



Advent 2025

Session 3: Joy

THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

Joy is the theme of the third week of Advent. As we light the “Shepherd’s Candle,” we reflect on the good news of Jesus that had come to the most unusual of recipients.

In today’s readings, look for the way joy was expressed—Isaiah described the joy that would come after exile, the shepherds experienced an unexpected message of joy given to an unexpected group of people, and in Romans, Paul described the joy of sharing the good news of Jesus with others.

As we enter the third week of Advent, there will be lots of things competing for “holiday joy.” Gift giving, holiday travel, and time commitments threaten to steal the joy of encountering the Christ child. Look for intentional ways to reflect on His arrival, to wonder at the manger, or to share the joy of Jesus with someone else.

TODAY’S SCRIPTURES

Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 2:8-20; Romans 10:14-15

THE MAIN IDEA

Joy is abundant gladness rooted in the good news of Jesus’s coming.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Consider your experience of joy. What specific promises of God provide joy to those who are in Christ?

SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

Isaiah 35:1-10 A prophet’s work wasn’t easy. They often had to proclaim exceedingly difficult news, and many resented them for it. Isaiah was no exception. In today’s text, Isaiah moved beyond his prophecies about God’s judgement and looked forward to a day when God would restore Israel and the people would return to the promised land. Ultimately, Isaiah pointed people to Christ and the joy He would bring.

Luke 2:8-10 The shepherds were unlikely messengers of the good news of Jesus’s birth. However, after the angel appeared, the shepherd’s enthusiasm could not be contained. They rushed to Bethlehem and told everyone they encountered about Jesus.

Romans 10:14-15 The story of Christmas is the beginning of the journey to the cross. When we have experienced God’s forgiveness and reconciliation through Christ, our desire, like the shepherds, should be to tell others about Jesus. When we share our experiences with Christ, we help others experience God’s peace, hope, and love.

START HERE

In 1957, Dr. Seuss released a now Christmas classic—*How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. In 1966, this story was turned into a TV special, and now generations of kids have grown up watching the Grinch try to discover the true meaning of Christmas. In a poignant scene, the Grinch watches the residents of Whoville celebrate Christmas without any gifts, holiday meals, or Christmas décor. In that moment, he realizes that the joy of Christmas could not be tied to material things. He muses, *"Maybe Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas... perhaps... means a little bit more!"* Like the Grinch, we can believe the joy of Christmas is found in gift wrap and holiday experiences. Today's Scriptures, however, paint a much different picture of joy. True joy, the Bible says, comes from experiencing the abiding gladness of Christ's arrival, and sharing that gladness with others.

DISCUSS

What threatens to steal your joy this Christmas? What helps joy in Christ to grow?

REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

1. Joy comes because of Jesus's arrival.

Isaiah 35:1-10:

*The wilderness and the dry land will be glad;
the desert will rejoice and blossom like a wildflower.
It will blossom abundantly
and will also rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon.
They will see the glory of the Lord,
the splendor of our God.
Strengthen the weak hands,
steady the shaking knees!
Say to the cowardly:
"Be strong; do not fear!
Here is your God; vengeance is coming.
God's retribution is coming; he will save you."
Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then the lame will leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy,
for water will gush in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the parched ground will become a pool,*

*and the thirsty land, springs.
In the haunt of jackals, in their lairs,
there will be grass, reeds, and papyrus.
A road will be there and a way;
it will be called the Holy Way.
The unclean will not travel on it,
but it will be for the one who walks the path.
Fools will not wander on it.
There will be no lion there,
and no vicious beast will go up on it;
they will not be found there.
But the redeemed will walk on it,
and the ransomed of the Lord will return
and come to Zion with singing,
crowned with unending joy.
Joy and gladness will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee.*

Unpacking Isaiah 35:1-10

Whoever said that half of the fun of traveling is the journey and not just the destination, has never traveled over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house at Christmas in a minivan with cranky toddlers. The journey to celebrate the holidays with family can be an expensive, frustrating, and lengthy ordeal. Add to it traffic jams, delayed flights, and inclement weather, and it can be enough to tempt anyone to stay home!

Some journeys, though challenging, are worth the joy on the other side. In today's text, Isaiah the prophet looked forward to a day when the Southern Kingdom of Judah would return from the Babylonian exile. Though he would not live to see either the seventy-year exile or their return, he looked forward by faith to celebrating their journey. As you prepare to study today's lesson, read this passage in its entirety and notice the different ways the prophet expressed the joy of coming home.

"The wilderness and the dry land will be glad; the desert will rejoice and blossom like a wildflower. It will blossom abundantly and will also rejoice with joy and singing" (Isaiah 35:1-2a). If you've watched a cowboy movie (or traveled through West Texas) you know few would describe traveling through a desert as rejoicing in wildflowers and abundant blossoms. Further, the journey Isaiah described would cover more than seven hundred miles on foot when the weary Southern Kingdom—men, women and children, returned from seventy years of forced labor. However, even the challenging journey would look like new life and celebration to an oppressed people set free. As the rest of verse two proclaims, *"They will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God."*

Joy is the theme of the third week of Advent. As we light the "shepherd's candle," we are reminded of the joy that comes from journeying through life *with* Jesus and *toward* Jesus. For

the Israelites, joy would come as they celebrated their release from captivity and a return to freedom. For Christians, we rejoice in being set free from the captivity of our sin, and we experience freedom in Christ in this life and for eternity. The joy waiting on the other side of the journey to Judah helped the Israelites endure the difficulties of a long, stressful, resource-limited, hot, dusty trip. Even a desert highway would feel like an oasis compared to the cruelty and hardship of captivity. In the same way, our journey to Jesus will have seasons that feel arduous. There may be times when our resources feel short and the journey is exhausting. However, as followers of Christ, we can experience joy as we travel toward Him.

The day before His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus shared with the disciples the pain of temporary separation they would experience after His death on the cross, but also the joy that would follow His resurrection (John 16:19-22). Because of Jesus's death and resurrection, we can experience joy that will never be taken away. While happiness is the fleeting emotion of temporary pleasure, joy is the enduring fulfillment that comes through the good news of Christ.

Isaiah told the Israelites they should draw their strength from the assurance of God's justice over their enemies (Isaiah 35:4). The Israelites hoped for an earthly king to deliver them from their oppressors and punish their enemies. In Christ, we have an eternal King who delivers us from sin and bore our punishment as the enemies of God. As Romans 5:10 says, *"For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, then how much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life."* Like the Israelites, we were carried away into captivity by sin. Through Christ, we have been set free from the bondage of sin and now walk in the joy that our eternal King has come!

In verses 5-7, Isaiah described the eyes of the blind being opened, the deaf hearing, the lame leaping, and the earth flourishing. In a temporary sense, their return from exile would be a time of renewal and restoration of what sin had cost. In an eternal way, Isaiah pointed to Christ who makes all things new. In fact, Jesus quoted the prophet's words in Luke 7:22-23, *"Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are told the good news, and blessed is the one who isn't offended by me."*

Isaiah described the freedom, safety, and joy that would accompany the Israelites' return to Judah. They would not wander aimlessly through the desert like their ancestors. Rather, God would make a way for them to go home. *"A road will be there and a way; it will be called the Holy Way"* (Isaiah 35:8). In the Greek version of the Old Testament (called the Septuagint), the word "Way" is the same word Jesus used when He proclaimed, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6). Jesus is the holy Way in the desert who allows us to walk in God's forgiveness, reconciliation, and safety. Isaiah closed this chapter by looking beyond the Israelites captivity and return from exile, toward the time when Christ would come to make all things new (Isaiah 35:8b-10).

The Israelites would experience the joy of returning to Zion. After seventy years of captivity in Babylon, the next generation would return to the promised land in joy—to settle in the area and

rebuild the temple. The sorrow and sighing of captivity would be overshadowed by gladness and unending joy. In the same way, when we place our hope in Jesus, we experience joy and gladness as we experience freedom in Christ. Even more, we look forward to an eternal rejoicing that will be ours. We experience joy in the already, life with Christ here on earth, and the not yet—life with Him for eternity. As John expressed in Revelation 19:7, a day is coming when God's people will say, *"Let us be glad, rejoice, and give him glory, because the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has prepared herself."* As we live with Jesus, even as parts of the journey are hard, we look forward to eternal joy and peace in His presence.

DISCUSS

- *Have you ever had trouble traveling that made you wonder if the destination was worth the journey?*
- *How might the Israelites' journey back to Judah have felt like a celebration? What perspective would they need to stay motivated for the long journey?*
- *How does our final destination of being with Christ make this world's pain and difficulty bearable? How can we have joy in the journey?*

2. Joy often arrives unexpectedly and humbly.

Luke 2:8-20: *In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock. 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, "Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be the sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger." Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying:*

*Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and peace on earth to people he favors!*

When the angels had left them and returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

They hurried off and found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger. After seeing them, they reported the message they were told about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary was treasuring up all these things in her heart and meditating on them. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard, which were just as they had been told.

Unpacking Luke 2:8-20

In 1990, twentieth-century Fox released the sleeper Christmas movie of the decade—"Home Alone." In it, 8-year-old Kevin McCallister, played by Macaulay Culkin, protects his house from robbers after being accidentally left behind during his family's Christmas trip to Paris. While the film is filled with slapstick comedy and Kevin's creative anti-theft inventions, it is a poignant scene with the "scary" neighbor that touches on the true meaning of Christmas. In the scene, Kevin and Old Man Marley talk inside a church while the choir practices for Christmas Eve. The two discuss family, fear, and reconciliation with people they love. In this touching scene, Kevin encounters joy in an unexpected place, and friendship with an unexpected person. While Kevin had lots of things to make him happy at home—peace, quiet, and the freedom to eat whatever he wanted—he recognized what he really wanted was to be with his family for Christmas.

In Luke 2:8-20, we find the joy of Christmas in an unexpected place with unexpected people. No one would have expected lowly shepherds to receive a visit from an angel. In Bible times, shepherds were considered untrustworthy and lower-class citizens, and their work made them ceremonially unclean. Yet, they were the first to receive the most important news in history. As Randy Alcorn wrote, *"A handful of shepherds, marginalized by the social and religious elite, were chosen to break the silence of centuries, heralding Messiah's birth."*

Not only were the recipients of the message unexpected, the message itself was unexpected. After centuries of waiting, God sent the promised Messiah. A single angel could not contain the news of Christ's birth. A great multitude appeared and joined in praising God.

The angels brought a message of salvation and peace, and their exuberant worship sparked awe and joy among the shepherds. The shepherds' eagerness to confirm the good news could not be held back (Luke 2:15). In this unexpected moment, the shepherds were invited into the kingdom of God, despite their ceremonial uncleanness, their occupation, and their status in society. The angel's voice must have been such a welcome invitation—"Today...a Savior was born for you" (Luke 2:11). In response, they rushed away to see the Messiah for themselves.

"They hurried off and found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger" (Luke 2:16). When the shepherds encountered this baby, born in humble circumstances, with a manger for a bed, they knew they had found the Savior. *"After seeing them, they reported the message they were told about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them"* (vv. 17-18).

Their journey from the fields to the manger changed their lives. They went from outcasts to invited guests. As Daniel Darling wrote in his book, *The Characters of Christmas*, *"The shepherds left their fields and became the most unlikely of messengers... they became the world's first missionaries, the first in a long line of ordinary, unheralded messengers of the gospel."* When we encounter Jesus, it changes us. When we experience the joy of being invited into the family of God, we want others to experience it too. Like the shepherds, many of us would describe ourselves as unexpected invitees into God's family. Perhaps we come from humble circumstances or challenging beginnings. Maybe we've made lots of mistakes and been

cast out by our own family or friends. The shepherds' story reminds us God invites all kinds of people into His family. When we say "yes" to His invitation, not only do we experience the joy of meeting Jesus, but we also take joy in sharing the good news with others.

Like Kevin McCallister in *Home Alone*, we can seek joy in all kinds of places, things, or experiences. When he was first left home alone, he enjoyed the temporary freedom and indulgence that came from making his own rules. As the days passed, however, Kevin yearned for the connection of his family. Similarly, we can try to find Christmas joy in various places, things, or holiday experiences. Whether we're coming to Christmas with humble gifts under the tree, or we have the resources to "shop 'til we drop," it's possible to go through December and miss Christmas entirely. If we seek fulfillment in our relational or financial position in society, we will come up short. The real joy of Christmas comes when we, like the shepherds, make haste to gaze at the manger, and share the joy of Jesus with others.

DISCUSS

- *What surprises you more about the Christmas story—the humble place of Christ's birth, or the humble nature of those who first received the good news?*
- *How can joy be something we chase at Christmas but never find?*
- *What does it look like to make haste to the manger? How can other things get in the way?*

3. Joy is the natural response of encountering Jesus.

Romans 10:14-15: *How, then, can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about him? And how can they hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news."*

The 2004 animated film, "The Polar Express," used new motion capture technology to create lifelike characters and realistic looking scenery. Though technology has improved in the twenty years since its release, the film has taken its place as a Christmas movie classic. In it, a young boy takes an unforgettable journey by train to rediscover his belief in Christmas. Along the way, the boy and his friends face various challenges but arrive at the North Pole in time to meet Santa and receive the first gift of Christmas. The young boy's curiosity and leadership help inspire not only his belief, but a growing Christmas wonder among all the other passengers. While the movie is an obvious departure from the birth of Jesus, the hero's journey in the film reminds us of the joy of sharing belief with others.

In the first nine chapters of Romans, Paul spent considerable time and attention pointing out the necessity of Christ to pay the penalty for our sins. He highlighted God's mercy toward all people,

not just the Jews, and articulated clearly how a person comes to faith in Christ. In Romans 10:9-13, he said, *“If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. One believes with the heart, resulting in righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, Everyone who believes on him will not be put to shame, since there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, because the same Lord of all richly blesses all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

It is challenging to adequately express the magnitude of this message. In essence, Paul painted a picture of God, through Christ, throwing open the gates of heaven for all to enter by grace through faith—Jew and Gentile alike. This is incredible news!

Then, Paul addressed the mission of those who profess faith in Jesus. The good news of forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God is too good to keep to ourselves. Like the shepherds after receiving the message of the angel, followers of Jesus have received the message of Christ. Part of our journey as believers is carrying the good news of Jesus to those who do not know Him. In connection to his statement on salvation in verse 13, *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,”* Paul boldly asked, *“How, then, can they call on him they have not believed in?”*

God has chosen His people as the mechanism for telling the world about Jesus. The Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 makes Christ’s mission clear: *“All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

Paul took the Great Commission and reverse engineered it. People call on the One they believe in, they believe in the One they hear about, and they hear about the One through the preaching of another. Finally, he said they hear preaching as someone is sent. The person who finds a Bible in a hotel room, reads, and accepts Christ, can tie his or her spiritual lineage through the one who gave the Bible. In the most remote parts of the world, people come to faith through the sending and ministering ministry of missionaries. And Paul calls their sending *“beautiful.”*

In fact, in Romans 10:15, Paul directly quoted the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. Seven hundred years before Jesus was born, Isaiah prophesied about a day when the Israelites would return to Judah from captivity. Even more, his Christological writing looked ahead to a better day when God would send the ultimate King to redeem His people forever. Isaiah wrote, *“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the herald, who proclaims peace, who brings news of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God reigns!”* (Isaiah 52:7).

Like the prophet Isaiah, in Luke 2, the angels came declaring *“good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”* Christ fulfilled the prophet’s words, secured our salvation on the cross, and commissioned us to tell others. Both Isaiah and Paul pointed toward the mission of

believers when they proclaimed, *“How beautiful on the mountain are the feet of those who bring good news.”*

The shepherds heard the angels’ message, hurried away to find Jesus, and then went out to tell others. Their enthusiasm could not be contained, and they shared the joyful news wherever they went. As we celebrate Christmas, it can be easy to view it as a private time to reflect on the incarnation and celebrate Jesus’s arrival in our hearts, lives, and family. However, if we view Christmas apart from the Great Commission, we fall short of God’s plan. Like the shepherds, the joy of meeting Christ is meant to be shared with others.

How can the Great Commission and Paul’s words in Romans 10:14-15 change the way you and your family celebrate Christmas this year? Maybe there are children or grandchildren who don’t know your salvation story. You could bear witness to Christ by telling people in your family or workplace the difference that Jesus has made in your life. Perhaps it is to serve others in some meaningful way that allows you to directly be a part of spreading the news of Jesus like the shepherds. The challenge of this week of Advent is not only to seek to experience the joy of the nativity, but to joyfully find ways to also share the good news with others!

DISCUSS

- *Why is the Christmas message necessarily tied to the Great Commission?*
- *How is sharing Jesus tied to joy in Him?*
- *What is one way you could be more intentional this Christmas about sharing the joy of Jesus with others?*

GOSPEL FOCUS

As the angels declared, Jesus’s birth is “good news, of great joy, for all the people.” That includes you. When we place our faith in Christ, we accept not only His birth, but His death and resurrection, paying for our sins and making a way for us to be reconciled to God. If you have never made a decision to follow Jesus, talk to someone about where to begin in this journey.

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

DISCUSS

- *How do you think Isaiah’s words encouraged the people even though most of them wouldn’t live long enough to see their return from captivity in Babylon? How can we maintain joy in long seasons of waiting?*
- *Why were the shepherds, though unlikely, but perfect people to first hear about the birth of Jesus?*

- *Why can we not separate the Christmas story from the Great Commission? How will our celebration fall short if we do?*

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

How can you share the joy of Christ's birth with someone else in a meaningful way this Christmas season?

APPLY

What needs to change in your celebration of Christmas to seek joy in Christ alone?

REFERENCES

Home Alone clip (4 min in length) <http://bit.ly/4miqiv1>

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