Preaching Series: The Hymns of Christmas
Sermon Title: Joy to the World

Text: Luke 2:8-11 – And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord…"

Introduction: Earlier, we sang **Joy to the World**, a well-known Christmas carol written by **Isaac Watts**. This famous Christian songwriter wrote approximately 600 hymns in his lifetime, including ***At the Cross, O God Our Help in Ages Past,*** and many others. In his biography, **Isaac** admitted to being a very competitive person. Although a bit on the cocky side, Watts' confidence in his own talent gave the world some of its best-loved hymns. **His mother recognized his outstanding gift when he was just a young child. His father, on the other hand, seemed less inclined to nurture the young man's talent**. Nevertheless, in God's providence, he may have been the one to incite his son to take up hymn writing in the first place. While still a youth, Isaac commented to his father that the hymns they were accustomed to singing in church lacked substance. The elder Watts, a faithful deacon, took offense at his son's criticism. It was almost as if he himself had composed those church songs. His father replied cynically, "***If you don't like the hymns we sing, write better ones***!" **Instead of feeling defeated by the retort, Isaac took up the man's challenge**. In a short time, he submitted to his father a hymn that he had written. ***Apparently, Mr. Watts had no idea that his son was so gifted***. He eagerly presented the composition at church the next Sunday and it was so well-received that Isaac was asked to write another one for the following week. Incredibly, he went on to write a new hymn every week for the next several years. Watts' composing of his famous hymn ***Joy to the World*** came about as a ***personal revelation*** of sorts. **Young Isaac, who had so devotedly prepared hymns for worship services, went on to enter the Christian ordained ministry himself**. After serving a little less than two decades, however, he found it necessary to leave the ministry due to health problems. **These health issues and a brief promise of love quickly dashed away by rejection caused Watts to reflect on his humanity**. This led him to undertake a project that had been stirring in his heart for several years. He had developed a deep fondness for the **Psalms of David** during his childhood. With time on his hands, as he recuperated from illness, Watts set about to write a series of poems based on the Psalms. It was during this time that **Joy to the World** came to fruition…***Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King; Let every heart prepare Him room, and heaven and nature sing***. Based on **Psalm 98**, Watts entwined David's original Old Testament poem with the fulfillment of prophecy in the New Testament. The result was the Christmas hymn that three centuries later is still cherished the world over.

As we come to the fourth message in our advent series **(The Hymns of Christmas)**, I would be remiss if I didn't take some time to talk about **the joy that Christians experience each year as we reflect on the coming of Jesus Christ into our world**. ***Joy is the thing that touches the deepest springs of emotion in us all***. **It is the feeling of *exultant gladness* that we find expressed in the Bible in actions like leaping** (*King David was leaping and dancing as he brought the ark into Jerusalem* – **2 Samuel 6:16**), **shouting, and singing**. ***The Bible tells us that joy is the natural outcome of fellowship with God*** (**Psalm 16:11 – You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy**). ***The amazing thing about the believer's joy is that God is not only its source but also its object***. "**I will greatly rejoice IN**

the Lord; my soul shall exalt IN my God" -- **Isaiah 61:10**. Our joy is ***in*** the Lord! We rejoice in the privilege of knowing, loving, and serving Him.

With Christmas just three days away I want to spend some time with you this morning and focus on **the joy that was announced by the angel that filled the hearts of the shepherds on the day of Jesus' birth when the angel of the Lord said**, "**Unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord**." Let's consider it from four different angles.

THE FORETELLING OF CHRIST'S COMING. Notice the simple phrase ***"the city of David…***" in **Luke 2:11**. If I asked how many of you can identify the city of David, I'm sure that at least a few would answer "**Jerusalem**" and you would be correct. That's where David built his palace and reigned as King over Israel. ***But the city of David is also Bethlehem***. It's called that because it was in this small village about five miles from Jerusalem that Israel's greatest king was raised by his father Jesse, along with seven of his brothers. My wife, Laurie, and I had the privilege of visiting Bethlehem in January of 2013. Today it is under Palestinian control, but when Jesus was born it was **a tiny Jewish community**. **If you were to visit modern Bethlehem, you would discover that the most important site in the city is the Church of the Holy Nativity. It is one of the oldest churches in the holy land having first been erected by Constantine some 1700 years ago and then added to and restored many times over the centuries**. Inside this church is the place where many believe Jesus was born in a cave that functioned as a kind of stable for animals. **Some seven hundred years before the birth of our Lord, Micah, the prophet, declared that the Messiah would come from this small town that had drifted into obscurity after the time of David**. "**But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me, one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days" -- Micah 5:2**. **When Jesus came into our world, Bethlehem was off the beaten track. It wasn't a vacation destination or a place of industry. Yet those living in the first century realized what the prophet had written about it**. We know this from **Matthew 2:5-6** where the chief priests and the teachers of the law advised Herod as to the Messiah's birthplace when the magi from the east came to inquire as to the birthplace of the one born king of the Jews. They told him, "**In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel**.'" Any Jew who studied the Scriptures would have known the same thing. **Yet even though this was not a secret, and Bethlehem was so close to Jerusalem, as far as we know not one of the priests or teachers of the law who advised Herod on that day took the trouble to travel there to investigate for themselves if the Messiah had come**. **They were indifferent to the claims of the Magi who traveled from afar to see the infant Jesus for themselves and bring Him gifts**. Amazingly, only the magi (foreigners) and the shepherds (outcasts) seemed to be in a hurry to worship the newborn king.

Now, when we read about the "***city of David***" in **Luke 2:11,** we should remember two things: **(1)** that Jesus was born in fulfillment of a prophecy that came from Micah seven centuries before and **(2)** ***that knowledge alone is not enough to transform us. It is what we do with what we know that makes the difference***. (**Review: The foretelling of Christ's coming**.)

THE REALITY OF CHRIST'S COMING. Again, as we consider the words of the angel, we read, "**Unto you is born this day**…" Focus on the phrase "**born this day**" for a moment. **These words speak to the fact somewhere in the small village of Bethlehem a baby named Jesus** was born. Here are a couple of observations to consider: (**1**) **There was nothing associated with the actual birth of Jesus that was**

miraculous in any way. True, there was a miracle, but it came nine months earlier when the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and the power of the Most High overshadowed her so that, though she was a virgin, she was with child. **When it came to the actual delivery, however, Jesus came into the world the same way that every other child has … his mother gave birth to Him**. I admit that the circumstances surrounding his entrance into the world were unusual. After all, He was born in a manger in a stable, but children are born in all kinds of weird locations even in the 21st century. **In 2000, Sofia Pedro climbed a tree to escape the floodwaters in Mozambique, Africa. The brave mom held onto branches as she delivered her baby Rosita. A few minutes later, they were rescued by a South African helicopter crew with the umbilical cord still attached**. Normal births happen under extraordinary circumstances and this was the case with Jesus. **(2)** Let me point out something else from our passage. **The words "this day" indicate that this is an event that occurred in real-time. *While some people have disputed the idea that the Son of God could come to our world in the person of Jesus*** (**one group called the Jesus Seminar, composed of 150 critical scholars and laymen, voted 24-1 against the biblical account of the virgin birth**), ***Luke, the author of this Gospel and a physician by trade, makes it clear that the birth of our Lord really took place***. The Apostle's Creed was written to confirm this very thing: "***We believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary…***" IT'S A HISTORICAL FACT THAT JESUS WAS BORN TWO THOUSAND YEARS AGO THAT FEW DISPUTE! (**The foretelling of His coming; the reality of His coming**.)

THE PURPOSE OF CHRIST'S COMING. The most important part of **verse eleven** is the part that refers to the baby in this way – "**a Savior, who is Christ the Lord**." Three important titles are given to Jesus … **Savior, Christ, Lord**. The first, "**SAVIOR**" is an appropriate title because Jesus came to save His people from their sins. "**CHRIST**" is the Greek version of a Hebrew word for "**Messiah**" which means "**anointed one**" sent by God to deliver His people and "**LORD**" is a term for His deity. ***As fallen people who have suffered spiritual death, we desperately need a Savior and the only One who can be that for us is Jesus, the Son of God anointed by God for this very purpose and with the power to do something about it***. It's important to note that Jesus isn't just a Savior; **He's Christ the Lord**. In other words, he's the one who calls the shots.

The worship and love of Jesus as our Savior always precedes faithful obedience to Jesus as our Lord. It's like in the beginning of the film ***The Princess Bride***. When **Princess Buttercup** would ask the poor farm boy, **Wesley**, to do something, all he would say was, "**As you wish**." At some point, Buttercup realized THAT what Wesley was really saying was, "**I love you**." His joyful obedience to her commands flowed out of his great love for her. It's the same way with Jesus. **The more you love him as Savior, the more you will obey Him as Lord**. (**The foretelling of His coming; the reality of His coming; the purpose of His coming**.)

THE IMPACT OF CHRIST'S COMING. Lastly, let's think about the shepherds to whom the angel spoke as recorded here in **Luke 2**. These men were near the bottom of the social ladder in ancient Israel. They were often poor and uneducated. ***Very few people would have chosen "shepherd" as a career of choice***. There were many easier and more socially acceptable ways to earn a living. Most shepherds had bad reputations. They were known as thieves because they were nomadic. As they moved their sheep around, sometimes they became confused about what was "**mine**" and what was "**thine**." They were not allowed to give testimony in a Jewish court of law. Their work made it nearly impossible for them to observe Jewish ceremonial laws so they were considered unclean. So, when the angel says, "**unto you is born this day**…", they must have thought he was mistaken. **Would Christ really come for**

some lowly shepherds? We know today that the answer to that question is a resounding "**yes**." Our Lord came for all the people of the world including those who lived on the fringes of society. Sometimes, I wonder if Jesus would have said that His favorite title was one that was meant as an insult. He was called **a friend of tax collectors and sinners – Luke 7:34**. THAT INCLUDES SHEPHERDS AS WELL AS ALL OF US.

When the angel appeared to the shepherds, before He spoke the words … "**for unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord**," **he said**, "**Fear not, for I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people**…" Christ's birth is cause for great joy and celebration! Why? Because…

- **Christ's birth is Good News**! Our world and everyone who inhabits it has been corrupted by sin. AND SIN TOUCHES US IN MANY WAYS, NOT THE LEAST OF WHICH IS THAT IT SEPARATES US FROM GOD AND ROBS US OF JOY. **I'm here to tell you that there is good news for those who want to hear it**. ***Christmas is nothing if it isn't good news***. The Son of God came to a manger in Bethlehem and His name is Jesus. He is our Savior and the reason that Christians are in a celebratory mood at this time of year. In fact, can ***you*** think of better news than that the God of love has come to our world as one of us?
- **Christ's birth brings Great Joy**! This is the logical result of the good news announced by the angel. **THIS IS THE JOY THAT LED ISAAC WATTS TO PEN HIS FAMOUS HYMN**! A ruler had come whose dominion was and always will be universal and everlasting. ***He has come from God to reconcile us to God by conquering sin and death***. Jesus took our sins in His body on the cross and delivered all who have faith in Him from the wrath of God. Because we are in Christ, we are children of God, sealed by His Spirit as a guarantee of our inheritance and the blessing of life …. Both abundant and eternal.
- **Christ's birth is for All People**! Jesus came to save sinners. That's what the Bible says. "**While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us**." So, the good news that brings great joy is this…***if you're a sinner*** (*someone less than morally perfect – after all this is the requirement to enter heaven on your own merit— "***cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the law***"*) ***then Christ came for you***. Salvation is God's Christmas gift to you. The Apostle Peter reminds us in **2 Peter 3:9** that **God does not want anyone to perish, but for all to come to repentance**. To repent is to turn from a self-centered life and our own sense of self-righteousness to Christ through faith. It is to put your trust in Him as Savior and Lord.

Conclusion: If joy is in short supply for you today, it needn't be. **God wants you to experience His joy this Christmas**. It may surprise you to learn that **Isaac Watts** wrote **Joy to the World** not while thinking about Christ's first coming but His second coming … "**Let earth receive her king**!" Still, it is very appropriate to sing the song at Christmas when we reflect on the words of the magi **– Where is this one who was born to be the King of the Jews?** The immense step from the baby at Bethlehem to the living, reigning triumphant Lord Jesus, returning to earth for his own people--that is the glorious truth proclaimed throughout all of Scripture. **And so, as the bells ring out the joys of Christmas a few days from now, may we also be alert for the final trumpet that will announce his return, when He shall reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.**