

November 27, 2016
Rick Myatt

THE UNFORTUNATE EFFECT OF THAT CARROT Luke 2:8-11

Christmas always brings with it the challenge of buying gifts. Do you have someone that is a challenge when it comes to Christmas presents? I saw a few creative ideas this week. If your particular challenge is a guy for a mere \$10 you could get him a combined head band and mullet wig. Another creative possibility is Han Solo ice trays. It freezes ice cubes that look like Han frozen in Carbonite in The Empire Strikes Back. Real estate is always a win. At surprisingly low cost of only \$30 you can buy an acre of land on the moon. Just go to Lunar Land.com. You might have to pay a little more if you want to get a lot with a view, but you don't have to worry about school districts or traffic noise. If none of those work for you, I have one more that is a sure winner. How about bacon flavored candy canes? Who wouldn't be thrilled that that?

We all can probably recall some of the...um...more interesting gifts we have received. When I was a kid an aunt gave Jerry and me socks. That was not a win. But surely the most memorable for me has to be the first Christmas of our married life I received toilet paper for Christmas. To clarify it wasn't from Laurie. I still wonder about the message behind that one.

Isn't it interesting that we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ by giving each other gifts? We do so because it commemorates the fact that when Jesus was born God was giving to us the greatest gifts we could ever receive. In the next few weeks I want to look at some of those incredible, priceless gifts. Today we will consider a terrific one that we can see in Luke 2:8-11.

GOD WANTS TO GIVE US JOY

There was nothing unusual about that night. Shepherds were out keeping an eye on the sheep, making sure no predator would show up to savage the sheep, or bandits would steal them, or the dumb animals would just wander off and get lost. They were doing exactly what shepherds had done for hundreds or even thousands of years. They expected this night would be just like the countless other nights they had done the same thing. And indeed that night was exactly like all those other nights...until suddenly it wasn't. The routine night was disrupted in a shocking way and they experienced not a once in a lifetime event, but a once in history event when a being surrounded by blazing light showed up.

To their total surprise this being, an angel, spoke to them. They apparently knew this being was an angel because of the brilliant light glowing all around him. Think of how startling that was for them. The brightest thing they had ever seen at night was a fire. They had never seen an electric light. So when they suddenly were bathed in blinding light after their eyes had been completely adjusted to the total darkness it would have definitely gotten their attention.

Some people scoff at this point, claiming that angels are inhabitants only of fairy tales. Have you or anyone you know ever seen an angel? I find it ironic that if the passage claimed that alien beings appeared after exiting a spacecraft, made this announcement and then said, “Live long and prosper” or maybe even, “may the force be with you,” many of the scoffers would have no problem believing it. Uh, have you ever seen an alien? No, I have never seen an alien, and no one I know has. Yet people who have never seen one seem sure that they exist. Why are angels any different?

The angel first told them to not be afraid. Too late. That sheep had already left the pasture. The passage tells us the poor startled shepherds were terrified. I am quite certain not one of those shepherds said, “Dude, where did you come from? And who are you?” They were seeing something they had never seen before, something they had no explanation for. And that scared them. One of my favorite classic movies is the original *The Day The Earth Stood Still*. In it a flying saucer lands on the mall in Washington D.C. People are shocked and fearful. The army sets up a cordon around the ship. But finally a door in the side of the ship opens. A being wearing a silvery suit and a helmet comes out and extends his hand in which he holds an object. One of the guards assumes it is a weapon and shoots the being. It turns out the object was an information storage device full of advanced knowledge the guy was offering to earthlings. The scene accurately portrays the terrible fear we naturally have in the face of the unknown. So the angel started by putting their minds at ease.

Then he said, “I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.” What a cool birth announcement. It’s a Messiah! That day the long prophesied and promised Messiah, the great hope of oppressed and downtrodden Israel, had been born. This was not just good news, it is news that will cause joy. And not just joy, but great joy. The Greek word for “great” was mega, so this is cause for megajoy! How many things in your life have caused megajoy? This news would bring megajoy for all the people, for everyone, not just for a blessed few.

Do you hear the message? The coming of Jesus Christ the Savior should cause megajoy, even today. Christmas is all about God bringing us joy. The result of Jesus arriving, both back on that night when he was first born and when he arrives in our lives today should be joy. Isaiah 60:1 speaks of when God will act and enter human history. "Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord rises on you." Speaking of that time when the Lord comes he says in verse 5. "Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will swell and throb with joy." You won't just be all right, you will be radiant. You will beam with joy. To radiate something is to emit it into your environment. Those to whom Christ comes will be radiant with joy. Their hearts will throb with it. The late John Stott said that the identifying mark of a follower of Jesus is joy.

WHAT IS JOY?

First we must understand that Joy is not a matter of life going exactly the way we want and having everything be wonderful in our circumstances. That is how we usually understand it, but that is not correct. We know that joy is a response, the natural result of something good happening to us, so we surmise that the level of our joy will be determined by how good the things happening in our lives are.

However, the Bible says that mega joy can exist regardless of the events in our lives. In Acts 5 the apostles of Jesus were arrested because the authorities were angry over their preaching that Jesus is alive. After a hearing the authorities decide their best course of action is to warn them, punish them and try to intimidate them into shutting up. There was a sort of "remember what happened to your Jesus" message. Verses 40-41 tell us, "They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go."

Pause there for a moment. It is easy to skim over that part about having them flogged. This was no trivial deal. Had it happened to you it would have been quite possibly the worst day of your life. But look at their reaction in the next verse. "The apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing that they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name." They rejoiced, meaning they had joy despite circumstances that were worse than anything we will likely encounter! Clearly their joy came from something other than really good circumstances.

The same thing appears in 2 Corinthians 8:2. Speaking of the Christians in Macedonia Paul wrote, "In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity." I sometimes give myself a pass when I am not joyful because the circumstances of my life feel like they're in the toilet and circling the drain. Then I think of those people in Macedonia. They

were going through severe persecution and they were in poverty that I can't imagine. And they had overflowing joy. It was irrepressible joy that could not be contained. It was mega joy. It sure didn't come from their circumstances.

Let's think back to those ancient shepherds. When they heard that the angel had news that would produce super joy, and the news was that Messiah was born, what do you suppose they envisioned? They thought there would be joy because Messiah would do 2 things they really wanted to happen. First, he would become a powerful ruler who would defeat the despised Romans. He wouldn't merely defeat them, he would crush them. That's what the prophet Daniel foretold. He would make Israel the dominant superpower in the world. Second he would usher in an era of unimaginable wealth and abundance for Israel, including humble shepherds like them. So they would rejoice because life was going to get better than they had ever dreamed. The person who would make that happen had just been born.

But what happened to those shepherds? The rest of their lives went on exactly as they had before. Nothing changed. They went into town, saw the baby, then life went on as it always had. There were times when they wondered what that strange night was all about. They lived expecting a big thing to happen, but it never did. They probably had times when one of them said, "Remember that night with the angels? Do you think maybe we all just had some bad lentil soup and dreamed that?" I suspect they died having never understood what that night was really all about. It was not about them being joyful because life finally was better than they ever dreamed. They never experienced their "best life now." So how was this news that brings joy?

The joy that exists independent of circumstances is a composite. It has several components.

Peace

I recall being on an airplane that was going through some really bad turbulence. The plane was bouncing all over the sky, and most disconcerting for me it was experiencing those periodic drops where you are sure this is it, the plane is going down. I suspect if I were a veteran pilot at the controls of the aircraft, someone who has experienced turbulence countless times and is totally confident that it is not a threat, it would not bother me any more than driving over some bumps on a road. But I am an occasional passenger, held captive in a metal torture chamber, strapped in and helpless. And for me the experience was well beyond disconcerting. For me it was all bad and I had zero peace in that situation. Do you think I was joyful? Far from it. I was not a happy camper. The joy only came when I got off the plane and could stand on solid ground. When there is no peace there is

no joy. To have real joy our souls must be at peace. We must be sure that we have nothing to fear. That is what Jesus came to bring us. We will see that next week, but recall Isaiah's prophecy of who Jesus Messiah is. He is the Prince of peace.

Hope

Did you happen to watch the election results on the recent election night? I noticed something very obvious. The channel I was watching periodically would show the election headquarters of the two presidential candidates. Early on the crowds in both buildings were optimistic. The crowd at the Clinton headquarters seemed to be the more joyful of the two, clearly anticipating a victory. As the night wore on and the returns came in I could see a visible change in the two crowds. At one point I recall seeing the Clinton crowd looking totally downcast. There was a complete absence of joy, while at the other headquarters there was a growing sense of ebullience. What was the difference? It was hope. As one side lost hope, joy was drained from the room and replaced by despair. But as the other saw more and more possibility of their candidate winning joy bloomed and grew.

The birth of Messiah was not a promise that he would make life on this planet more pleasant for the shepherds and for us. It was the promise of something much greater. God was solving our biggest problem and defeating our most fearsome enemy, death itself. He was making a way for us to be reconnected with God, without whom there is no hope. He was making it possible for us to have eternal life. He was giving us hope.

Blessing

Finally joy is a result of something good happening to us. It always is. But it is possible to be joyful even when something lousy is happening to us if at the same time something way better and more significant is happening.

I remember December 14 of last year. The night before Toby and Anna had been up all night. Anna had been through a painful ordeal and she was in the hospital. They were both exhausted. And despite the weariness that was apparent on their faces, there was great joy. That's because early that morning their little baby girl had been born. There was pain, uncertainty, exhaustion and unbounded joy. They had been through an ordeal and they were tired, but a cause of so much joy it eclipsed everything else had arrived.

Jesus came to bring something so good to us in the form of his love, his grace, his forgiveness, his presence and hope, that even though our lives might go through great difficulties we can still have joy because the blessing is so fantastic.

We forever get focused on the joy that comes from good things happening to us. We think that is what we want. But that joy, while good and pleasant, is entirely too transitory and fragile. Imagine that on a whim you buy a lottery ticket and then are stunned to learn that you have won \$100 million. Would you be joyful? I certainly would be. But then imagine that the day after you learn of your good fortune you find out that you have a potentially deadly form of cancer. How is your joy? It is obliterated. If we are to have joy continuously it must be derived from something much deeper than the blessings of this life that can vanish or be overshadowed by some terror or grief in the blink of an eye. We need some blessing so huge that it brings joy to our soul even when disaster strikes.

WHY IS JOY IMPORTANT?

Because we cannot help but want it. Pascal said that the desire for happiness, which is really about joy, drives all of us. In fact, he said it is behind everything we do. Even the Declaration of Independence alludes to the pursuit of happiness as a fundamental right.

We are all pursuing joy. We may do it in unhealthy and futile ways, but we never stop pursuing it. We cannot help ourselves. We must have joy. The great writer Robert Louis Stevenson said, "To miss the joy is to miss everything." Of course he was right. If you live devoid of joy, just trudging through your existence, what kind of life is that? In defining the Greek word for joy, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* said, joy "is the culmination of existence." In other words, it really isn't all about the hokey pokey, it's all about joy. If you are not filled with joy you are not really living.

God wants us to have joy. Remember that the first thing the angel said about the coming of Christ was that it would cause joy. God was doing this monumental thing so we could have joy. God himself is full of joy. Jesus told his disciples that he wanted them to have his joy in them, and that if they did their joy would be total. That only makes sense if Jesus was in fact filled with joy. We know God wants us to have joy because he commands us to have it. Both Romans 12:12 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16 command us to always rejoice, or to be joyful always.

Joy gives us strength. In Nehemiah 8:10 Nehemiah encouraged the people saying, "The joy of the Lord is your strength." We all know how hard it is to keep putting one foot in front of the other when we are down, discouraged or sad. But when we are filled with joy we can keep going indefinitely. Joy gives us energy and enthusiasm.

Joy is contagious. Laurie recently told me I needed to watch something with her. It was a commercial that featured a woman wrestling with the turkey she was going to prepare for Thanksgiving. She was trying to get it out of the sink but it kept slipping out of grip. She managed to pick it up but then it slipped and dropped on the floor. She grabbed it again, gathered all her strength and gave a mighty heave. It flew out of her grip, flew through the window and hit a man standing outside in the back of the head, knocking him flat. It is really funny, but what was funnier was Laurie's reaction. She laughed uncontrollably. She played it again and went into hysterics. I thought the ad was funny, but quickly I found myself gasping for breath because I was laughing so hard. My laughter was caused by Laurie's laughing. I caught it from her and couldn't help myself. Joy is contagious.

A few years ago Disney put out a comedy movie titled *Enchanted*. In it Amy Adams played Giselle who is transported from her existence in an animated fairy tale world into real life New York City. I found it to be pretty funny, but there was one scene that I thought was hilarious. In the scene Giselle is with Robert, played by Patrick Dempsey in Central Park. She begins to sing a song as so often happens in musical movies. First a couple of bystanders join in her song, then some others. By the time she finishes the song everyone in the park hundreds of people have joined in and are singing and dancing along with her.

Of course the scene is a spoof on musicals, but I found it to not just be funny, but touching. In the movie Giselle sweeps all those people up in her innocence, joy, and love for life so they join in her song. I find that's what I would like to do. We are all contagious. We can spread discouragement, dissension, complaint and pessimism. All of those things are virulently contagious, and they sap line and energy from those who catch them. Joy is also contagious, but it gives life and energy to others. Wouldn't you like to be the kind of person who brightens a room, who leaves people feeling more hopeful, more full of life, more energetic than before encountering you? The key is joy.

HOW CAN WE INCREASE OUR JOY?

How many Christians do you know who are radiant? How many have hearts throbbing with joy? Most of us don't exhibit that kind of joy regularly. Yet we have seen that's what the coming of Jesus should produce. That tells us that we can short circuit what Jesus brings so that his joy does not infuse us. What can we do to repair that short circuit and have the joy flow?

Walk with God

To walk with God is to live continually in his presence. That starts with grasping the reality that in Christ God loves you unconditionally. It means you get to have God with you all the time. You are never alone. He is with you to comfort and strengthen you always. He is ever pouring out his love on you, and he is infusing your every action with meaning. In Psalm 16:11 David said to God (ESV) “In your presence there is fullness of joy.” Just living in his presence creates joy.

But to walk with God also means to go where he is going. It means doing what he wants you to do. In other words we will get joy as we obey God’s instruction. In John 15:10 Jesus instructed his disciples to keep his commands. Then in verse 11 he said, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you.”

This is not a deal where you’d better keep the rules or God is going to get you. It is a matter of understanding that God’s commands are designed to create a life full of joy. We can disobey them and still know that in Christ we won’t be condemned by God, but we also won’t experience the joy those instructions are aimed at creating. Psalm 19:8 says, “The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.”

We had to take our car in to get it serviced recently. Since we only have one car this is a problem because we need it pretty much every day. Our owner’s manual has this prescribed maintenance schedule with a list of things to do and when to do them. Change the oil, rotate the tires, change the air filter, inspect the brakes and hoses, change the transmission fluid, change the brake fluid and so on. So many rules. It is so inconvenient. It would be much easier just to ignore it all and do whatever I feel like. If I do that I am not breaking any laws. No one will arrest me. Honda won’t come after me because I have violated their maintenance schedule. But I will be sorry because the car will not function as well and as long.

God’s precepts are his maintenance schedule for a healthy, radiantly joyful life. You don’t get in trouble with God because you fail to keep them, but you don’t get the joy. You aren’t more acceptable to God and more loved by him if you keep them, but you will experience more joy.

Live in hope

1 Peter 1:8 says, “Though you have not seen him (Christ), you love him; and even though you do not see him now you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.” By believing in him, trusting Jesus, we have an inexpressible joy.

Remember that hope is a critical component of joy. When we trust in Jesus we always have hope. We have the certain hope of eternal life, which is the most precious and joyful thing one could ever have. We also have the hope that God will bring good out of everything that happens. No situation is ever hopeless when our God is at work. He can and does redeem any and every situation.

Value what is valuable

Our little granddaughter Ella has some unique traits. She is a very happy little girl who beams a big smile a lot. She is also very tactile. She loves the feel of things. Along with that she loves holding things in her little hands. An empty travel size shampoo container, a tube of lip gloss, just about any small cylindrical object will do. One day recently she got her hands on a baby carrot. She carried that thing around for a couple of hours. When nap time came Laurie had to get her to relinquish the carrot. Ella wanted no part of that. Laurie had to pry it away from her. When Laurie took it away Ella went nuclear. She had a massive meltdown. Life was not worth living if she could not have her carrot. She was disconsolate and mad, and she let all of San Diego County know about it.

How valuable was that baby carrot? It was of almost zero value to Ella. It has no sentimental value, it has near zero financial value, and it had zero nutritional value because she has no teeth and can't eat it. How important was it? To her it seemed of extreme importance at that time, but we grown ups know there was no need for her to hold that carrot. It had no lasting value. And when she woke up from her nap 2 hours later it was totally forgotten. She never gave it another thought.

We grasp onto all manner of things in this life, and if we can't get them or lose them we go nuclear. Like Ella we become disconsolate and mad. You can probably identify a number of carrots in your life. Most of us have baskets full of them. But how joyful was Ella as she held onto her carrot with a death grip? She wasn't joyful at all. It just made her miserable, only to be soon forgotten.

If you want to be joyful quit grasping for and holding on so tightly to those carrots. Instead put your heart in that which has real value and cannot ever be taken away. Treasure the gifts of love, forgiveness, eternal life, and God's presence.

You may be in a situation that is painful, frightening or deeply discouraging. You do not need to deny the reality of it or pretend that it doesn't matter. What you can do is focus on the incredible blessings God has given you. One of the moments I recall happened 19 years ago. Our kids had wanted to go to Hawaii for some time. We had the opportunity to take them there for the first time at Thanksgiving that

year. They were so excited. Just before the trip Carissa caught a cold. I remember looking at her on the plane and feeling bad for her because she clearly was feeling miserable. There's nothing quite like being sick on a plane. I talked to her and told her I was sorry about her situation. She said, "It's okay, Dad. I feel bad, but we're going to Hawaii." The good thing made her able to rejoice anyway.

Andrew Klavan is a successful novelist. He was a non-practicing Jew who was a practical atheist. But he was touched at several points of life by Christians. Over time, he said, Christ came to him in stories. One night when he was in his 40's he was reading a novel in which a character prayed before going to sleep. He thought if that character could do it he could too. He simply said thank you to God for the love and contentment he had. It was a small prayer, but God's response was an extravagant act of grace. He says, "I woke the next morning and everything had changed. There was sudden clarity and brightness to familiar faces and objects; they were alive with meaning and with my own delight in them. I called this experience the joy of my joy and it came to me again whenever I prayed." He became a follower of Jesus. I think we easily lose sight of the priceless treasure of knowing God. To the degree that we place that in the center of our hearts we too will experience joy.

Pursue praise of God

Psalm 71:23 says, "My lips will shout for joy when I sing praise to you." We can either make life be about our comfort, our success, our glory, our pleasures, our desires, or we can make it about praise to God. Our fallen nature, the world around us and our spiritual enemy all trumpet loudly that the way to have joy, the only way, is to choose that first path. If you can get the comfort, success, desires and pleasures you seek you will have joy. I will let you in on a secret. It's not true. You will find only brief, fleeting tastes of incomplete joy that way. You will get only enough to make you believe if you just keep going you will get it. And you never will. All you will do is spend your life with a death grip on baby carrots, so desperate to gain and keep them that you are totally devoid of lasting joy.

Real, lasting joy is found on the other path. It comes from making life about praise to God. We can live for his praise in any situation and be joyful that God is praised even when our circumstances are less than ideal.

I watched the final innings of the World Series game 7, which some say was one of the best games in the long history of baseball. When the Cubs won I noticed Jason Heyward. Reportedly he had a crucial moment when during the rain delay he gave a stirring speech to his teammates. He had a down season. He didn't play well in

the postseason and in that final game he got no hits in 5 at bats. He had no personal success. Yet at the end of the game he was joyfully celebrating. His personal discouragement was utterly forgotten in the joy of something far greater. Compare that with teammate Miguel Montero who complained that he should have played more. Being about himself brought no joy. We will find way more joy when we live for praise of God than for some lesser selfish goal.