds.

Joy is another thing altogether. Joy is a thing of the spirit and the soul. It reaches deep into the very core of our being, the very center of who we are. But it doesn't stay there. It cooks and simmers there and, occasionally, it bubbles up and it overflows into the world.

We can't make it overflow. We can't make it bubble out. It happens or it doesn't happen.

But when it happens, when you hear it or see it, when you receive it from another person, it is as though an angel were handing it to you directly from the altar of heaven.

And it's always a surprise.

Several weeks ago I was in Kroger of all places.

I had stopped in there to pick up a few items – some shaving cream and Listerine – and ended up spending thirty dollars on other things. You know how it goes.

I was up in the front of the store, in the pharmacy department.

And I don't know if you've noticed it or not but right up there between the cash registers and the pharmacy there's a display case and on the top of it is a flat screen television. This day they were playing one of the "Cars" movies on that television and I noted it as I went by because my grandson, Luke, is obsessed with the whole "Cars" franchise.

I passed the television with just a glance and went on to do my pharmacy shopping and as I made my way through the aisles of the pharmacy I heard a sound that was so rare and so beautiful that it made me stop where I was, frozen to that spot on the floor.

The sound was that of a child, laughing.

How can I describe it to you?

It was pure and clean and clear.

Have you ever tasted spring water right out of the ground? How cold and pure and clean it tastes? That was what this laughter sounded like. Have you ever felt a sudden and unexpected cool breeze caress your face on a hot and humid day? That was how this laughter sounded.

It was sweet and simple, free and unselfconscious, and absolutely devoid of art or artifice. It was innocent. It was more than happiness – richer, fuller and more complete; it was...joy.

And it was so beautiful, so compelling, that I had – simply had – to discover its source.

So I made my way toward it and there was a little boy, about five years old or so, standing there, his coat unzipped and dangling precariously from his shoulders, his stocking cap perched atop his head, his cheeks flushed with warmth, his eyes wide and bright and glued to the television, watching "Cars."

I think you would say, had you seen him, that he beamed. It was as though light was radiating from all around him, so complete was his joy. And he was laughing. Laughing as though the whole world was laughing with him.

And so pure was his laughter, so innocent and perfect was it that I felt it warm my heart. And I felt my eyes beginning to tear as I stood there, bathed in his wonderful, innocent joy.

And not just me. Others, adults all, were standing around, watching and listening, too. And one by one, they, too began to smile and even to laugh a little as they became infected with his joy.

Had one of you happened by in that moment and noticed the tear in the corner of my eye and commented on it I would have, no doubt, made some lame and embarrassed excuse about allergies. But it wasn't allergies that were invading my system that day in Kroger.

It was joy.

And it caught me by surprise.

And it was a gift from God.

Right there in Kroger.

SURPRISED BY JOY

Brothers and sisters, let us, just for this one, special day, put away our anger and our fear. Let us set aside our bitterness, our resentment, our indignation. Let us take a vacation from our doubt, our annoyance, our exasperation. And let us open ourselves to the possibility of joy.

Let us look upon this holy child and remember the message he will bring to us – that we are loved and accepted, that our sins are forgiven, that the kingdom of God is at hand, that our past has been stamped approved and that our future is free and open.

Let us lift our spirits and our voices in praise of God. And let that joy which God has planted as a seed in each of us, grow and bloom and overflow out of us and into those around us.

And, finally, brothers and sisters, let us laugh, loudly and unselfconsciously, freely and openly, as though the whole world were laughing with us.

“For, behold, I bring you good news of great joy. Unto you is born, this day, in the city of David, a savior who is Christ, the Lord.”

AMEN