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**“Unto You: A Joy that Does Not Wither –
and a Journey”**

A sermon by Allen Verhey

1st Sunday after Christmas

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Isa. 9:2–7; Phil. 4:4–7; Lk. 2:8–20

Well, it happened. Our Christmas tree has started to drop its needles. And that tree needs to last another week until the grandkids arrive. Oh, it’s still magnificent in its way. It really is, as we had hoped, a symbol of Christmas joy in our house. But the needles have started to drop. Touch one, and it falls to the floor. The tree withers.

It’s sad, I think. I know -- this sort of thing happens to trees. I know -- I should have watered it more often. It’s not a surprise, but it’s sad just the same. Soon that tree will have to be thrown out. It awaits, I suppose, an unceremonious shredding.

It’s even sadder, though, when Christmas joy itself withers, when it dries up like the merry tree that is a mere token of it. That’s not much of a surprise either, I suppose. We have all muttered a “Bah, Humbug” or two when we think about getting the bills, or about cleaning up the needles that withering tree will leave behind, or about needing to exchange that outfit some husband bought who, even if he had any taste, still couldn’t get the size right. It’s sad, I say, when Christmas joy cannot outlast that withering tree or the withering year.

But there is a joy that does not wither with the Christmas trees. It is the joy Isaiah promised. It is the joy of which the angel spoke to shepherds. “Fear not,” it said, “for behold I bring you glad tidings of a great joy.” It is the joy of the wise men from the East who, “when they saw the star, rejoiced with great joy.” It is the joy of which Paul spoke, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice.” And if we miss that joy, we have missed Christmas.

So, let's not sweep Christmas out with those needles. Let's not dump Christmas with that withering tree. Let's attend to Christmas one more time – and try not to miss the joy.

You have heard the Christmas story one more time this morning. You know it well enough, of course. You know about Caesar Augustus and the governor of Syria. You know about Joseph and Mary and the innkeeper. You know about the kings of the East, the wise men. You know about the star that suddenly was where none had been before, lighting the way to Bethlehem. You know about the shepherds – and about the angel that suddenly appeared in the midst of them – and about the multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace.” You know the story well enough.

Could it be that we know the story so well that it's hard to attend to it very carefully? Could it be that it has become so familiar that it is no longer astonishing? Could it be that we hear and even tell it so absent-mindedly that we miss the joy at the center of it?

Our thoughts do tend to wander, don't they? Sometimes our thoughts are (understandably) captured and held captive by our own fears or by our sadness, by reality, we say, and so we attend to the Christmas story as a pleasant little tale, too beautiful to be really true. But listen carefully, and you can almost smell the sheep stench on the sweaty shepherds. Listen carefully, and you can almost feel the pain of labor and delivery on the miserable hay and hard ground of a manger. Listen carefully, and you can almost hear the not too distant weeping and wailing of mothers grieving for the children soon to be executed by a jealous and ruthless Herod. Listen carefully, and the story no longer seems too beautiful to be true but too real to lift us up to joy.

And sometimes, too, our thoughts turn to the days of our youth – to all the memories of Christmases long past: the presents, the cookies, the carols, Santa Claus, and Jack Frost nipping at your nose. (It's a good morning for that last little piece of nostalgia.) It was a time we half believed that the animals talked on Christmas Eve. The story prompts Christmas sentiment almost as sweet as the candies we remember. But listen carefully, and the story is hardly sentimental. When Mary kept all these things in her heart, it was hardly nostalgia.

Those are the ways we often listen to the familiar Christmas story, aren't they? A little absent-mindedly. A little skeptically. A little sentimentally. No wonder, then, that we sometimes miss the joy.

Listen carefully one more time. Listen to that angel. That messenger of God still cries to all who will hear, “It is good news! It is glad tidings! There is great joy! **Unto you** a savior is born! He is Christ, the Lord!”

“**Unto you,**” the angel says. Who can be absent-minded then? “**Unto you,**” the angel says, and points us toward our joy and toward our journey, sweeping away our skepticism and nostalgia.

It’s a good thing God did not send some academic type like me with the first Christmas tidings. I like to think I can be trusted with God’s good news, but I fear I would have brought the message of great joy by saying something quite professorial and abstract, something like “Openness in history to the judgment on history from beyond history rescues us from our alienations to meaning.” To that, of course, the shepherds would have replied, “Huh?”, and returned to diligent attention to their sheep or to their slumber.

Oh, I think I could have done better than that. I might have said, “Unto humanity a savior is born” or “Unto human beings a savior is given.” And I would have been right, of course, but the shepherds might still have missed the joy and their journey. An abstraction is easy enough to ignore. We can treat a universal quite absent-mindedly. Whatever the rules of logic say, you and I know how easy it is to suppose that “all people” in general does not really include me, that a message to humanity in general is not really include me. It would be easy, then, to suppose that the message is meant only for others really, while we return, if not to our sheep or to our slumber, to our skepticism and sentimentalism and miss the joy and the journey.

The angel was no academic, no Ph.D. in Religious Studies. “**Unto you,**” the angel says. “**Unto you** a savior is born.” There is no mistaking this message. The angel points at the shepherds – and at us – and says, “**Unto you.**” And this professor is not so foolish as to refuse to learn from angels. “Unto you,” I say, “Unto you – and you – and you – is born a savior who is Christ the Lord.”

The good news is meant for you. The Christmas story does not take place like some movie or play that we merely observe without being involved in. We are not merely spectators here. The Christmas story involves you. The good news is “unto you.” The glad tidings are “unto you.”

It doesn’t matter how much you understand about the Christmas story or whether you can give a learned theological account of the incarnation. Do you think the shepherds understood much of what was going on? I don’t. Do you think the

shepherds were “wise men”? I don’t. But unto them and “unto you” the glad tidings come.

It doesn’t matter how good or pious you already are. Do you think these shepherds were very pious souls? I doubt it. I imagine they had cussed a time or two at some recalcitrant, stupid sheep that very evening. But unto them and “unto you” the good news comes.

For your sake God was not content just to be God but chose to become human. **For your sake** the one who made man was made man. **For your sake** he was created of a mother whom he created, carried by hands he formed, sucked at breasts which he filled, cried in wordless infancy, the very one who was and is the Word before all human eloquence is mute. “**Unto you,**” the angel says, “unto you.” He was a gift of the Father’s love **unto you**. To think that God loves you like that is enough to take your breath away. We are struck dumb, not with terror but with joy, a joy that does not wither with the Christmas tree.

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But if we’re honest, that joy **is** a little scary. These little words, “unto you,” are a little terrifying. There is a weight to such glory, a burden to such a grace, a responsibility to such a gift. The angel points to you and then points you to Bethlehem. The joy puts you on a journey, with miles to go before you sleep.

It’s a little like the first two wheel bike you got. You had wanted a bike for so long. A bike for Christmas would make you so happy, you had said. And then, alas, you got one. Someone said, “This bike is for you. We give it unto you.” And then you had to make good on your declarations and intentions -- and ride it. You had to screw up your courage, sometimes bandage up your knees, because it was “unto you.” The joy was real – but sometimes costly and painful, too. It was good news “unto you” – and a little scary “unto you.”

It’s a little like the time you wanted a child and then, finally, you got one. Some doctor or nurse said, “This child is born unto you.” That’s joy. That’s glad tidings. That’s good news. That’s scary! Suddenly you had to make good your declarations and intentions. You had to screw up your courage, toughen up your love. You had to **be** parents, for that child was “unto you.” The joy was real – but it changed you. It was glad tidings “unto you” – and a burden “unto you.”

It’s a little like Peter, I suppose, when Jesus gave to him the keys of the kingdom. “Here, Pete, I give these unto you.” Can you imagine Peter’s joy? Can you

imagine how scared he was? Poor old reckless Peter knew in the midst of joy that those little words, “unto you,” could spell responsibilities too great to bear.

If Peter had thought about it, he might have said, “Ah, thanks, but no thanks. I don’t want the keys. That’s too much responsibility.” He didn’t say that. He couldn’t say that. The keys were unto him, and the joy – though burdensome – was real. Nor could you say about your bike, “Thanks, but no thanks. I think I’ll keep some skin on my knees. A bike for me is too demanding.” And you, of course, could not say about your child, “Um, is it too late to change my mind?”

We are changed by such gifts, or rather, we are put on a journey of changing by such gifts. They determine in a way who we are and who we are to become. And we cannot renege on the demands without forfeiting the joy.

Now hear one more time the message of the angel: “**Unto you** is born a savior who is Christ the Lord.” It is good news, to be sure. It is glad tidings. It is a cause for great joy. But it is also a little scary. The gift is a demanding one. The Christmas story involves joy – and claim you – and changes you. After this gift you can never be quite the same one again.

“**Unto you**” -- God almighty lays this child on your back doorstep, taps lightly on the door before slipping away into transcendence, and the message says, “unto you.”

There is no evading this “unto you.” There is no playing with this holy child for a day or two and then returning the gift with a casual “Ah, thanks but no thanks. Such a gift for me is too demanding.” There is no protection from this gracious and demanding child.

The joy and the journey are a matched set. “Unto you” a joy that does not wither and a journey that is the adventure of a lifetime. So shall we continue in our old ways, in absent-mindedness or double-mindedness, in disbelief or in some sweet Christmas sentiment? Or shall we go to Bethlehem, there to see one born savior and Lord “unto us” and there like the drummer boy to offer our hearts unto him, gift answering to gift? That’s the joy that does not wither with the Christmas tree. May God bless you on your journey. Amen.