

Luke 2:8-20

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.”

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear People of God,

A couple weeks ago, Patsy and I took in the Christmas Carol production at the Citadel Theatre. We watched as old Scrooge and his “bah humbug” attitude and heart, turned from cold to warm. The man who scoffed at people enjoying life, who had no mercy on people going through hard times, who drove his employees hard and showed no grace to them was changed. As the gospel took hold in his heart, the shackles of bitterness, unkindness, prejudice and his self-centred living gave way to the joy of Jesus that transformed his heart and life. It wasn’t that explicit but it was clear from the story line that Jesus was the source of true joy and the meaning of Christmas. It’s ultimately his love that turns cold hearts warm and fills them with joy, making people charismatic in some sense.

When you think of charismatic Christians, what comes to mind? Do you think of the shepherds who heard the angels announcing Christ's birth? I do. The Bible tells us in our reading this morning, in v.10, that first of all the angel came to the shepherds and said, "*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.*" And this good news or gospel immediately started to change the shepherds. By v.20 we find, that after the shepherds had gone to Bethlehem and had seen Jesus, when it's all done, they "*returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.*" (v.20). We often associate glorifying and praising God with charismatics, don't we? Maybe we do, but maybe we shouldn't limit it to that. Maybe we need to expand out definition of charismatics.

Sometimes when I hear of charismatic Christians, I might picture a church with people swaying back and forth, jumping up and down, and maybe even falling to the floor because they've been slain in the Spirit. Some of us equate charismatics with lots of singing and repetition. And some charismatics themselves would claim that you aren't truly spiritual or Spirit-filled unless you speak in tongues. We won't debate or discuss those manifestations this morning.

What would you say, however, if I said Trinity CRC is a charismatic church? Some of us would laugh. Other might say, "Oh no! We are not charismatic." Still others might joke that the only time CRC folk get charismatic is around budget meetings.

The charismatic tradition in Christianity down through the ages is not marked by the kind of emphasis on signs and emotion that is often portrayed in so-called charismatic churches today. Rather, the charismatic tradition, according to the well-respected spiritual director Richard Foster, is defined by "a life immersed in, empowered by, and under the direction of the Holy Spirit." The charismatic person has his or her "life immersed in, empowered by, and under the direction of the Holy Spirit." (Richard Foster, *Streams*, 132). It doesn't have as much to do with outward gestures as it does with an inner, spiritual reality brought about by the presence of Jesus in our hearts. And that gets reflected in our everyday life, more than in just external signs in a worship service.

One of the obvious marks of this inner reality is joy.

The Root of Joy

The shepherds of Bethlehem help us see, first of all, the root of charismatic joy. Think about it.

Shepherds as a rule were nobodies in the eyes of other people. They were near the bottom of the social ladder. You wouldn't want your daughter or your sister to marry a shepherd. They were rough, earthy people—and understandably so.

We've probably all seen a picture of Jesus with a little lamb over his shoulder. He is clean and neat—the picture of purity and grace. But shepherds were far from that.

Shepherding was a rotten job. Shepherds lived out in the fields with the sheep. They slept between the sheep or at best in a little shelter made of branches just outside the sheepfold. In addition, they didn't go to the laundromat every other day and they didn't pack a lot of clean clothes along. They were dirty people who may have gone weeks without a bath. They literally stank. For reasons like that, people looked down upon them. In fact, they had so little respect and status in society that, even legally speaking, they were not considered reliable witnesses in the courts. Shepherd may have witnessed a crime but their testimony in court was worthless.

The Gospel of Luke tells us about some shepherds. These are the guys we're calling charismatic. They may have been dirty on the outside, but there was something on the inside of these men that made them different from other shepherds. The well-respected commentator William Hendriksen put it, "They were devout men, probably acquainted with Messianic prophecy, and like Simeon, 'waiting for the consolation of Israel' (2:25)." (Hendriksen, NTC, Luke, 149). These shepherds were waiting for the coming Messiah, just as we must wait for his return. So having heard the good news of his arrival, they get up and run to Bethlehem where they tell the good news to everyone who will listen. (v.17). No matter how crazy their story sounds, they risk ridicule and disbelief to tell people that the Saviour has been born.

We learn from these devout and joy-filled shepherds that the root of being charismatic lies in believing that God has delivered you. They were the despised and rejected members of society. They were at the bottom of the heap. Since they were considered unclean in the eyes of the religious leaders, and unsavoury or unreliable in the courtrooms, and unworthy of friendship by the majority of people, the only hope they had was in God. They had no one to turn to. No status to flaunt before people. They were nothing. And so the Messiah is their all. Jesus is their only salvation. He is their heart's joy because they know they need grace.

New Christians are often exuberant. They are on fire for the Lord. They are so incredibly thankful to God for their salvation because they have been in the dark so long or far deeper down than most of us can imagine. They see how great Jesus is!! He is the one who gives them hope and joy despite their hard life! We see in Ebenezer Scrooge how the good news transforms his focus in life. The blinders of sin are removed and his heart is suddenly full of joy.

What about us? Do we get excited about following Jesus because we know how much we need him and how amazing his grace is? You see, congregation, we cannot be sincerely excited—charismatic in that sense—about the Saviour until we recognize how much we need him! The root of the charismatic life is

recognizing your need of the Lord and when you see all he's done for you, joy comes out.

Do we recognize our position at the bottom rung of the ladder? Do we know that this is where sin—our own sin—has put us in the eyes of God? And yet Jesus came to us. He humbled himself to be human like the shepherds and like you and me. The shepherds remind us that even if we may have a lot of status in this world, we must consider ourselves as hopeless and helpless apart from Christ. If a charismatic Christian has “a life immersed in, empowered by, and under the direction of the Holy Spirit” then you and I cannot be charismatic until we know how much we are indebted to Jesus for the change in our heart.

We have a lot of good theology in our church. We have the familiar Heidelberg Catechism reminding us that we must know how great our sin and misery are before we can find the comfort of knowing how great our Saviour and his grace are. And we have Canons of Dort which teach us about our fallenness but also the powerful, awesome grace of God which picks up our lifeless souls from the bottom of the sea, so to speak, and by the Holy Spirit breathes new life into us. Does this good theology help us appreciate how desperately we need the Lord? Does it point you and me to Jesus and how much we need him and all he's done for us?

Poverty may have kept the shepherds focused on and hoping in the Lord. Maybe our wealth has the opposite effect sometimes. Do the comforts of this world keep us trusting in ourselves like they did for old Scrooge in *the Christmas Carol*, or at least not trusting fully in the Lord? We ought to recognize the honour of being invited to know and worship Jesus, even though we are lowly sinners. Remember, the root of being a charismatic Christian is recognizing our complete dependence on Jesus. The good news of great joy is for all people, said the angels. For us too. The joy comes, however, when we realize and truly believe that we need to be saved and that Jesus alone makes it possible.

The Fruit of Joy

Secondly, then, after looking at the root, let's look at the fruit of joy as charismatic Christians. The fruit of joy is obedience. I believe there are many different fruit that we could point to. But let's stick to just one big mark that we see displayed by the shepherds. Their obedience. It's amazing.

When we look at the shepherds who came to worship Jesus in Bethlehem, we find joy. Remember that the angel said the shepherds, “*I bring you good news of great joy.*” And they were overflowing with that joy. Notice, though, that it resulted in action. In vv.16&17 and then v.20, the Bible says that after the shepherds got word of Jesus birth, “*They hurried off*” and found Jesus. And afterwards: “*When they had seen [Jesus], they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child...*” And then again in v.20 we read, “*The*

shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.”

Our joy, dear friends, is displayed in our willingness to obey the Lord. Joy motivates us to testify or witness to Jesus. It moves us to worship him in all of our life.

Did you notice that the shepherds didn't hold a meeting after the angels left to decide if they really heard God's Word? They didn't wait till the morning for fear that they might have been hallucinating. No, it becomes increasingly clear that these shepherds devoutly waited for the Saviour like the 5 virgins Jesus talked about who trimmed their lamps and were ready when the bridegroom arrived. The coming Messiah was an integral part of their lives. They believed God's promises. And so when the angels spoke they hurried off.

Dear friends, they simply obeyed! No questions asked. They dropped everything else and were ready to go when the Lord arrived. As we live our busy lives, are we listening to the Lord and ready to do what he says in his Word and through the prompting of the Holy Spirit? Do we live our days in anticipation of Jesus coming back? Is our life built around doing whatever the Lord commands even as we wait for his return?

It's easy to get sidetracked by our desires to succeed financially in our world. That's one of the measures our society uses. Being well-known or popular as a celebrity is high on the list. But in the kingdom of God, a heart that has been touched by the Messiah results in a life that seeks to obey God in all things. The joy of the gospel that came to the shepherds moved them to get up and go! They experienced great joy in knowing Jesus had arrived and they expressed it in what they did.

The shepherds overflowed with joy heading to the stable and when they left the stable. The people society always passed by were now running to everyone to tell the people who looked down on them the good news of great joy which the angels had first shared with them. They felt like the richest people on the earth. Their joy overflowed into obedience that took the form of witness as well as worship.

In v.20 we see the shepherds' joy flowing over in praise to God. Their hearts are full of joy because God has sent the Saviour. But Jesus is not just somebody's Saviour. These devout shepherds know Jesus as their own Saviour. They could not return to the fields the same way they came. The Messiah has arrived. The source of their hope and joy is here. They realize that even if they remain on the lowest rung of society's ladder, this Saviour ensures that they can be raised to the heights of heaven.

And that changes everything on earth, doesn't it? Indeed, it does! Our lives become a sacrifice of praise to God. That's what the fruit of joy looks like in the life of a believer. We become charismatic because we are filled with the joy of Jesus overflowing into all parts of our lives. Consider a few examples of people I would call charismatic Christians, people who've been changed by Jesus.

First of all, such people are worshipers. I overheard a couple ladies talking near the office the other day. They were reflecting on the seniors of our church and the wonderful example they provide to us of people who are eager to worship. They eagerly make the trek over here from Emmanuel Home or elsewhere because they want to worship. Their hearts of joy in the Lord overflow in a desire *to come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ the newborn king*. This is a staple of their life. They might do it out of custom but it's also out of gratitude and joy for our salvation. Routines aren't bad. They help us to stay focused on Jesus. So an obedient life is going to include worship as a starting point.

And carries on from there to the rest of life.

When I think of a charismatic Christians, I think of other people in this church. I'm thinking of an older guy. He likes to worship on Sundays. But his hands are busy all week long serving the Lord in his daily work. He helps people in the Lord's name! He provides jobs, treats his employees well and also shares what he has with people in need. Whenever I listen to him, I think, "Wow! I would love to be serving the Lord with as much joy as he does." So this man, in my opinion, is charismatic. He lives "a life immersed in, empowered by, and under the direction of the Holy Spirit." His actions point people to Jesus. His life exudes joy that results in obedience to God's call to sacrificial living.

I think of our young adults who are wrestling to find how to serve Jesus with their lives in our world today. They come to worship on Sundays but are also seeking Jesus throughout the week. These are charismatic Christians who want to hear the voice of Jesus and follow him into a career path where they can honour God in their daily work.

Parents of young children are charismatic when they recognize Jesus as their Saviour and look to the Holy Spirit to help them raise their children to know and serve the Lord in all of life. When they realize that our time in this world is training for the life to come when Jesus returns. That impacts how they teach and lead their family.

A lady here is also charismatic. She'd rather not be seen by too many people. She's quiet most of the time. Not likely to shout anything in church or anywhere else for that matter. But just the same, she loves to praise the Lord just as the shepherd glorified and praised God because they had been waiting for the Messiah to come and then he arrived! In a similar way, the woman I'm thinking of

lives in anticipation of hearing from the Lord. She's eager to obey him. She's charismatic because as far as I could tell, she also has "a life immersed in, empowered by, and under the direction of the Holy Spirit." A life that lives to praise God in her weekly job where she helps people who are hurting and also at home and in the church or anywhere else she goes. She's been changed by Jesus. And it shows.

All of us need to be charismatic Christians in the sense that the shepherds were. We need to see the greatness of our Saviour who came to deliver us from the misery of our sin. And then we need to live our lives filled with the joy of our salvation. And that joy should take the form of obedience which includes witness and worship. But it results in a life lived to glorify God in all things every day.

Scrooge was changed by the good news of great joy which points us to Jesus. He not only sang Christmas carols for a day. He treated people better than before. He loved them and served them. His life became—like ours should—a means of glorifying and praising God for the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. Let our joy spread to the world!

And all God's people say, Amen.