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Sermon 13 December 2020: The Real Thing

Good morning church! This is the third Sunday in Advent which, in the liturgical calendar, is traditionally known as *Gaudete* Sunday which gets its name from the introit of the traditional mass, which begins with the following words: *Gaudete in domino semper* “Rejoice in the Lord always.” And in those churches and homes, where the advent candles are white, pink and purple, today is the day we light the pink candle – or more specifically the rose candle. On this joy Sunday, we look toward the good news of the birth of Christ and today we’re going to focus on some of those who were told of the good news first.

In our scripture this morning, Luke tells us the story of some shepherds, living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Luke is careful to describe the shepherds as “living in the fields” which tells us that these shepherds are not necessarily the landowners who own the flock and the fields — no — the landowners are asleep in the comfort of their homes. The shepherds here are more likely the night-shift slaves or low-paid wage earners who protect the flock at night. That is, they’re at work. They’re on the job. Now, what’s interesting to notice is that here again, the word of God is revealed to the simple and lowly rather than the powerful and influential.

Last week when Pastor Steve shared from Luke chapter three, he reminded us that in the midst of all of those rulers – in the 15th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene – five political rulers and the geographical regions over which they rule. Then in verse two: during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas – now that’s SEVEN people in authority—5 rulers and 2 high priests – who does the word of God come to? It comes to John. A guy (who Mark tells us) was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, a guy who ate locusts and wild honey. A guy living in the wilderness – with no power, no wealth and no status other than his reputation as a prophet.

Luke, more than any other New Testament writer, portrays the work of the kingdom and the mission of the messiah as one that lifts up the lowly and casts down the powerful. Salvation for Luke involves a reversal of the social status quo, an upheaval and upending of the way things are.

You'll remember the first Sunday of Advent we looked at Mary's Magnificat, and her prophecies concerning what God is going to do in Christ. She said:

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51-53)

And so, in Luke 2, the announcement of Christ's birth to the shepherds is the first sign in the story that Mary's prophecy is being fulfilled. It's not just in Jesus' public ministry that God redeems the marginalized and oppressed; it happens already even before his birth. For Luke, Jesus' very existence, having humbled himself and taken on humanity turns the tables on the inequality of the world.

So here we have this group of shepherds, night-shift slaves, the graveyard shift protecting a flock of sheep as the wealthy sleep soundly in their beds. An angel appears in the night sky and the glory of the Lord shines all around them and unlike Mary, when Gabriel paid her a visit, these poor guys are absolutely terrified! But the angel tells them not to be afraid.

I don't know if you're familiar with the rather new video production called "The Chosen" which portrays the life of Christ. Well, there's a really powerful scene that dramatizes this story of the shepherds – and I think they've done such a great job of communicating the reactions of the shepherds when confronted with the angel. What I love about this scene is that when the angel of the Lord tells them about the Christ child that's been born and is now laying in a manger – and tells them where to go to find him, they take off running. And they run as fast as they can to him. Luke tells us in verse 16 that the shepherds went with haste. The greek word used here is *speudó* (spyoo'-do) which means to hurry. And boy, do those guys hurry! Now it's an incredibly emotional scene because you can feel the absolute joy and the anticipation and the excitement those shepherds must have felt knowing that they were running toward the son of God, the very Messiah himself. And when they found him, they told everybody what they'd

heard and when they returned, they rejoiced and praised God for all they had heard and seen. They were filled with joy because they'd found Jesus.

When I read this passage, I'm always reminded of that childhood song that as kids we used to sing in the church Christmas cantatas - I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart (where?), down in my heart (where?) down in my heart... Down in my heart to stay.

We all crave joy. And we crave a joy that will last. A joy that will stay in our hearts. As humans we look for joy in lots of places – and the world promises us that we can find it if we just obtain the right things. The right food, the right relationship, the right car, the right holiday, the right job. But things never really provide us with a joy that lasts.

Some of you know that for 20 years, before God called me into ministry, I worked in marketing. My father and I ran a successful marketing company in Augusta Georgia. We were blessed with a phenomenal creative team, a marketing sales team, account managers, and although we primarily worked with clients in the banking, industrial, and medical sectors, we occasionally worked with some unusual clients using some really fun, creative strategies.

And in the world of marketing, there is really no limit to creativity when it comes to strategies designed to get people to buy stuff – I mean, isn't that really what marketers are trying to achieve most of the time? The primary goals of marketing are to engage audiences and encourage purchasing. Some terms used for marketing strategies that you've probably heard are things like viral marketing or social media marketing– that's where companies use social media like Facebook and WhatsApp to encourage the public to spread their message and much of modern viral marketing on social media can be illustrated by the popularity of what are called memes – a meme is basically an image with words on it and that image gets repeated and reused in different situations. For example here's a meme promoting Wendy's using an image of Baby Yoda, a Star Wars character – In this meme we see Baby Yoda standing there with some Wendy's chicken nuggets and the headline says: Me when my mom brings me @Wendy's spicy nuggs for being a good boi. He's cute and cuddly and he's got this pack of chicken nuggets in his wittle hands... And after Wendy's posted this on their twitter account, this meme was shared and viewed by hundreds of thousands of people.

Memes can be funny, serious, heart-warming – and they get shared and promoted like crazy because they resonate with people – they conjure emotion – they make us feel good and considering the connection

between our actions and emotions, it should come as no surprise that marketers look for ways to incorporate joy into their marketing efforts – not only to affect how people perceive the brand they’re promoting-like associating a cute wittle Yoda with his wittle hands holding chicken nuggets, but to motivate us to purchase that brand – to choose that brand over others – or to purchase that item even though we don’t need it and often can’t afford it, because we assume that purchasing that item will make us feel the way the meme did, it will elicit that same emotion.

Another (very powerful) marketing concept that’s used – especially during this time of year is called Joy Marketing. Now, what is Joy Marketing? Joy marketing is just what you might think – it’s a marketing strategy used by campaigns to elicit a specific emotional response: joy.

Most recently we’ve seen this strategy in McDonalds first TV adverts after the easing of the first lockdown where we witness the return of the Big Mac as the fast food chain welcomes back customers for drive through and delivery orders. The ad shows us customers’ videos of themselves and their excitement over their first McDonald’s meal in ages. It’s a great commercial, it has a catchy tune, makes you feel good – and at the very end of the ad, a woman sits at the table, with her big ole big mac in hands and before she takes a bite she sighs and says “I’m so happy”. Now, I don’t particularly care for fast food, but it makes me kind of want to go out and get a BigMac and feel what they’re feeling!

One of the most iconic adverts of all time that uses this Joy Marketing strategy is a Coca Cola ad that debuted in 1971. The ad portrayed a positive message of hope and love, and featured a multicultural collection of teenagers on top of a hill singing – You know the one - ****Show the video****

The jingle, “I’d like to teach the world to sing” became so popular that its creators rewrote it, added three verses and removed the Coca Cola references to create a full-length song that was re-recorded by a group called The New Seekers and sold 96,000 copies of their record in one day, eventually selling 12 million total. After it was released, it climbed to #1 in the UK and #7 in the US.

This ad has been called "one of the best-loved and most influential ads in TV history" and it’s considered by many to be the world’s most famous advert. Now – why is that?

Around the time that this ad was released, college students had been shot and killed at Kent State by the National Guard for protesting the Vietnam War, a conflict that had been dragging on for a decade- a war in which the average age of those soldiers who lost their lives was just 23. The US President was Richard

Nixon, a president whose name will forever be tarnished by scandal and bound up with his eventual resignation. Battles between India and Pakistan erupted into full-scale war, Margaret Thatcher controversially ended free school milk for children over the age of seven, life in the UK was rocked by the Ibrox disaster and the miners strike. The whole world seemed polarised by politics, religion, and war. It was a time when violence and division were easy to find and compassion and community were in short supply. And in the midst of that quagmire of despair, came this clarion call to hope.

I'd like to build a world a home
And furnish it with love
Grow apple trees and honey bees
And snow white turtle doves

I'd like to see the world for once
All standing hand in hand
And hear them echo through the hills
For peace throughout the land

Those words bring us joy. And marketers know that. And they use this strategy to make us believe that their product, whatever it is, will bring us the same feeling of joy when we drink it or eat it or use it or even give it as a gift. And many times they're right. There are few things better than an ice cold co-cola from a glass bottle on a hot day in August in South Carolina. But the joy that consumers feel is inevitably fleeting – it doesn't last. If it did, you'd only have to buy one coke to last a lifetime. And the Coca Cola company serves 1.9 billion drinks every single day.

We all know that this kind of joy is a commodity. Marketers know it too. And they know that this kind of joy won't last – this kind of joy brings the consumer back time and time again because this kind of Joy, while it makes us feel good, this joy is fleeting. We're all looking for joy – a joy joy joy joy down in our hearts to stay - like the shepherds who ran Jesus, the wellspring of all joy whose life began on earth with “good news of great joy for all people” to a marginalised people, to ordinary people, like you and me.

The joy that marketers use to attract us to products is something very different from what the shepherds felt and the angels proclaimed. The kind of joy that marketers are promoting might be more properly called “happiness”.

Theologian Henri Nouwen described the difference between joy and happiness by saying that while happiness is dependent on external conditions, joy is "the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death - can take that love away." And so, joy can be present even in the midst of sadness. Even in the midst of a pandemic, even when the whole world seems polarised by politics, religion, and war. Even during a time when violence and division are easy to find and compassion and community are in short supply.

This Advent season is very different from the ones we've celebrated in the past. Lots of events have been cancelled. The beautiful service of light and remembrance was cancelled, Christmas parades have been cancelled, family events have been cancelled but with all of the uncertainties that surround us right now, there are some things we can be completely certain of and one of those things is that Joy has not been cancelled. God's love and mercy never ends and he's never failed us. The joy we have in Christ is eternal. Down in our hearts to stay.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.