Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/24/2017, Christmas Eve  
Luke 2:1-20  
Tidings of Great Joy

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you should like a title for my sermon this evening, I call it “Tidings of Great Joy.” It is based on our Gospel reading from Luke 2. Verse 10 of that Chapter goes this way:

10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. (Luke 2:10, KJV)

My friends, the theme of my sermon this evening is an easy one: When the angel spoke of “good tidings of great joy...”, that angel was not just whistling Dixie. He was a happy angel, soon to be joined by a joyful multitude of angels, all singing

14“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” (Luke 2:14, KJV)

They were happy angels. They were happy for us, humanity. And they want us to be happy too.  
A great danger in our world is a kind of spiritual depression — a sad sense that things are just not going to work out well, that the forces against love and goodness on earth are too strong, and that nothing really matters. Against all such discouraging thoughts, the Christmas angel speaks of “good tidings of great joy.”

Some of you might have heard of what I call my “Pastor’s Booth.” I set it up outside our church, on the corner of Lexington Avenue and 88th Street. I do it on Tuesday mornings. God willing, I’ll do it again this Tuesday morning. That booth has become a highpoint of my week. Sitting there at my booth, ready to pray with folks, expresses my conviction that the church is not just for insiders. Jesus is not just for an “in crowd.” When some dear passerby sits down at my booth and bursts into tears, well, I want to be able to honestly tell that person that things are better than she thinks, better than he thinks. Things are better because of Christmas. The Incarnation of our God on that first Christmas night means that there is true reason for joy on earth. The birth of the Babe of Bethlehem means that there are good tidings to bring to all people:
...I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

I do not want our neighbors to be left out of these good tidings. I want them to know that this Christ Child was born for her too, for him too! And so it is that Christmas authorizes a great battle against sin and discouragement on earth.

One of Pope Francis’s first encyclicals is called *The Joy of the Gospel*. Emphasis is on that word “joy.” A great early passage in this little book goes this way:

I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since “no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord.”

Or, as the angel said,

Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. (Luke 2:10, KJV)

Christmas means that there is now Someone afoot on earth who is on your side — someone who is altogether good and lovely and who has power even over death. I am speaking of Jesus. I am speaking of your Saviour, if you would have him:

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:11, KJV)

Pope Francis raises a good question for us in the book I just mentioned. He refers to the abiding joy of the disciples in the early church. Those disciples suffered setbacks and persecution, but they rejoiced nonetheless. If they did, let us do so too. And so the Pope writes this:

...even amid persecution they continued to be “filled with joy” (Acts 13:52). The newly baptized eunuch “went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:39), while Paul’s jailer “and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer

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1 Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete in Domino* (May 9, 1975), 22: AAS 67 (1975), 297.

in God” (16:34). Why should we not also enter into this great stream of joy?

That is what I am after this evening: that you and I should “enter into this great stream of joy.”

It is a splendid thought: our Maker wants us to be happy. He does not want us, nor our neighbors, to be dejected but comforted. Being happy is part of true religion. God does not really want us to be sad and long-faced. Humanity is at our best when we are singing a song, like Mary’s Magnificat:

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...”(RSV Luke 1:46-47)

Or again, we have that wonderful two-word verse from a recent Advent reading. In St. Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians, Chapter Five, we read this short verse:

Rejoice always. (1 Thessalonians 5:16, RSV)

That is a lot of rejoicing. Rejoice always! Let us try to take this to heart. Other things have their times and their seasons, but the call to rejoice seems to be more steady than that. Rejoice always, says the apostle.

This does not mean that there is no reason for sorrow on earth. Why! This past year our world has experienced gunmen shooting everybody in sight in churches and mosques. The awful specter of nuclear attacks haunts us again. News continues to pour forth of sexual harassment and abuse. The opioid crisis is ruining lives across the land. There are untold sorrows of sickness and shifts in the economy that leave people unemployed and facing poverty. Evil marches on and looks unconquerable. And yet the angels and the apostle say to us, “Rejoice always.” Why, because in full face of all the sin and evil that afflicts our earth, a Babe is born in Bethlehem, and this Child is stronger than all of sin, suffering, death, hell, and the devil combined!

I bet those Christmas shepherds abiding in the field by night entered into this great stream of joy. They had packed their lunch and gone off to work at daybreak. They had weathered the cold and storms of the day. They had chased after wayward sheep, they had fought off wolves threatening their sheep. They had lived through the normal, hard things of the day. Then, suddenly in the nighttime, the angels appeared to them and spoke of “good tides of great joy.” The glory of the Lord surrounded them, and our text says that they were “sore afraid.” And I don’t blame them for that. But also I bet

4A point made by Spurgeon in his sermon “Rejoice Evermore.”
those shepherds came out of that experience thrilled to the depths of their souls. Their lives as shepherds still lay before them, and all the hardships of shepherding. And yet life was forever changed by that first Christmas eve. For now the shepherds know that unto them a Saviour has been born. And life is better than they ever imagined. It is so for us too. The choice of the lowly shepherds signifies to us that these good tidings of great joy are meant for everyone, even the very humblest and lowest of us. Those shepherds are not kings or powerful political people. They are not theologians, they are not scholars, they are not writers, they might not be very good at speaking about what they have seen. But henceforth life is better for them because of that first Christmas. They have learned the gospel: that unto them a Saviour has been born, even Jesus Christ the Lord.

On the First Sunday of Advent, a few week ago, Isaiah let forth a cry that could well spring from the heart of all humanity. Isaiah’s mighty cry went this way. He is speaking to the LORD, our Maker:

1O that you would tear open the heavens and come down… (Isaiah 64:1, NRSV)

This is a cry that is wrung from the hearts of those who know that ordinary means of human help are not enough. Look to the left, look to the right — nothing suffices. We need the Lord. Christmas is God’s glorious answer to that cry, for on that first Christmas Eve, God did rend the heavens and came down, all the way in a stable in Bethlehem of old.

Christmas means that this amazing proposition is true: love shall triumph over evil. Let me repeat that idea, my friends. It is my chief theme of Christmas. Take all the heartaches and disappointments of this world, paint them with frightening images of fire and ashes, thunder and lightening, with cruel sin, death, and the devil all frowning at us. Take all this heartache of life and know this in the depths of your heart: Jesus (pointing to the Christ statue in our reredos) is stronger than all of that sin and misery. He (pointing the Blessed Sacrament)... he is stronger, he is better, his more beautiful than anything Satan can cook up. If not for Christmas, it would be an incredible proposition that love shall triumph over evil. It would be hard to fathom, hard to credit. But Christmas changes everything. Now the claim that love shall triumph over evil is so true it is worth living for.

Let me giving you an example. A recent news story tells of a seven-year-old girl in Texas who wrote a letter to Santa asking for a ball, food, and a blanket.5 Think of that — of children hoping for a ball, food, and a blanket. Well, donations are pouring into that little Texas town and school, and well

5 http://www.statesman.com/news/national/donations-pour-after-year-old-girl-letter-santa-asking-for-blanket-food/ibBiuXAQ7G7Sv0EsfVWG1/
they should. You take this child’s letter to Santa and multiply it untold times across our land and across our world, and it makes you fear that sin, death, suffering, and the devil are too much for us. But Christmas says a Saviour is born to us, that the battle between good and evil will result in the eternal triumph of good. So go ahead and give your donations. Do what you can that children and the elderly and all kinds of people on this earth will not suffer so much.

Your love this coming year is the best thing on earth. In the great battle between love and evil, love is going to win. Christmas means that love is going to win out, and, my dear friends, I want you to be on the winning side. I want you to launch yourself with joy into the path of love that lies ahead of you. I want you to love even more earnestly going forward, for you were built for love, and the Christ Child is on your side.

And so we do well this evening to sing, “Joy to the World!” The Saviour has indeed come! When this Christmas Eve liturgy is done and you walk out of our church this evening, I want you to go as a happy people. Indeed, I want you to join King David of old in his happy words from Psalm 103:

Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name!(RSV Psalm 103:1)

Yes, Bless the LORD, O my soul, for Christmas and for the Babe of Bethlehem, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.