

Advent 4 – Joy

Luke 2:8-14 December 24, 2017 Roger Barkley

A few years ago, some elderly men up in Idaho sat around telling their stories of immigrating as teens from Spain in search of economic security.

Many of these men became shepherds because they couldn't find more desirable work.

With little or no mentoring, they were put in charge of a flock of smelly sheep that they herded over remote hills – often threatened by coyotes and bears, shivering through freezing nights, and frequently not seeing another person for weeks at a time.

When they would get to a town, they were sweaty, lonely and sometimes undernourished.

In Jesus' time, shepherds were stereotyped as liars, degenerates, and thieves.

Because their duties kept them from observing the Sabbath, they were considered ritually unclean, and therefore to be avoided.

Shepherds were lumped together with tax collectors and prostitutes, persons who were "sinners" by virtue of their vocation.

In fact, the testimony of shepherds was not admissible in court, and many towns had ordinances barring shepherds from their city limits.

But it was to these people that God sent word of hope and joy.

Luke 2:8 There were shepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep.

Today we miss the scandal of this ... of God choosing lowlife outcasts to receive word of the Savior

The angels didn't go to the sanctuary to announce Jesus' birth to the priests Annas and Caiaphas.

They didn't go to the halls of power to announce Jesus' birth to Caesar Augustus or Herod.

No, the angels went to people who were most open and most in need of hearing about the birth of the Savior.

Luke 2:10 *The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master.*

Whereas the shepherds had the most need, the self-satisfied and powerful were afraid of losing what they held.

Those with power and money and status didn't want their world threatened.

The angels began their announcement by saying, *Don't be afraid* because fear and grasping close the door on God.

Fear and grasping – holding tight to what we have or what we want to believe – are the joy killers.

It may be power, it may be a resentment, it may be nostalgia that we cling to, but fear of losing whatever we hold dear can close us to God's promises for a new future.

We might be holding tight to some judgement of someone – and when we feel our heart soften, we quickly tighten up to not let the love in, to protect our judgement and rejection of them.

It may be that Norman Rockwell was one of the most dangerous artists of our time.

Now, I confess to being a bit facetious.

I actually enjoy his work, and each year I look forward to Jim Ezell's calendars that feature his works.

But just for now, go with me and ask why I would say such an outrageous thing.

Well, just look at this iconic picture, called *Freedom from Want* ... one of Rockwell's most famous.

This particular illustration was part of a series of four paintings inspired by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union address that was crafted to spur Army enlistment and war bond sales.

As part of this promotional campaign, the government distributed 4-million of these Rockwell posters.

As I said, I enjoy Rockwell's painting – but we have to understand them for what they are: idealized portrayals of early- to mid-century, Christian, Caucasian life.

Our problem begins when we confuse them, or any form of nostalgia, with snapshots of real world.

Our problem begins when we see them as true representations of a lost, bygone time when America was great, and then hold tight to our notion of that is the way it should be.

You see, once we do that we can't help but look around and see all sorts of ways our country and our lives don't measure up to that ideal.

Actually, Rockwell painted in a time when America wasn't so great for large swaths of people.

In addition to the good life he portrayed, there also was massive poverty, little to no consumer protection against innumerable scam artists, racial segregation of every aspect of life, hundreds of public lynchings (for which not a single person was ever convicted), brutal (even deadly) suppression of labor unions, much education and employment denied to women, and a world on the brink of conquest by fascist governments.

Like today: life was good, and life was tough.

But radicalism can't accept that.

Radicalism can't deal with subtleties – grey areas of life.

Radicalism blindly rages against the status quo – thrashing the good, the bad, the needing to be adjusted – in the wild hope of bringing back an idealized past that never really was.

Radicalism scapegoats all the people and institutions not included in their imagined and idealized portrayals of a purer life of a century ago.

We see such a wave of radicalism all around the world – from the European right, to Muslim fundamentalism, to the American Tea Party – much of it cloaked in religious trappings

When Jesus spoke of the past, it was not an idealized past of King David.

Jesus spoke ancient words of the prophets who had cried out for justice in the midst of their own imperfect world.

You may remember when Jesus returned to preach at his childhood synagogue in Nazareth.

That day's assigned reading was Isaiah 61:1-2 – a passage we often read during Advent:

Luke 4:18 *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”*

Then, Jesus said that those words were being fulfilled through him – and that his ministry included people outside his clan.

That incensed his neighbors, who chased him out of town and tried to throw him off a cliff.

As in Jesus' time, it is easier to defend an imaginary, idyllic past than it is to engage in the struggles of today.

According to Jesus, bringing freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight (and therefore their social standing) for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed is the measuring stick for how we are doing as his followers.

I frankly don't think Jesus would give a hoot whether we say "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays" – but somehow that's become the new measuring stick of our commitment to Christ.

More than that, it is being used as a dividing, polarizing totem for cultural identity.

Now, I'm not really getting off on a political rant, but this is where faith and public life are intersecting these days, and if we want to be faithful to Jesus' mission, then we need to bring some understanding to what's happening around us ... no matter which side of the political divide we find ourselves.

And from there, we are better able to hear, understand and reconcile with the other side.

As long as our expectations are for the return of a time that never was, we will remain hostile to the present moment.

And with that we will lose the hope, peace, love and joy that Christmas promises.

And this is not just true on a social level – it is true for each of us on a personal and family level as well.

I won't ask for a show of hands for how many of our family Christmas dinners will look like this painting ... because we'll be lucky to see one or two.

I chuckle at this spoof picture of the modern Christmas dinner, with everyone sitting around the table but absorbed in their smart phones.

And, we probably have some aunt who's gotten a bit tipsy, an uncle who is grouchy, a sister who's not speaking to husband, a couple of men who've taken their plates to the TV football game, and children spilling cranberry sauce on the new carpet.

If dinners don't look like Norman Rockwell today, they didn't when I was growing up in the 1950's either.

But it is right here, in these imperfect moments, is where we can find joy – if we are open to it.

Expectations are resentments waiting to happen.

The culprit is our tendency to seek out ideals in the first place because it easily turns to envy and to discounting the joy to be found in this very moment.

All unhappiness is caused by comparison ... including comparison to an imagined experience that only exists in nostalgia, or in the ads crafted by Madison Avenue.

The angels appeared to the people whose lives were messy: haggard, shivery shepherds, isolated, scorned and kept at a distance from the villages.

The angel appeared to Mary, a poor teenager who was shocked that she would be called upon.

The angel appeared to priests of a foreign religion who were searching the skies for signs of God at work.

God may try to appear to others, but if they – or us – are holding on for dear life to what we have now, or to a harsh judgment of others, or holding onto some imaginary past, then we will miss His promise.

My prayer for you and me this season is that we will release and let go of any and all of those attitudes that separate us from God and from one another.

Release and let go so that the Spirit will fill our hearts and guide our lives.