



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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DECEMBER 13, 2015  
THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Starry Stranger, Guiding Light to Joy  
Isaiah 12:2-6; Matthew 1:18-25

It is often in the dark that our worries and fears play upon us. Sometimes those worries chase away sleep which we hope might bring us needed rest. At other times those fears invade our sleep, turning otherwise pleasant dreams into fitful nightmares. In the dark, we are often vulnerable to all of the worries of the day.

Today we read a love story. It is not your typical love story, but it is one, nonetheless. We read a story of Joseph, a young man wrapped in the bliss of springtime love. There is no telling how long it took him to catch the eye of Mary, the sweet and lovely maiden he had loved for years. Or perhaps it was she who had waited a long time for Joseph to notice the gangly Galilean girl who had blossomed into a beautiful young woman. Finally their eyes met, their hearts embraced, and Joseph summoned the courage to ask Mary to be his betrothed. She said, "Yes."

For a young man, the fact that someone, anyone, would notice him, much less return his affection, is adrenaline to the spirit. A young man in love sees nothing but sunshine, hears nothing but the singing of cheerful birds, and walks only in the clouds surrounding his head. The joy of being loved is an antidote against all of the sorrow and suffering in the world, unless, of course, that sorrow and suffering is your own. Surely after Mary accepted his proposal of marriage, Joseph must have floated through the streets of Nazareth oblivious to any of the problems around him.

Then Mary told him "the news." His cloud became a thunderstorm. The singing birds became annoying ravens. The bright sun was eclipsed by the darkness of betrayal, deceit, and shame. I imagine Joseph and I think of that phrase in the poem by Richard Crashaw which speaks of the world's "well-stol'n joy."<sup>1</sup> Joseph must have felt as if all the joy of his life had been stolen when Mary told him that she was expecting a child. It was not the child in her womb which sorrowed him; it was the betrayal he felt, the lies he knew that

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Crashaw, "A Hymn of the Nativity," in *Classic Hymns & Carols* (London: Batsford, 2012), 161.

she had told, the deceit which had been the foundation for what he thought would be a happy life together.

“Well-stol’n joy.” Do you ever feel like your joy has been stolen? I am not speaking only of the moments of happiness that we receive throughout a particular day, but of that abiding sense of joy which enriches life and which God intends for us all.

Our joy may be stolen by broken promises, shattered trust, and poor choices. Joy may evaporate when the job which provided a good living and gave meaning to each day is suddenly gone. Joy may vanish when the house that has been our home and the place of our nurture is taken away. Joy may flee when someone we love is no longer with us.

Our joy may depart when our health declines. When the opportunities to explore life and live it to the fullest are stolen by hatred and violence, our joy may flee to safer territory and leave us with little more than crushed ideals and a jaded view of life.

Sadly, our joy is easily stolen, and with it the light that lifts our spirits and helps us cope with fear and pain. It was “well-stol’n joy” which sent Joseph to his bed that night. Sleep came, but it was the “well-stol’n joy” of cherished memories and broken trust which haunted him that night. Heartbreak and anger pressed darkly upon him. He had no choice but to let Mary go. Mary, the cause of his joy and the source of his sorrow. Then, breaking through that deep darkness, a vision of a messenger from God was like dawn bringing a new day.

“Joseph, son of David,” he said, surprising Joseph with this connection to the heralded King of Israel. “Do not be afraid. Do not let the darkness of this hour overwhelm you. Do not allow the joy of your love for Mary to be stolen by misunderstood news.” The messenger encouraged him not to be afraid of the child for the child was from God—was God—and would bring joy to all people. The messenger told him not to be afraid of Mary and what was happening within her because hers was a story, not of unfaithfulness, betrayal, and deceit; rather, it was a story of faithfulness and love, a story that would be his story as well. Theirs would be a love story, not for Mary and Joseph alone, but for all people.

We are told that Joseph rose from his sleep, awake in the light of a new day. Buoyed by a new-found joy of life, he married Mary and they became parents of the Savior of the world.

It would be years later that the Apostle Paul, one who himself had worked tirelessly to steal joy from Jesus' followers, would capture what I think became Joseph's new mood when he wrote:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:4-7

We do not hear much about Joseph after the birth of Jesus. He leads the family to safety in Egypt and returns to their hometown of Nazareth. He accompanies Mary and Jesus to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover and Jesus' coming of age. After that, Joseph slips from the picture, but he never leaves the story for his experience is important for us all.

There are many times in life when darkness grabs us from behind and threatens to squeeze all of the joy out of life. Sometimes the tragedies and failures of life are successful and we are left with everything but joy. We try to find our way back, but the path is unknown and the way is always dark.

There are certainly days when I find it difficult to be joyful. The hatred and violence in our world are almost overwhelming and the length to which some people will go to hurt others whom they do not even know is heartbreaking. The economy, though improved for some, is still brutal to many people. Politics, rather than offering us hope for a better day, confirms our suspicions that our leaders do not have our best interests at heart. Personal challenges confuse our thinking, confound our efforts to move forward, and leave us wondering if there is any joy at all.

And then a messenger speaks and light appears and the way begins to clear. If Joseph teaches us anything, it is that the darkest night is not without its light. Over and over again, God comes to us with his message of hope and love which brings us joy. It may not be a giddy, Christmas party kind of joy, but it is the abiding joy of knowing that we are not alone and that God is with us. And which type of joy would you rather have?

Years ago, I learned a rather simplistic but unforgettable lesson about joy. It was the summer following my freshman year in college. I was trying to work out my understanding of faith and how I was to live out my faith in Christ. I worked in a factory that summer with some great people who were

by and large, not Christian. The only other self-identified Christian on our crew was a person so obnoxious that none of us wanted to be around him. I was confused and frustrated and unsure how anyone could live faithfully.

Someone shared with me an acronym, a clever device for remembering the true path to joy. I am not given to mnemonics when it comes to faith, but this one has stayed with me for nearly forty years. It is the simple acronym of JOY: Jesus–Others–Yourself. When we give Jesus–God–the primary place in our lives, looking unto him for divine guidance, we will soon find the way we should go. When we put other people ahead of ourselves, thinking more about their well-being than our own, we gain a certain balance in life. And when we make certain to take care of ourselves, not putting ourselves last, so to speak, but looking after ourselves in the proper sequence, we gain a broader perspective in life. When Jesus, Others, and Yourself are in the proper configuration, joy does permeate our lives. It is the heartbeat of every day. It is the energy that helps us deal with whatever comes our way. That summer, I learned a great deal about myself and other people. My faith grew in a challenging time, and I was filled with joy.

When Joseph listened to the messenger of God and put the needs of Mary and her child ahead of himself, his joy returned. Life was back in order. It was still a very difficult situation, but they were able to deal with it because God was with them.

I have been impressed with so many of you who have been faced with unbelievable challenges in life but who have continued to live faithfully and joyfully. You are loving, caring, giving people because you live each day strengthened by the joy of life which comes only from God.

Joseph's story is a love story, a story of God's love for the world and for each one of us. That love surely brings us joy and reminds us day by day that we are never alone. The joy which God brings into life is like dawn breaking into the darkest of nights, scattering clouds and chasing away fears. The source of that joy is the One whom Joseph called both Son and Savior, whom shepherds adored and angels heralded, whom Herod feared and Wise Men sought. The source of our joy is Christ who illumines our lives with the joy of hope and love. Starry Stranger, Guiding Light, lead us to the joy of life. Amen.

December 13, 2015

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Supplication

O God who became flesh and dwelt among us, as the birth of our Savior draws near, we can rejoice in the faithfulness you have shown to your people throughout the ages. And yet, as we await Christ's coming once again, we continue to be surprised by the persistence of your love for us, by the abundance of your blessings to us, and by the extravagant demonstration of your grace in the sending of your Son. We give you thanks for the comfort we find in familiar words and music and in meaningful traditions. We give you thanks for the grace of family and friends, for memories shared and gifts given. Most of all, we give you thanks for the gift of your Son who is our Guiding Light leading us to you, the One who gives us hope, who fills our celebrations with abundant joy and abiding peace. In our gratitude, grant to us a spirit of generosity and compassion. Help us to share all that you have given to us and to remember that you are the source of all that we have and all that we are.

On this day when we have lit the candle of joy, we pray, Lord Jesus, that you would come to bring joy to our world. Bring joy to the one who has sung these carols for a lifetime and still sings them with heart and soul and voice. Bring joy to the child who comes with eyes wide and heart open knowing that we are celebrating something too wondrous for words. Bring joy to the one who needs to know that though your love embraces all the world, it is particular enough to meet each grief and loss as though it were the only pain in the world. Bring joy to the hopeless ones who long for assurance of their worth and that someone cares for them when the world tosses them aside. Bring joy to those for whom the sounds of war have drowned out the melodies of carols. Bring joy to all of us who are caught up in the wonders of your love as though we were experiencing your birth for the first time. With all heaven and nature, let us sing and shout and speak our joy, that the dark places of the world might know that you have come. We pray in the name of the One who comes to bring us abundant and joyful life, and we offer our prayers by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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