

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • DECEMBER 15, 2019
THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
“SAY YES” SERIES

The Psalm Litany
Based on Psalm 146

The one who helps us is the God of Jacob – the person who rests on the Lord
their God – is truly satisfied, for God is faithful forever.

I will praise the Lord as long as I live.

The Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, sets the prisoner free,
opens the eyes of the blind, watches over the strangers,
upholds the orphan and widow, and protects immigrants.

**Our Lord walked as an immigrant and stranger,
and God will reign forever in all generations!**

The Scripture
Luke 2:8-20

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!” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying, and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The Message
The Shepherds' Yes
Mark Briley
(Shared at the 8 a.m. Daybreak Worship)

Synopsis: The shepherds' "yes" is what first makes this an event for everyone. They were camped out on the hillside, working the graveyard shift, when "God's glory blazed around them!" How's that for shaking up an ordinary night on the job? The angel pronounces to the shepherds that this baby announcement was for everybody. They could have shrugged their shoulders. They could have thought, "Huh, Cool," and gone right back to tending the herd and watching the weather channel in the shepherd's break room. **But, they said, "Yes!"** We've got to go get in on this thing that has happened. So they went. Their "Yes" opened space for the whole world to say "Yes," too.



ju-bi-late [joo-b uh-leyt] – verb. *To show or feel great joy; rejoice; exult.* Jubilate.

I honestly didn't know you could use this word in this form. One can be jubilating all over the place, and that is totally acceptable; especially on "Joy!" Sunday. Are you with me yet? Maybe it's too early. Maybe you're waiting to see the Children's Christmas Pageant in one of our next two services before you get on board with that level of joy. Joy does have its peak moment expressions of course.

Clive Staples Lewis said, "Joy jumps under one's ribs and tickles down one's back and makes one forget meals and keeps one (delightedly) thru sleepless nights. It shocks one awake when the other puts one to sleep. One second of joy is worth twelve hours of pleasure."¹

¹ *Surprised by Joy*. C.S. Lewis. Harcourt Brace Publishing. 1955.

Beyond those peaks, however, joy is truly more of a way of life than a moment in time. Joy is a well. It's deep and it accompanies all sorts of moments and can include tears, laughter, and sometimes both at the same time. Joy is a frequent visitor in Scripture. The word "joy," not counting its many synonyms or variations of the term shows up more than 200 times in the Bible.

This time of year, you might think of Mary and the Magnificat – "*My soul magnifies the Lord! My spirit rejoices!*" She's going to have a son! "*Mary did you know?*" Yes. She did. Joy.

I think of the *lost* passages in Luke's gospel. The Shepherd jubilating when the lost sheep is found. Joy. The woman sweeping her home, jubilating when she finds her lost coin in the seat cushions on the couch (*always check the couch cushions first!*). Joy. The father running down the driveway to embrace his prodigal son near the mailbox. His son had been lost to the world for too long had come home. Joy.

There's a special well of joy found when life is restored, made whole, reconciled in some way. The shepherds, in the Broadway's Children's Pageant, and in our text for today, take center stage as we ponder their "yes."

The shepherds' "yes" is what first makes this an event for everyone. They were camped out on the hillside, working the graveyard shift, when "*God's glory blazed around them!*" How's that for shaking up an ordinary night on the job? The angel pronounces to the shepherds that this baby announcement was for everybody. They could have shrugged their shoulders. They could have thought, "*Huh. Cool.*" and gone right back to tending the herd and watching the weather channel in the shepherd's break room.

I always wondered about those first shepherds. Just like any place you've ever worked, every one of them would have had their own unique experiences and personalities. Some may have been more spiritual, and others could have cared less. It's interesting in any environment made of up a diverse group of people when some collective moment happens that can't be ignored. Like... an angel choir showing up with such an announcement. *Trusting Tom's* reaction always differs from *Cynical Carl's* and *Melancholy Molly's*, you know?

Shepherds, in general, were more or less despised by the good orthodox people of the day. They just couldn't keep up the details of the ceremonial law; they could not observe all the meticulous hand-washings and rules and regulations. So, they were not looked upon favorably, which is a constant Gospel theme, especially in Luke's gospel. Those without the favor of the culture often were the most favored by God.

There are some interesting thoughts about this particular group of shepherds, however. Morning and evening, an unblemished lamb was offered at the Temple as a sacrifice to God. Officials were very particular about the perfection of the sacrifice, so they were not inclined to sub out the lamb raising. Authorities had their own private sheep flocks from which the daily sacrifices were chosen, and we know these flocks were kept near Bethlehem. It would sort of be like us being so picky about our grape juice for communion that we had our own vineyard out in the community garden instead of trusting Welch's to be our supply.

Or... maybe it's like the poor lobsters in the tank at Red Lobster when you walk in the front door. No one can quite do it like you'd do it, right? Could the angel's appearance have been to the shepherds of *this* sacrificial flock? Theologian William Barclay said about this possibility: "*It is an interesting thought that the shepherds who looked after the Temple lambs were the first to see the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*"²

More than any legend, the greatest joy of this part of the journey to Christmas, is that the gift was expanded to include a larger circle of people. That God would show up in a place where the likes of any of us might be in our lives at any given moment... working an honest job, working through a tough transition, working on a relationship that takes more effort than we ever thought it would... and yet, right in the middle of it all, an invitation: "*Hey... yeah... you... in the middle of all that stuff... you've got to be a part of this!*"

It's like the old European monarch, who used to frustrate his security detail to no end, because he would slip out into the crowds of people to move among them incognito. Every time he was asked to quit doing that, he'd say, "*How can I influence anyone unless I know how they live?*" How can I know their pain? How can I know their joy? We have a God who came among us with the same passion. But that was so long ago, right? "*Emmanuel – God with us?*" Okay. But that was a world ago. I want that joy now.

James, the brother of Jesus, felt this same thing on the other side of the resurrection. He is living and dwelling with the movement of Jesus followers, who are anticipating a quick return of Christ. They are ready to get the party started. Let's do this return thing. Let's set the world right. Let's raise our eggnog-filled glasses high, dance to the Black-Eyed Peas – "*Tonight's gonna be a good night!*"

But James offers a helpful word in the fifth chapter of his letter: "*Be joyful in the waiting,*" he says. Like a farmer watching over the crop, watch... for the coming of the Lord is near. What *is* near anyway? When is near? We all want to know this answer.

² Exegetical sharing as found in William Barclay's commentary, "*The Gospel of Luke.*" Westminster Press. 1975.

Near for my kids is five minutes from now. Near for you might be tomorrow or next week or next month or even a couple of years. And then, of course, we always hear that a lifetime for us is but a drop in the bucket for God. What is *near* for God? I don't know. But I understand God's *coming soon* to be near every time I open my heart to that possibility. That's how I find joy, too. It is how I get through bitter life moments. It is why I celebrate the name of this baby that is coming... Emmanuel, "*God with us.*"

It is hard to understand "*God with Us.*" I've bought stock in it. I believe it speaks life to me. But it can be difficult to find a grip and hold on to it.

Eleven years ago, this weekend in fact, a good buddy of mine, a big IU fan and graduate of Indiana University, took me to my first basketball game at Assembly Hall in Bloomington, Indiana. It is a magical place... awkward seating and shape but rich with tradition. Coach Bobby Knight stormed the sidelines for years, threw chairs across the court... all sorts of memorable stuff. But the game we attended was one of Coach Tom Crean's first games as coach of the team. The previous coach got into some hot water and had to leave the school. It was a crushing blow to the school as their team was so good, and the next year held great promise for the school. But the stars left when the coach left, most of the team left in fact.

Coach Crean held open tryouts on campus... one of the most storied collegiate basketball programs of all time... scrambling to find anybody on campus who could play a decent game of horse. So, here we were at the game, the fans excited to have a new coach even though the team was going to need some work. Students held signs across the arena that said things like "*Crean and Crimsom*" and other creative things you could do with Coach Crean's name. The students were hungry all night... wild... cheering... painted chests... longing for their school's name to be restored to its place of integrity, prestige, and glory. It was a tight game, but the Hoosiers pulled out the victory in the end.

Why do I tell this story? Because of what happened next. My friend and I watched Coach Crean as he was leaving the court. He was going to have to walk past the student section that was still going wild... chanting his name... the band playing. I've seen many a coach walk right off the floor, head down, all business on their face. But as Coach Crean got close, in his suit and shiny rimmed glasses, he ran to the stands and right up the stairs to be in the very middle of the students. They cheered. They danced. They sang. They celebrated! *Together.*

It would be a long battle ahead. It would be a hard year, and they wouldn't win many games. They knew this, but it was a new beginning. Bitterness gone... they now had someone who would walk with them... who would become a part of them... who would be with them. And there is joy when you realize the truth of that.

Somehow, that speaks Christmas to me. God among us... running up the bleachers, or the hillside, or our driveways to be in the middle of it all with us. That's why the story of the shepherds matters so much. And it is why, in amazement to me, they all come together in agreement... saying "Yes" to becoming a part of Christmas. Shouldn't one stay back with the herd? Might not *Skeptical Sam* who doesn't see much hope in things getting better in the world say, "*Nah. I'm out. Babies make me nervous anyway.*" But no matter the differing thoughts... they say "Yes" and make the journey to meet the baby.

I wonder if you're up for jubilating today. You've got a lot going on in your life. You're processing something new all the time – are you up for seeing the baby? Are you up for seeing kids dress up as shepherds and sheep and the like and experience their joy? Even when they forget a line? Even when they speak out of turn? Even when all doesn't go as planned. In reality, their presentation of the Christmas story is as pure and honest as any.

One of my favorite holiday program memories was my son's pre-school program a number of years ago. I think it was our second Christmas in Tulsa, and Carrie and I went to Dane's preschool Christmas program. The director comes out and says, "*Just enjoy the show, no need to take pictures or record it as we have a professional videoing the whole program that you all can have after it's through.*" As soon as the kids take the stage, out come 400 cell phones ready to capture the moment.

There were dozens of little kids dressed in their Christmas best for the pageant. Some stood and cried. Some sang louder than all the rest. Some tripped and started the domino effect through the little three-and-four-year-olds huddled on the steps. My very favorite moment was when they held up letters and did a chant on what each letter in the word Christmas stood for... you know... "*C is for the Christ child...*" and the kid would raise that "C" high into the sky. What made it so great was some confusion set in, and not all the letters were in the right place. Instead of spelling Christmas when all was said and done, nine proud children held high each letter gleaming from ear to ear as they spelled "*Chrismtas.*" When the burdens get heavy... the circumstances bleak... I restore a smile; my soul jubilates by remembering the gift of *Chrismtas*... the most wonderful time of the year. Amidst the chaos, when I feel my identity is lost... I can remember, in Christ, who I truly am. Imperfect. Not Christmas card clean, but real and honest and known. Such moments remind me why I need Christmas in the first place. Maybe you need that reminder today as you think about your own "Yes" to Christmas. May you know the joy.

ju-bi-late [joo-b uh-leyt] – verb. *To show or feel great joy; rejoice; exult.* Jubilate.

Let's join the shepherds. Let's join our children. "*Let's go and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.*"