



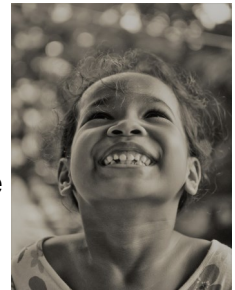
O Come, O Come

The Third Sunday of Advent

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.
Luke 2:10-11 (NIV)

Joy. It’s such a little word, but it’s no small thing. Think of the joy of a clean bill of health after a prolonged illness, the joy of a longed-for pregnancy, the joy of seeing loved ones after a lengthy absence.

Back before air travel became a nightmare, I used to love being in the arrivals area of airports. Watching people fling themselves together, the laughter, the smiles, the tears of joy. There is a glorious rightness about the arrival of someone we’ve been waiting for.



This sense of glorious rightness must have been not only what the shepherds felt when the angel announced the Messiah, but what the whole heavenly host felt. The joy of God’s plan coming together. Just imagining it makes me giddy.

Joy is funny, though. It’s not always about leaping up and clicking your heels. Our world sometimes feels soaked in grief. One person’s joy can be another’s sorrow. That longed-for pregnancy can feel like a slap to the friend who is still struggling with infertility. The great joy the angel foretold led to the slaughter of the innocents a few years later and, much later, the figurative sword that Simeon prophesied would pierce Mary’s soul.

The night before His crucifixion, Jesus gave His disciples a truckload of bad news: betrayal, denial, death. He gave hard commands and confusing instructions that they would spend the rest of their lives working out. But amid all that, He tucked in one astonishing sentence: “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” (John 15:11)

Joy complete. This isn’t happy-clappy all the time. Complete here means “accomplished” or “perfected.” Joy is perfected when it isn’t fleeting, based on my feelings, but is rooted in God’s character. When life feels full of pain, joy complete can be the slow burn of certainty that God is not only *with* me, but *for* me regardless of my circumstances. Because ultimately, my joy is complete because His joy is in me.



What circumstances in my life make joy seem difficult right now?

What can I do to readjust my perspective so my joy will be complete?

Exercise:

1. Commit this time to God, asking Him to speak to you throughout this exercise.
2. Read the passage.

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

Luke 2:8-15 (NIV)

3. Now read the passage below which includes prompts to help you imagine yourself there with the shepherds. As you allow your imagination to create the scene, pay attention to the details: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and feelings.

⁸ *...there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby,
keeping watch over their flocks at night.*

Imagine you are among these shepherds. It’s deep in the night. Feel the cold air in your nostrils, on your skin. Hear the sounds of the night creatures: crickets, perhaps owls, maybe the howl of a wolf in the distance. Smell the grass and even the scent of the sheep. What other sounds and scents do you detect? What can you see by the light of the moon and stars? Are the other shepherds nearby, or are you alone? How do you feel about being here?

⁹ *An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord
shone around them.*

Suddenly a huge being surrounded by blazing light appears before you! The light is so bright you can’t bear to look. Every sound—the sheep, the crickets, even the faint rustle of wind through the trees—has ceased. As if the world is encased in total silence. Then a booming voice fills the air.

¹⁰ *...the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid.*

Your heart is pounding, and you’re faced with a terrifying creature outside the boundaries of anything you ever could have imagined. Yet with these words, you grow calm. You know in the depths of your soul that this being speaks truth. You need not fear. Feel the sense of calm filling you. Relax into it.

I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.
¹¹ *Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is
the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a
baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”*

A savior? The Messiah! Can it be? You've heard stories your whole life about a messiah coming. Is it possible He has finally come in your lifetime? But this being speaks the words of God. It *has* to be true! What emotions arise in you?

¹³ *Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,*

¹⁴ *"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."*

The skies, from end to end, are filled with creatures unlike any you've ever seen: wings and eyes and colors. The faces of strange creatures all upturned and joyous. Arms raised in praise, mouths wide in jubilant song. Hear the uproarious songs of praise, feel the wind of their rushing wings against your skin. It's a party, it's a dance, and you've been invited! How do you respond?

Then suddenly—as suddenly as it began—it's over. The skies are simply filled with stars again. The air holds the sounds of crickets, not the praises of the heavenly host. You can feel a light breeze on your face rather than the gale of angel wings. Was it a dream? You look at the other shepherds. They're gazing around as astonished as you are. No, not a dream then. What are you thinking now? How are you feeling?

¹⁵ *When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."*

You and your companions head to Bethlehem. Yet a part of your mind is still listening for angel voices. God has spoken to you, and He wants to continue speaking to you. As you walk toward the Christ child, what is God saying to you? And how do you respond? Talk with God as with a friend you trust, in a very close and intimate way. Let the conversation continue as long as it needs to.

4. When you've finished your conversation with God, journal (in whatever way works best for you) about the experience, your prayer, your conversation.
 - Note anything that struck you, especially the unusual or unexpected. Ask yourself:
 - Why did I feel or think or react the way I did?
 - Did my reactions show me anything about the way I see God, myself, or others?
 - Note any desires or concerns that have come up as a result of this prayer.
 - What, if anything, did God show you?
 - Did God give you what you desired from Him in this time? If not, why do you feel that way?