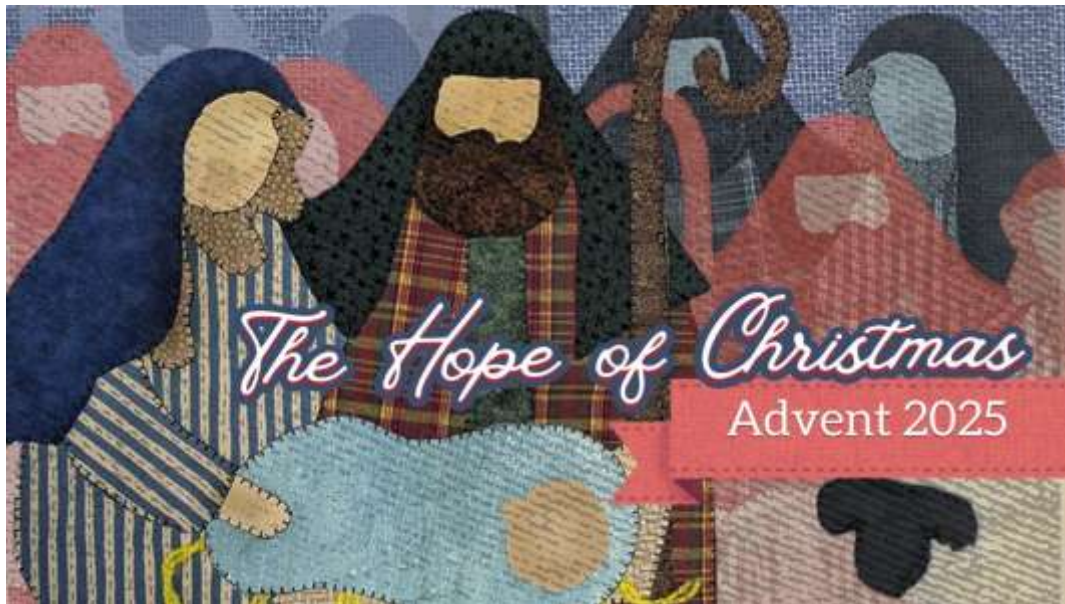


The Joy of Christmas
Kenwood Baptist Church Sermon Series
Advent 2024
Pastor David Palmer
December 14, 2025

TEXT: Luke 2:1-20



Good morning, Beloved. This Sunday is the third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of joy. Advent slows us down so we can open our hearts to receive what God has done for us in Christ. When you hear the word “joy,” what comes to your mind? When do you remember feeling joy? “I got the job.” She said, “Yes.” “We’re going to have a baby.” These are obvious moments of joy. Sometimes joy comes in unexpected moments, such as a meeting you have scheduled that suddenly gets canceled and you have an unexpected moment of free time in your schedule, and you feel something we might call joy. You may feel joy when a child says, “I’m coming home for Christmas,” or someone says, “We won!”

Our route to joy this morning at Christmas takes us on a journey. It’s a journey of four scenes. It’s a journey where we find the expression “great joy.” This morning, I want you to consider joy—and specifically the joy of Christmas—as a response to events and as a response to a relationship. Joy is not really a mood or a mindset. It’s a natural response to tremendously good news. It’s a natural response to an invitation of relationship with God. It’s the response that people feel and have when they first meet Jesus Christ. Let’s take this journey toward the joy of Christmas. If you are not feeling the joy of Christmas right now, that’s okay because we are going to get there together in this passage.

Scene 1: An imperial edict: The first scene for us this morning is an imperial edict. We read in Luke 2:1:

"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered."

I remember a reading of Luke 2 when I was a brand new Christian. I was led to saving faith in Jesus when I was 16 years old, just before my senior year of high school, so my first Christmas as a believer was during my senior year. I remember going to church where the pastor talked about Christmas and said he woke up with his family and read Luke 2 and retold the Christmas story. I thought, "This guy is amazing. He knows the Bible so well. He knows to go to Luke 2." I did not even know where to find the Gospel of Luke. He knew the chapter of Christmas in the whole Bible.

Every Christmas, we are drawn to Jesus. But in Luke's telling, we also must face Augustus as well. Luke is the only writer in the New Testament who mentions this aspect of the story. This is Caesar Augustus in one of his many marble statues. If you look closely at him from the side, you can see the bursting acorns in his hair. Those of you who were with us in the Revelation series will immediately recognize the iconography of this. The *corona civica* is a crown made of oak leaves, and the only person who can wear this crown publicly is one who has saved the life of a Roman citizen. And that's why the person wearing this crown is called the savior. And since this is Caesar, he can make crowns out of marble.



Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus: Gaius is his given name, Julius Caesar his adopted name, and Octavianus means he was child eight in his family. He was officially renamed Augustus by decree of the Roman senate on January 16, 27 BC. He was given this name as an honorific title. It means majestic, great, and venerable. Lest we forget this title, he slipped it into the calendar so that everyone thinks of his venerability when they are in back-to-school mode in August. His full title became *Imperator Caesar Divi Filius Augustus*, meaning Caesar, emperor, of the divine one's son, Augustus. In the Greek-speaking provinces, Augustus is translated as Sebastos, a pious one. It's sometimes Hellenized with the Latin form *Augustos*. Luke uses that form here. Herod the Great rebuilt the capital of Samaria and called it Sebaste after Caesar Augustus, using the Greek name. Luke shows that he also knows Latin in the fact that he uses the Latin name. The title Augustus was used, and it was conferred to all subsequent Roman leaders for 15 centuries until the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

Augustus sets the scene for us with the act of commanding that the world be registered. Augustus himself describes this act in his pre-recorded funeral inscription. He issued a



command that it be published upon his death in a monumental inscription that summarized all his accomplishments. It has the catchy title in Latin "*The Res Gestae Divi Augusti*," the deeds accomplished of the divine Augustus. This is called the queen of Latin inscriptions. It is gigantic—so large that it would fill much more than the whole front of this sanctuary. You can see the scale of it. It's the largest, longest Latin inscription that exists.

In this inscription, he records several censuses that he took. He says, "In my sixth consulship, I made a census of the people. I performed the lustrum, an act of ritual cleansing of the entire Roman people, and he recorded the number of Roman citizens. He did it again later in his reign, and the number was higher. He did it a third time in his inscription, and the number was higher. He was counting the people, recording those that filled his realm. His heading title says that he subjected the orb of the world to Roman rule. For those less inclined to respond emotionally to lists of numbers, he decided he would make a map as well, the first map of the world. He ordered his friend Agrippa to construct this map and display this gigantic map. The ancient sources differ in the exact dimensions. Some say it was 75 meters across. This is a big map for everyone to see.



To see the map, you may be turning and twisting just as the ancients would have done, but to orient you (which is the right word), it's a view of the world in three parts. Asia is at the top, and that's where we get the phrase "to orient." Europe is on the left, Asia and Africa are on the right, and Rome emerges in the middle. All ancient maps we have place the map-maker in the center, which is interesting. Four-fifths of the area of the map is dedicated to the Roman Empire. India, China, and Russia are just named on the periphery.

What was Augustus doing to send out a census account of the world? He was documenting his reign. He was inviting people to see themselves as within his reign, and within that is the story

that he is the lord of that realm and publicly identified as savior. Luke tells us that the imperial decree to register the world, to take a census of all the world, sets in motion the events of Christmas. In Luke 2:3, we read:

“And all went to be registered, each to his own town.”

Everyone goes to their own hometown, and we go to scene two.

Scene 2: Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem: Set within this worldwide decision to count the peoples of the world, Luke tells us that within this global imperial decision Joseph also was set in motion. In Luke 2:4, we read:

“And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David.”

Luke says he went up from Galilee, which is the theological use of this verb. Galilee is north of Judea, but theologically you always go up to Jerusalem, no matter what direction you are headed. He goes up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because that is his ancestral line. Joseph and Mary travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It's about 70 miles if you are flying. It's about 90 miles if you are walking. It takes between seven and ten days to walk from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Mary is in the advanced stages of her pregnancy, so it was probably closer to nine or ten days.



Luke tells us in Luke 2:6-7 that when they reached Bethlehem, the time came for her to give birth:

“And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

I know it's hard not to say swaddling clothes, but it actually is swaddling cloths. It's not an outfit for the baby Jesus. It's straps of cloth wrapped around Him to keep His limbs close. Luke tells us there was no room for them in the guest house. Large crowds had come to their ancestral home in response to this imperial decree, and everyone from the lineage and line of King David was returning to the city of Bethlehem.

Luke tells us that they laid Him in a manger. It's a striking picture for the newborn King. “Manger” is a term that describes a feeding trough for animals. There are many examples of mangers found in Israel, and they are made of stone. The word “manger” comes from the old

French “*mangier*” (meaning to eat), which is from the Latin “*mandere*” (meaning to chew). This infant child is set inside a stone manger filled with hay. From the view of a worldwide empire,



with a map of the world that's 75 meters wide to count the whole world, Luke focuses our attention on a stone box in a small town, in a distant province, in a town—Bethlehem—



that does not even appear on Caesar's map.

Scene 3: The shepherds: Scene three takes us even further outside, quite literally. In Luke 2:8, Luke tells us:

“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.”

The traditional translation is that they were “*out in the field*,” as though they just happened to be outside. Luke tells us that they were actually dwelling outside. They were people who lived outside permanently, and it is nighttime and they are watching over their flocks. In Luke 2:9, we read that the most remarkable thing happens:

“And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.”

Heaven and earth connect here with these unnamed shepherds living outside. Luke tells us that the “*angel of the Lord appeared to them*,” according to the ESV. The Greek word that is used here is actually more concrete. It says that the “*angel of the Lord stood in front of them*.” Can you imagine that an angel of the Lord comes and stands right in front of you? Not only that, but the angel of the Lord comes, and the glory of Almighty God radiates around them. The luminous presence of the living God lights up the night sky around these shepherds. How would you have reacted? Do a quick self-assessment. You are doing your job. Camping is fun. Sheep are great. And yet, imagine how you would have reacted. What would you have felt to see an angel of God and then the glory of God light up the space all around you? Would you have asked a question? Would you have shouted? Luke tells us that they were overwhelmed. They were afraid, not in the sense of fearing for their lives, but that fear that explains for us why we have the capacity for fear. The scriptures teach us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and that when there is no fear of God before our eyes, it's a terrible situation for human beings, because then we just do whatever we want. There is a right holy awe that comes over them at the angel's presence and the glory and numinous presence of the living God all around them, and they felt a holy fear.

One of the books that has shaped my soul and my walk with Jesus was given to me when I was a college student by my Resident Director. It was *The Knowledge of the Holy* by A.W. Tozer. Tozer writes in this book:

“If we ever think well it should be when we think of God.

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

“With our loss of the sense of Majesty has come the further loss of religious awe and consciousness of the divine presence.... The decline of the knowledge of the holy has brought on our troubles...

“The man who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of ten thousand temporal problems, for he sees at once that these have to do with matters which at the most cannot concern him for very long;

“...and until he sees a vision of God high and lifted up, [then we are welcomed into the gospel]... Low views of God destroyed the gospel for all who hold them.”

Here these shepherds are met with the glory of God, an angelic announcement. In Luke 2:10, the angel gives the announcement of the gospel:

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”

This great joy will be for all people—all the people. The angel's announcement of a gospel that is for all the people is set in the context of an imperial decree to register all the world for an imperial subjugation. Luke instead records the arrival of the angel of the Lord with a message from Almighty God of a gospel that is a gospel of great joy for all the people. The message is explained in Luke 2:11:

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

The infant Jesus does not wear an oak crown. No. He will wear a crown later in the gospel. And in the end, He will be crowned with glory. The Savior is Christ the Lord. And the angel tells the shepherds in Luke 2:12:

“And this will be a sign for you: you will find a Baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

This is an unusual spot for a newborn to be placed. It is part of the sign. The angel does not interpret for the shepherds the meaning of it, but I think the meaning is fairly obvious. It signals the humility of the incarnation: that Almighty God would come to this out-of-the-way place, outside the house, announced to people who were living in fields. It's a stunning statement of the humility of God incarnate.

As the shepherds receive this announcement in the midst of their holy terror, suddenly the rest of the choir steps forward. Luke tells us in Luke 2:13-14:

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!'"

This idiom, "the heavenly host," picks up language from the Old Testament that the Lord is the Lord of hosts, meaning the Lord of armies. Luke says, "A multitude of the heavenly army stepped forward." We do not know how many angels there are. That will be fun to learn someday. We are told that there are myriads and myriads. A myriad is 10,000, so those who love numbers can crunch that out: 10,000 times 10,000. For others who are not great with numbers, you can rest in the calm assurance that there are a lot of them—lots and lots of angels. And these angels move forward.

Do you know that angels sing? We see angels singing in the Bible. We cannot be in close proximity to God and not sing. We see the seraphim close to God, these fiery, radiant creatures in Isaiah 6, and they never cease singing and calling out to one another, *"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty."* Here the heavenly army choir is like the ultimate Marine band. It's like the ultimate college band. It's the ultimate angel choir. They come and they sing, *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is well pleased."*

There is a text variant of that last word of Luke 2:14. The text variant is related to the Greek word *"eudokias,"* which means good pleasure. Some manuscripts do not have the last "s." Most of them do. What difference does that make? This is the difference. If we do not have the last "s," then *eudokia* is an abstract noun meaning goodwill. That is why the King James Version has *"glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, goodwill to men,"* as though there are three elements in the angelic announcement. The best manuscripts have the "s," so that is why most scholars think it's a just a double announcement: *"Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth."* If it ends up that it's a triple greeting, that's okay.

What does that mean for us to be people of goodwill? It's not our goodwill. This word is used in the Bible to refer to God's good pleasure toward us. Why is this such an important part of the joy of Christmas? It's because Christmas is good news of great joy for people who do not deserve it. Christmas is not an announcement just for the good people, whoever they might be. Christmas is good news of great joy for all people. *"Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth to people on whom divine favor rests."* That's what this means, just as Mary was told earlier.

Scene 4: The shepherds find the Child: We go to scene four in our passage. We read in Luke 2:15 that the angels go back up into heaven:

“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’”

Isn't it great to know that the whole choir came to the fields of Bethlehem and then they return to their heavenly abode, and the shepherds say to one another with a great hortatory subjunctive, “Let us go.” *“Let us go and see what has happened which the Lord has made known to us.”* I love that about the shepherds. They are given this heavenly vision, the meaning of these events, and then the right response is: “We probably should go check that out.” Can you imagine that being a long conversation with the shepherds? The angelic army returns to heaven, and the shepherds look at each other and think, “Well, what do you guys want to do the rest of the night?” I do not think anyone said that. I think they said, “We are going straight there.” When Christmas is announced to you, you do not make other plans. You go straight for it. And Luke tells us they went straight for it. In Luke 2:16, he says:

“And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Baby lying in a manger.”

And when they came in to that scene, they helped interpret that moment for Mary and Joseph. In Luke 2:17-18, we read:

“And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this Child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.”

Everyone who heard it marveled at what the shepherds said. We imagine this scene in Bethlehem with Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus and the shepherds coming and suddenly the scene around the manger is getting more and more crowded. The scene around the manger just continues to get more and more crowded, because this good news of great joy is meant to be shared. The shepherds went back to their fields, and they did not go back in silence; they went back singing. In Luke 2:20, we read:

“And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

The joy of Christmas is not a mood. It's not dependent on circumstances. It's not really a function of certain personality types. Some people are more joyful than others. The joy of Christmas is a spontaneous and free response to what has happened. It's a free and spontaneous response to the good news of great joy that for you, for your benefit, for your salvation, Jesus Christ has come. He has come and laid aside His heavenly glory and descended and, in His apparent weakness, lay in a manger.

Luke knows the rest of the Christmas story. When he writes his Gospel, he knows the whole story. He himself was a relative latecomer to that story and was told that when he met Paul in the context of his second missionary journey. When Luke wrote his Gospel, he used this phrase “great joy” with great intentionality.

This expression of “great joy” reappears in two later moments in the Gospel, and both of them are really important. The next time we see “great joy” is in Luke 15 when the infant Jesus is now the public teacher and preacher of the gospel. As Jesus was welcoming sinners and eating with them and rejoicing with them, he was criticized for that. His response was to tell a set of three parables. Each of these parables features great joy. In the parable of a lost sheep, one out of a hundred, there is a costly search, and the sheep is found. When the shepherd finds it, he puts the sheep on his shoulders, rejoicing. There is the joy. He calls his friends and neighbors and says, *“Rejoice with me, for I have found My sheep that was lost.”*

In His second parable, Jesus says of a woman who lost one of ten coins, a costly search begins. She searches diligently and finds it. She calls her friends and neighbors and says, *“Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.”* And then Jesus says, *“I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”* Luke knows that we have heard angels rejoicing before in the gospel when they came to earth for the birth of the Son of God. And now Jesus says that as the message of the gospel goes out and people turn in repentance, it launches joy in heaven among the angels again.

The third parable is the climactic one, Jesus' most famous parable of all. Instead of one out of a hundred lost, instead of one out of ten lost, one out of two sons is lost. More costly than a sheep or a coin, a child, a son, is lost. As this story unfolds, the son is recovered and a celebration is launched and the punchline is there again: *“Rejoice. Rejoice.”* We had to celebrate.

Whether you are here this morning or you are listening online and you are really new to Christmas and the paint is still wet on your ornaments and the frosting is still warm on your cookies and you are still trying to navigate your way, what is this all about? Christmas is *“good news of great joy”* because Jesus Christ comes into the world to save sinners. The last use of *“great joy”* in Luke's Gospel is actually the ending of his Gospel. In Luke 24, after Jesus, the infant son, grows to become the public preacher of the gospel, He then becomes the Lamb of God who carries the sin of the world and who dies in the place of sinful men and women and children but then is resurrected from the dead. Jesus greets His disciples upon His resurrection and opens the Scriptures to them. Then, just as the angelic choir returned to heaven, Jesus

Himself blesses them as He is carried up and ascends into heavenly glory. In the second to last verse of Luke's Gospel, the disciples worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem *"with great joy."*

Great joy of Christmas leads to the joy of sinners being forgiven through faith in Christ—great joy of the missionary sharing of the gospel with others. The joy of Christmas, Beloved, is found in Jesus Christ, our Savior. The joy of Christmas is a shared delight in God, in His character, His purpose and plan for our lives, in finding our place in His world. The joy of Christmas in the end inspires our singing. It's such an important part of Christmas to sing. I am not a great singer, but I love to sing. I love to sing because singing is vital for Christian worship. Singing is not meant just to hear someone else singing. Singing is meant to be belted out loudly, boldly, and a terrible voice blends with the great voices around you. It's miraculous, and it's this big choir. Singing is such a vital part of Christmas.

In 1739, Charles Wesley penned a Christmas hymn. He wrote it as one of the 6,000 hymns that he wrote. He was second of all time in the statistics for the most worship songs ever written. First place is Fanny Crosby with 8,000 hymns. Charles Wesley wrote this song to mark the one-year anniversary of his own conversion. He gave it a great title: "Hark How All the Welkin Rings." "Welkin" is an archaic English word for the heavens. Wesley was inspired by our passage: *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men."* The lyrics of his song celebrate the angel's announcement. The poem was published with a sober, somber tune and ten stanzas.

A few years later, the preacher and great orator George Whitfield evangelized two-thirds of the colonial United States. Whitfield preached in the Boston Common to 10,000 people without amplification. Ben Franklin heard him preach. He died in a church in Newbury Port, and the church said, "Well, the great preacher has died. What do we do?" They buried him underneath the pulpit, and he is still there. During his life, George Whitfield thought that not everybody really gets "welkin," so he tweaked the words of Wesley's song. He changed the words from "Hark How All the Welkin Rings" to "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." Whitfield also added the line "glory to the newborn King." Whitfield was a preacher, so he shifted this song ever so slightly from being a song that just recalled how the angels were singing to a song with a gospel announcement that we should join in singing with the angels. That's a great change. It still had a pretty somber tune, but God in His providence had a plan for that, too. Almost a hundred years later, Felix Mendelson wrote a rousing melody to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the Gutenberg printing press. It's the Gutenberg printing press that helped proliferate the distribution of God's Word. So he wrote this really catchy, peppy, upbeat, singable tune. Ten years later, an English musician, William Cummings, took Wesley's lyrics, modified by Whitfield,

and said, "I think this really goes well with Mendelson's melody." And that's how we get "Hark the Herald Angels Sing."

*Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled:
Joyful all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies,
With the angelic host proclaim,
Christ is born in Bethlehem:
Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King.*

*Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
Late in time behold him come,
Offspring of a virgin's womb!
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail the incarnate Deity!
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel:
Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King.*

*Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Son of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings;
Mild, he lays his glory by,
Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth:
Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King.*

That is the joy of Christmas. Let's receive it and let's share it.

Let's pray.

Lord God, we worship You. We praise You this morning. Your ways are so much better than ours, and we praise You for that. We thank You for the angelic announcement, good news of great joy and that that is for all people. We thank You, Lord, this morning that no one on planet earth is excluded from this joy of Christmas. We thank You, Lord God, that in the fullness of the Gospel, the entry point to Christmas joy is not just gazing at the infant King in the manger but responding to His preaching and invitation to be reconciled to God and forgiven. We thank You, Lord, that the joy of Christmas is meant to be received and shared. And we thank You, Lord, that the angels burst into song at the birth of Christ, that the shepherds were praising God after seeing what they saw. We thank You that godly men and women have been writing songs for centuries to celebrate what You have done for the world in Christ. And so this morning, we pray that no matter what we are facing right now, no matter what our circumstances may be this day, that we would join that heavenly angelic choir and join our voices with our brothers and sisters to celebrate and say, "Glory, glory to the newborn King." I pray, Lord, for these my brothers and sisters that You would fill us with the joy of Christmas and that out of that fullness we would share Your joy with others.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.