

“The Gift of Joy”

Date: December 16, 2018

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Matthew 1:22-25

Theme: Joy

Occasion: Advent 3, Christmas gifts that won't break series

A story to begin our time together: “A young mother wanted her two pre-school aged children to learn the real meaning of Christmas, so early that December she brought home a small manger scene. The figurines in the manger scene were made of wood, so they were pretty much indestructible, and easy for little hands to pick up and move around.

The children loved the manger scene and they loved being able to play with the different figures. As you might imagine, sometimes the figurines would disappear and later show up in the most fascinating places around the house.

Interestingly, the character who went missing the most often was Jesus. The mother would walk by and notice that Jesus was missing again, and then he would turn up in different places around the house. Once he showed up on the windowsill of her daughter's room. How appropriate, the mother thought, Jesus left the manger to watch over us wherever we go.

A few days before Christmas and the baby Jesus figure went missing again. The mother looked all over the house but she couldn't find him. She called her children together and she asked them, “Where is Jesus?” Her daughter shrugged her shoulders, meaning, “I don't have a clue.”

The mother turned to her two year old son and asked. “Do you know where Jesus is?” He began talking a mile a minute in two year old gibberish, which not even his mother could understand. Finally, the boy went over to his mother and took her by the hand. He led her up the stairs

to his bedroom and pointed to his bed. There, under the pillow, was baby Jesus.

Isn't that beautiful? You see, for many two-year olds, bedtime is a scary time. It's dark in the room, and they feel all alone. But this boy felt safe and secure, because Jesus was there with him!

That's the good news of Christmas, isn't it? We find that incredible truth expressed with these magnificent words in the first chapter of Matthew: "His name shall be called Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us.'"

Here is the great message of Christmas, the great promise of Christmas, and the great joy of Christmas – all wrapped up in that one word, *Emmanuel*, which means 'God is always with us.' The good news of Christmas gives us a deep sense of joy. Let me tell you what I mean.

In this world, people get criticized too much, "put down" too much, "fussed at" too much. So, we in the church (who are the children of Christmas) we need to be the sons and daughters of encouragement. The message of Christmas is good news, glad tidings, great joy.

Christ came to lift people up, not tear them down. Christ came to save people, not destroy them. We would do well to pick up his torch and take on his spirit of joyful encouragement. Let me tell you a story about the little boy in the school Christmas play.

He was playing the part of an angel. He was supposed to come to the shepherds in the field and announce Christ's birth with enthusiasm and excitement. But he was having real trouble learning his part. He was especially having a hard time with his one line "Behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy."

The boy didn't normally talk that way, so he found the line difficult to remember. The drama teacher worked with him and explained that "glad tidings" simply meant good news. Finally the boy learned his part.

But on the night of the play, the boy got stage fright and forgot his line. Instead of saying "Behold I bring you glad tidings of great joy," the little angel made this Christmas play different from any other, by suddenly running all over the stage, flapping his wings wildly, and shouting over and over again, "Boy have I got good news for you!"

That's part of our task as Christians, isn't it? We need to say to a scared, anxious, confused and fretful world, "Boy do we have good news for you!" The good news is that we can make it, because God is with us and God will see us through.

Our part of that good news is saying to people near us, "I care about you," "I believe in you," "I trust you," "You can do it."

Maybe the best gift we can give someone we love this Christmas is a gift that will not break: the joy of encouragement. A second gift I think we can offer others is the joy of thoughtfulness.

I love the way Christmas brings out the best in people. At this time of year, they tend to be more thoughtful. Christmas cards, flowers, food, phone calls, e-mails, and personal gifts – these wonderful gestures of thoughtfulness are woven deeply into the fabric of Christmas. Many of us wish and wonder why it can't last all year long.

James Moore tells the story of a time some years ago when he was on staff of the First UMC in Shreveport, Louisiana. Some members of his outreach committee came to him a few days before Christmas with a concern and a plan. They were concerned that some people in their community might be hungry or lonely on Christmas day.

Their plan was to open the church fellowship hall on Christmas afternoon and offer free food and warm fellowship – a Christmas party – to anyone who might be hungry or lonely. They were willing to give up their Christmas afternoon to work in the kitchen and make this happen.

They quickly recruited some other helpers and began preparations. They announced to the city that anyone who might be hungry or lonely on Christmas afternoon could come to the church between noon and five o'clock to enjoy Christmas carols, fellowship and a complimentary meal.

About two o'clock in the afternoon, Rev. Moore drove to the church to see how things were going. As he went inside, he met several members of the outreach committee coming out the door and heading for home. "What happened?" the pastor asked. "Is it over? Didn't anybody show up?"

A committee member answered, "Oh, they're here for sure. About 300 are eating right now. The only reason we are leaving is because some new workers came in to relieve us." The pastor inquired as to whom that might be. The committee members smiled and said, "Why don't you go into the kitchen and see for yourself."

In the pastor's own words, he says, "When I went into the kitchen, I was moved to tears by what I saw. There was my good friend, a rabbi, along with 14 members of his temple, who had told our people, "This is your special day. Go home and be with your families, and we will work for you."

Isn't that something? One of the most moving Christmas stories I have heard in a long time, a gift from a group of Jewish friends who had heard what these Methodists were trying to do, and they had responded with joy, the joy of thoughtfulness.

My friends, if you watch cable news all day long, you may become discouraged about the world we're living in right now: bitter politics, economic insecurity, fear of global warming, terrorists and the next mass shooter. At times it feels as though the world is getting darker and meaner.

Sometimes I just want to stay inside my nice warm house and forget the world outside. But what if your place of security was burned to the ground, the way it was out in California during the terrible firestorm they just went through?

Is it possible to find joy in the world we live in today? Knowing that God is with us is the gift that brings joy. Remember the sign of Immanuel, God with us, is a baby being born to a woman who has no business having a baby. The story of Jesus' birth tells us that hope is coming, and with the hope of Jesus comes a gift we surely did not see coming; it's the gift of joy.

And what is our sign? - a baby, born in a manger. Followers of Jesus, we have our sign. If it feels like your security has been burned to the ground; if you're feeling weary living in a world of bad news, look up. We have been given a sign.

The sign for us is a baby conceived by a virgin. Crazy! Impossible! His name is Immanuel. God is with us. And God's presence brings us the most unexpected gift of all, the gift of joy. Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Christmas Gifts That Won't Break* by James W. Moore and Jacob Armstrong, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017, pp. 61-78.