

Title: "Thy Kingdom Come: Joy!"

Text: Luke 2:8-20; Isaiah 9:1-7

During this season of Advent we are exploring together what Jesus meant when he taught his disciples to pray, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven."

I have said that at heart this is an 'advent prayer.'

-It is a prayer of longing for God to come and set the world right.

-A prayer inviting God to come and fulfill His whole plan of redemption for this broken world.

And we are using the four candles of the Advent Wreath to "light our way" in unpacking four aspects of what we are praying for when we join Jesus in praying, "Thy Kingdom come."

On the first Sunday of Advent we looked at the HOPE of God's coming kingdom.

On the second Sunday of Advent we looked at the PEACE of God's coming Kingdom.

Today we will explore the JOY of God's coming Kingdom.

Listen today to the familiar Christmas text from Luke 2:8-20, -about the shepherds and the good news of great joy that was given to them at Christ's first coming to earth.

"I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people," the angel proclaimed.

Good news of great joy.

-Could anyone here use a little of that at this point in your life?

-I know I could.

-And for the past few weeks it seems like our whole church has been seriously in need of some good news.

-So many of us are sick, some are seriously depressed.

-Barbara Coyman is dying.

-Susan Matos has been plagued with migraines.

-Others are overwhelmed by the stresses of work and family and finances.

It's the Christmas season and so there are added stresses of
-cards to send, presents to purchase, parties to host or attend.

And then the world we live in is just full of angry people.
-And sometimes those people are us.

There doesn't seem to be much joy going around.
-We could use an angel showing up and bringing a dose of
good news of great joy for all the people.

Well, my friends, JOY is another characteristic of the Kingdom
of God,
-and it is another aspect of what Jesus is inviting us to pray
for when we pray, "Thy Kingdom come."

We are praying for more of the joy of God's Kingdom to be
manifested here on earth,
-and right here in our lives as we seek to live as citizens of
God's Kingdom right now.

So what is this joy, and what does it look like?
-Well a dictionary will tell you that joy is a "feeling of delight."
-And that's a perfectly good definition, but it doesn't tell us
where to get that feeling of delight.

So we humans, who all would really love to have a little more
delight in our lives,
-we go off seeking joy in all kinds of places that seem to be
full of promise.

We look for joy in a new car, a new house, a new toy, a new
Outfit.

We look for joy in a better job, a bigger salary, a new boss,
nicer co-workers.

We look for joy in other people, our friends, our family, our
spouse, our kids.

We look for joy in ourselves, in our accomplishments, our
abilities, our good looks, our smarts, our winning
personality!

But life being life, and people being people, and each of us
being who we are, the joys and delights are short lived.

We have a lot of days and weeks when life is hard, and people are irritating, and the new car gets old,
-and we get frustrated, and the world seems like a dark and joyless place.

Well, you may have never thought about it before, but that may well be how the shepherds felt that night just before the angels all showed up.

They had the night shift guarding flocks of sheep out on a hillside near the little village of Bethlehem.
-It was dark out there.
-No city lights nearby brightening the sky.

And the sheep smelled like sheep, and the night shift was probably given to the low-men on the shepherd totem pole,
-and they all probably wished they could be home in bed.

And shepherding sheep at any time was not a glamorous job.
-It did not pay well.
-It was kind of boring, especially at night.
-Who knows whether the shepherds actually got along with each other.
-But they probably had a lot to complain about that night and every night.

It's right into the midst of all of that, that angels appear in glorious light with good news of great joy!

You see, the Kingdom of God shows up, unannounced but bringing light and joy from God Himself.
-That's what turns the whole night upside down for those shepherds.
-That's what causes them to go traipsing off to find a new born baby in a barn in Bethlehem.
-That's what engenders feelings of delight!
-Luke says that when all was said and done these shepherds were glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard.

And you know what? The same could be said for Mary and Joseph that night, too.

The two of them had had a pretty rough go of it themselves for the past couple months of their lives.

- Mary found to be pregnant.
- Joseph wondering what to do.
- Their two families in turmoil.

Then the trip to Bethlehem to register for the tax, and Mary is 9 months pregnant.

- And no place to stay, and the baby decides to come that night when they are out back of the Inn in the stable.
- Joseph gets to deliver the baby in the dark, with donkeys and cows watching the process.
- It's amazing the baby and mother and Joseph lived through it.

But it's right in the midst of all that, that these shepherds show up with good news of great joy.

- They confirm to Mary and Joseph that this baby is Christ the Lord.
- They heard it from the angels!

And suddenly that dark and lonely stable isn't so dark and lonely anymore.

- It's full of joy and light and life and laughter and praise.
- They recognize the presence of God right there with them.
- Right there in the manger.
- The Kingdom of God has come, and it's full of joy.

So here's some things we can notice in the Christmas story itself about this feeling of delight we call joy.

It comes from God.

It comes as a gift.

It comes as a surprise.

It comes right in the midst of the pains of life being life.

When we pray "Thy Kingdom come," joy is one of the gifts of God we are praying for.

- But it's helpful to keep these characteristics in mind as we then get up from our prayer and go about our lives.

Joy may not come at a time or place or in a way you expect.

Fredrich Buechner, who was a pastor, teacher, and writer that I have always liked,
-he wrote once about how joy snuck up and surprised him one day when he was at Sea World in Orlando, Florida with his family.

It was a gorgeous day when we were there, with bright Florida sunlight reflected in the shimmering water and a cloudless blue sky over our heads. The bleachers where we sat were packed. The way the show began was that at a given signal they released into the tank five or six killer whales...and no creatures under heaven could have looked less killer-like as they went racing around and around in circles. What with the dazzle of the sky and sun, the beautiful young people on the platform, the soft southern air, and the crowds all around us watching the performance with a delight matched only by what seemed the delight of the performing whales, it was as if the whole creation – men and women and beasts and sun and water and earth and sky and, for all I know, God Himself – was caught up in one great, jubilant dance of unimaginable beauty. And then, right in the midst of it, I was astonished to find that my eyes were filled with tears.

Then Buechner turned to his wife and daughter and discovered that they were weeping, too. He writes,

We shed tears because we had caught a glimpse of the Peaceable Kingdom, and it had almost broken our hearts. For a few minutes we had seen Eden and been a part of the great dance that goes on at the heart of creation. We shed tears because we were given a glimpse of the way life was created to be and is not... We were given a taste of the joy of our true home, and I believe the tears that came to our eyes were more than anything else homesick tears.

Have you ever had a moment like that?

- A moment when out of the blue you were given the surprise gift of a taste of the Kingdom of God?
- A brief experience of the peaceable Kingdom where God reigns and heaven and nature sing in harmony,
- and all is well and all is well and all manner of things is well.

Joy is what comes when God reveals Himself to us, and gives us a glimpse of His Kingdom where all is set right again.

Sometimes I have had moments like that walking home from the church at night.

- It's just a short distance, but there have been times after a Deacons meeting, or a counseling appointment,
 - where I have felt like God showed up at the meeting,
 - and I walk home with this deep sense of contentment, and a sense of joy that I am right where I'm supposed to be.
- It's also happened right here in this sanctuary on some Sundays at worship.
- It's when I am sitting in the pew, and someone else is reading Scripture or leading the pastoral prayer, or David is leading worship,
 - and I am simply surrounded by this Body of Christ.
- There are times when I just feel like God is present, and I am so thankful to be in this place with these people and with God present.

I have also had such moments sailing my little sunfish sailboat on a lake in New Hampshire,
-or walking with Nancy on the beach in New Jersey.

How about you? Have you tasted those moments of joy when it seemed like God was present, and his Kingdom was near?

There's another passage that I have always loved that describes such an encounter with joy.

- It is a fictional encounter, but it moves every time I read it.
- It's from Dostoyevsky's book, The Brothers Karamozov.

One of those brothers is named Alyosha, and he is the youngest of the three Karamazov brothers.

- He is religious and devout, and he has been being discipled by an old monk named Father Zossima.
- And Alyosha loves Father Zossima, and is devoted to him, but Father Zossima is old and one night he dies.

Alyosha is broken-hearted, and his world is turned upside down,
-but one night as he comes out of the house into the dark of night, he is suddenly filled with rapture and joy.

Dostoyevsky writes:

Over him the heavenly dome, full of quiet, shining stars, hung boundlessly. From the zenith to the horizon the still-dim Milky Way stretched its double strand. Night, fresh and quiet, almost unstirring,

enveloped the earth. The white towers and golden domes of the church gleamed in the sapphire sky. The luxuriant autumn flowers in the flowerbeds near the house had fallen asleep until morning. The silence of the earth seemed to merge with the silence of the heavens, the mystery of the earth touched the mystery of the stars... Alyosha stood gazing and suddenly, as if he had been cut down, threw himself to the earth.

He did not know why he was embracing it, he did not try to understand why he longed so irresistibly to kiss it, to kiss all of it, but he was kissing it, weeping, sobbing, and watering it with his tears, and he vowed ecstatically to love it, to love it unto ages of ages. [The words]"Water the earth with the tears of your joy, and love those tears...", "rang in his soul. What was he weeping for? Oh, in his rapture he wept even for the stars that shone on him from the abyss, and "he was not ashamed of this ecstasy." It was as if threads from all those innumerable worlds of God all came together in his soul, and it was trembling all over, "touching other worlds." He wanted to forgive everyone and for everything, and to ask forgiveness, oh, not [just] for himself! but for all and for everything, "as others are asking for me," rang again in his soul. But with each moment he felt clearly and almost tangibly something as firm and immovable as this heavenly vault descend into his soul. Some sort of idea, as it were, was coming to reign in his mind-now for the whole of his life and unto ages of ages. He fell to the earth a weak youth and rose up a fighter, steadfast for the rest of his life, and he knew it and felt it suddenly, in that very moment of his ecstasy. Never, never in all his life would Alyosha forget that moment. "Someone visited my soul in that hour," he would say afterwards, with firm belief in his words..."

Ecstasy, a feeling of delight, Joy:

It comes from God. It comes as a gift. It comes as a surprise. It comes right in the midst of the pains of life being life.

-Yet it comes and somehow transports us out of the kingdom of darkness and into the Kingdom of Light.

That's what Jesus invites us to pray for when we pray "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

We are praying for a taste of that peaceable Kingdom,
-where God's will is done
-where we see all of creation as it was meant to be,
-where we become ourselves the creations that we were
meant to be,
-where we get a glimpse of our true home and discover that
this is where we belong and have always wanted to be.

That is true joy.

Let us pray.