

Letting Joy be Found

Sermon 82 | Greystone Baptist Church | December 13, 2020

Luke 2: 1-14

I don't know about you, but we have been watching a lot more TV than usual in my house. Normally "screen time" is something to limit, for the protection of my daughter's eyes. But as that same daughter likes to remind me these days, school (aka hours spent in the Virtual Academy) is not optional, therefore, those hours spent looking into the computer screen should not count against her daily "screen time" allowance. It's a good point, right?

In addition to these parenting challenges, the need to stay at home has our only child pretty bored most days. Since this has been happening for 9 months now, we're all out of creative solutions for non-screen, non-bored time. And, to be *really* honest, we are exhausted and tired of trying. We are in full-on survival mode and in that ongoing desperation we have (at times) adopted the pandemic parenting method championed by Glennon Doyle in her Twitter Public Service Announcement for Parenting Young Children in a Pandemic: "MOM SHAMING YOURSELF DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC IS WHERE I MUST DRAW THE LINE," she writes in all caps, "You know what 'TV TIME' is during the corona? Tv time is ALLLL THE TIMES. ALL THE TIMES. ALL." she says.¹

One of the silver linings to all this TV time, especially now that the Christmas season is here, is that we are rediscovering some of those old Christmas movies from the 90s that we haven't seen in many, many years. Just this week, the whole family settled into the couch one evening after dinner to watch the classic flick, *Home Alone 2*. I'd forgotten so much about the movie, I haven't seen it since my own elementary years, so I was able to experience the drama of the film in a whole new way, without the assumptions and interpretations of a child.

Early in the film, just after the main character, 10-year-old Kevin McCallister, finds himself alone in New York City (by a series of comically unfortunate events) he runs into a woman who is alone, poorly dressed, and covered in pigeons. To Kevin's youthful eyes, she is terrifying so after seeing her, he mutters under his breath, "Sick," and takes off in the opposite direction. After using a bit of childish trickery and his dad's credit card, Kevin books himself a suite in the Plaza Hotel, but once hotel management begins to suspect that the card had been stolen, Kevin finds himself once again, alone, in the dark, and on the run. That first night alone he walks through Central Park and realizes it is full of all kinds of dodgy characters. Just as he escapes one, he gets his foot stuck in a rock and appears to be caught by none other than... the Pigeon Lady. With nowhere to run and no one to help, Kevin closes his eyes and waits for the worst. Much to his surprise, the Pigeon Lady does not attempt to harm him. Instead, she helps him.

¹ <https://twitter.com/glennondoyle/status/1247520628749373442?lang=en>

In the scenes that follow Kevin decides to talk to the woman and we learn a little more of her story. She once had a job, a family, and a husband who she loved... until one day her husband fell out of love with her. After experiencing that great loss, she wasn't able to trust anymore. She lost her job, lost her home, and lost all of her friends.

"I'm like the birds I care for," she says in the movie. "People pass me in the street but they try to ignore me. They prefer I wasn't in their city"

Kevin could relate to that! He felt like the "pigeon" of his household, being the youngest, often forgotten and misunderstood child in a large Chicago household with nearly a dozen children.²

There is an unmistakable parallel between the pigeon woman and the shepherds in today's reading from Luke. We may be familiar with the shepherds; we recognize them from their annual appearance in our nativity scenes but in the Gospel of Luke we meet them in the fields, where they lived, keeping watch over their flocks, in the darkness of night. Until an angel comes, glowing with a light from the heavens, and bringing good and joyful news: a child has been born.

The shepherds immediately depart from their fields, leaving the flocks behind (or so it seems), "Let us go now," they say as they begin their pilgrimage to Bethlehem. There was nothing that could delay their journey, slow them down, or hold them back from traveling to see the Messiah, the very presence of God in this world.

Upon their arrival, the shepherds found Mary, Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. There it was, the joy of new life, the hope of unquestioned possibility, love incarnate, the Prince of Peace.

This miraculous scene reminds us that the shepherds were not the only ones who were weary from travel. Mary and Joseph, too, had journeyed far from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Both journeys under the cover of darkness, both leaving behind the familiar comforts of home, both surprised by joy as they gazed upon the babe, lying in the manger.

How vulnerable the babe must have looked, lying there, wrapped in cloth, relying on Mary and Joseph to nurture and care for him. And how vulnerable Mary and Joseph must have felt, two young people, weary from travel and labor and birth. They must have known that this child would earn them some unwanted and dangerous attention, if he truly was who the angels said he would be. And how vulnerable those shepherds were, having left their flocks in the dark field. Was there someone else keeping watch? Could they be trusted? Would they return to the field to find their sheep missing, sick, or malnourished?

Somehow, all of the characters in Luke's birth narrative seem to have figured out how to embrace joy when it comes. They were not worried about what might happen *if*... They

² Info on the Pigeon Lady and Kevin taken from the movie and supported with quotes from: https://homealone.fandom.com/wiki/Pigeon_Lady

did not play out all the worst case scenarios once the angels were gone. They believed the angels who promised good tidings and great joy.

Sociologist and well-known author, Brené Brown, says that joy like this, uninhibited joy, is one of the most elusive emotions for most people. We live in a “culture of deep scarcity – of never feeling safe or certain... Sure enough – joy can feel like a setup.” She wrote these words in her book, *Daring Greatly*, which was published in 2012. “We wake up in the morning and think, Work is going well. Everyone in the family is healthy. No major crises are happening. The house is still standing. I’m working out and feeling good. Oh [no] this is bad. This is really bad. Disaster must be lurking right around the corner.”³

Reading her words today, as the year 2020 draws to an end, I can’t help but see how despite our circumstances, we fear the same thing: complete and utter disaster. No matter what logic, intuition, scientific trends or statistics might tell us, we gaze upon our sleeping infants worried that something terrible will happen to them. We await the news from the doctor praying for the best but preparing for the worst. We make plans with family but worry that they will be broken. We hold off on experiencing the joy of each moment, for fear that the next one will bring heartache, disappointment, and disaster.

More like the Pigeon Lady than the shepherds, we guard ourselves from the joy that is trying to break in.

We remember our experiences of brokenness and use that to build up walls of protection so that we never have to feel that pain again. Especially in years like this one, where so many things seem to be going wrong... global pandemic, divisive political season, economic rollercoaster, worldwide uncertainty, racial awakening, ancient institutions trying to survive on digital platforms, loneliness, isolation, and darkness everywhere we turn... In times like this we are all skeptical that real joy is even possible.

Like the Pigeon Lady who had given up on relationships of trust, we have given up on the possibility of joy.

So what are we doing, lighting the pink candle, the one called joy, as we read the words from Isaiah saying “You shall go out in joy and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands...” (55:12)?

What are we doing here, saying in our opening liturgy, “Come Lord Jesus, Come. With great joy, your people are waiting.”?

Are we really waiting with joy? What would our colleagues say? What would our children and siblings and cousins and parents say?

Are we living the joy of the incarnation?

³ Brené Brown. *Daring Greatly*. Kindle Edition, p. 117

Are we even open to it if it comes to find us in our darkest night?

All of us are like both the shepherds and the Pigeon Lady. We are, each and every one, hosting our little brood of pigeons, tending our flocks by night. And as the darkness of night drags on, we have a choice to make about how we will welcome or block out opportunities for joy.

Brené Brown says that to truly experience joy, we have to vulnerably open ourselves to gratitude in each and every moment. Gratitude is the antidote to foreboding joy. To experience all the joy that God is offering us in this life, we have to learn to be grateful, “for the person, the beauty, the connection or simply the moment before us.”⁴ If we can do this, if we can begin to practice gratitude, those walls of protection will begin to crumble and joy will find its way in.

We await a Christmas season that approaches this year, under the cover of darkness. There is much to be concerned about, much to fear, much to cause worry and maybe even panic. But if we are Gospel people, this is an opportunity for us to follow after the shepherds who yes, tended their flock in the darkness of night, but who saw the spark of joy when it came to interrupt their darkness. When the light came even in the most surprising fashion, they took off after it, leaving everything else behind, and Joy met them at the manger.

We may not know how Christ will arrive in joy this year, this Christmas of 2020. But we can rest assured, we can wait in hope and good faith that joy is possible, that joy is being born, and perhaps that joy is already all around... we just can't see it through the walls of protection we have built up.

So while we wait, why not practice what we preach?

Why not go about our days waiting with joy, joy that begins with gratitude for *all that is* without hardening us for *all that is not*... Joy that vulnerably exposes our hearts to welcome and comfort others in true and authentic relationships of love... Joy that opens us to heartbreak but in so doing, opens us to the presence of Christ in this world? Joy that is as vulnerable as a babe lying in a manger, and at the same time as powerful as the Messiah he would grow up to be.

You know the Pigeon Lady finally opened herself to joy when she accepted the strange gift of a turtledove from young little Kevin McCallister, who kept another just the same as a symbol of true and authentic friendship. As long as they each had one of the pair, that friendship would go on forever. In a moment of utter vulnerability, the Pigeon Lady – the one who had built an impermeable wall because of the pain of her past – she accepted the gift and the true joy of friendship.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 123

Sometimes joy doesn't arrive in all the usual ways.
Sometimes it's a package under the tree,
sometimes a house full of family and friends,
sometimes it's a holiday party offering music and laughter...

and sometimes it's a smaller joy of a quiet house,
a parking lot gathering or a virtual hug,
sometimes it's the sun breaking through, highlighting frost on the grass,
sometimes it's the song of the mountains and the clap of the trees,
and sometimes it's the humble child in the manger – filled with all of our hopes and
dreams, bursting with possibility and promise, just waiting to be born in us...
if we are brave enough to risk it.

So how will we greet joy when it comes as we tend our flocks in the darkness of our night?

Will we respond to the sparks of light with gratitude?

If we do, I'll just bet, joy (not disaster) is just around the corner.