

“Surprised By Joy”
Luke 2: 8-20
by Pastor David Nygard
December 14, 2025

Preached at Messiah Lutheran, Joliet Illinois

All Bible verses are taken from the New International Version (NIV)

8:30 A.M. Service - A Shorter Sermon

Luke 2:8-20 NIV 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.**

Grace to you from Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Our sermon is called **“Surprised By Joy”**. Here’s a surprise. My sermon will be short. You’ve read about short sermons. Now you get to hear one. We’re saving time for our Choir Cantata. The shepherds were surprised to hear a choir of angels praising God. Our Choir are not angels, but they are very sincere. They finish singing each song at the same time.

We read **“... that there were shepherds... keeping watch over their flocks at night.”** I’m guessing that shepherds are not easily surprised. Their job was boring, the same thing every day. They spent long hours just watching sheep. They were underpaid. People considered them low life. They heard each other’s stories many times. They knew exactly what would happen next.

Sometimes you and I get that way. We get bored by life. We think that life is just getting up in the morning, going to work or school or just

watching TV. Then we get up the next morning and start it all over again. If we're sick, lonely, grieving or out of work, we can easily think, "This will never end."

But we don't know the end of our story. We don't know what God could do next. He isn't done with any of us. When our kids were little and we woke them up for school, they would shout, "Dad, what's today going to be like?" I would say "It's going to be like yesterday, only different." Even in the worst situation God can surprise us with joy.

A relationship could be repaired. We might overcome an addiction. We could make new friends. A sermon might give us hope. People think that they have God figured out. They think that God only works one way. Then we give up on God. Anytime that I have thought that God only answers certain prayers or certain people, he proves me wrong.

God the Holy Spirit is like the wind. Like the wind he comes and goes, and no one can stop him or control him. What God wants to do, he will do. God is good all the time.

We read that **"An angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified."** I've tried to imagine what that angel looked like, shining and full of light. He looked like Pastor Kurt on Sunday morning when he wears a clean robe.

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

The shepherds probably thought "God can't be talking to me. I am a shepherd, an outcast, a failure." We might reason that God is talking to someone else. "I am too old or young, too sick or foolish." But God says it clearly, **"I bring you good news... that will cause great joy."** He means "You".

If there is one thing lacking in your life and mine, it is Joy. Joy is inner peace. Joy is anticipation, confident hope. Joy is happiness. If you're looking for joy, God is the only store in town.

What does it mean to be "Surprised By Joy"? Sometimes we lose hope when we can't hear God's voice. A few years ago, I had to write a sermon. Sunday was coming. I was empty, anxious. I had nothing. I said a prayer, went to the library, hoping to find a book with a story. There

were thousands of books. I told God, “I’ll walk down the aisle and stop by a book. That book will be my sermon.” I picked a book. It wasn’t a Christian book. It was about a dad who didn’t have time for his family. He took them on a ski trip in Switzerland, I think. Father and Son went skiing but got lost. A blizzard came. They dug a cave in a snowbank and lived there four days without food. Father and son prayed together for the first time. Then Dad met lumberjacks on a dead-end road. They were rescued.

I preached that story but people in the last pew were talking and laughing. How rude. Two were members here. They said, “We know that this story is true, because that family are relatives. They are with us today.” They had never been to our church before or since, but we heard God’s voice, and he surprised us with joy. God speaks to you too.

Sometimes we lose hope in our grief. My cousin John died several years ago; the same week that my brother Joe died. John was sicker than anyone realized. His wife Joanne sat with him for days. He needed oxygen. They talked together. One day John looked up, pointed and said “Jesus?” He saw Jesus and later closed his eyes and died.

What happened? Didn’t Jesus promise us, **“I go to prepare a place for you. When that place is ready, I will take you to be with me.” (John 14:2-3)** Jesus came for John. One day he will come for us. We grieved for John and Joe, but not like people without hope. Our hope is in Jesus. The day of John’s death, Jesus surprised everyone with joy.

Sometimes we wonder if we make a difference in the lives of others. You may have seen the reunion special for “Everybody Loves Raymond”. It was funny and touching. It’s been 30 years since it left the air. Ray Romano was the star. When he left New York to film the show, his two brothers put a note in his luggage. He never mentioned it. The show lasted nine years.

On the last program Ray told the audience “My brothers gave me this note. It said, **“What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses his soul?” (Mark 8:36)**. It was a quotation from Jesus about priorities. It would be tragic if any person put his trust in money or success and lost his relationship with his Savior. Ray told his audience, “I’ve been working on my soul.”

For nine years the brothers wondered if Ray got the message. He never forgot it. At the end of the 30th reunion show, Ray played the tape

again and said, "I am working on my soul." In that moment Ray and his family and America were surprised by Joy.

We never know the difference that we make with a prayer, a card, a Bible verse or an act of kindness. Ray never forgot his brothers' love and the love of Jesus. One day God will show us the difference he made through us.

Do this. Read your Bible. Pray. Come to church more often. Take a class. Share your faith. Let God surprise you with Joy! Amen. I preach again on February 8th. My sermon for today's 10:30 service will be a bit longer. Both sermons are printed together.

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10:30 A.M. Service - A Shorter Sermon With An Extra Story

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Sometimes we lose sight of God when the unexpected happens.

We were thrilled when my brother Jim and his wife Theresa gave birth to their son Geoff. He was a beautiful baby, but he was born with Down Syndrome. I didn't know how to react. I was furious with God. I didn't pray for a month. How could God let someone so little be born with problems? Geoff's Grandma Preus knew what to say. She said "So what? We're still going to love him. We're still a family." She was right.

Geoff is now 35. He speaks in two-word sentences. He has limitations. But he graduated from high school. He ran in the Special Olympics. He was the basketball team's mascot and waterboy. He works four hours a day. He can be a rascal, but he loves helping people. When he watches church services he raises his arms in praise. He says "Praise you. Praise you." When Joe was dying, Geoff knelt beside me and said, "Pray Joe". Jim told me that Geoff is the best thing that ever happened to him. God surprised us with Joy.

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