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Christmas 2022

Pastor Josh Luse

What does it take to make someone sing? Ever thought about that? I'm not talking about like you're in the same room and somebody strikes up Happy Birthday and you feel obligated to join in. I'm talking about that soul desire; something deep within you that is bubbling up that you can't hold in that you just long to sing about. Maybe you're like me, and you're not that inclined in music, you're not that naturally gifted. In fact, when I was in elementary school, our class was tasked with learning the recorder. Remember those plastic instruments? Anybody else in the room have that task? Yeah. Bless those music teachers. I tell you what, I don't know why but for some reason, I just was not able to get how to read music, and never quite figured out how to put my fingers in the right place on the instrument, and just honestly had no clue. That would have been fine except at the end of that semester, our teacher had given us a song, the sheet music, that we were supposed to play to her. I remember getting to the end and sitting down in front of her, and I thought, "Oh boy, I had no clue how to play this song." But I just took a big breath and started playing whatever I could figure out in that moment, and just went at it. In between squeaks and weird notes and other random sounds, got through the end, what I felt like was something good, and stopped. And she sat there for a few moments with her head down and looked up at me, said, "Josh, that was awesome." Or she might have said awful, they both kind of sound the same—I think it was the latter. (*laughter*) Some people just don't appreciate fine art.

But it didn't stop me much because I rolled on a few years later and got into middle school choir. Now there's nothing like a guy that's naturally already not inclined musically and add to that, puberty. So my voice was the mix of like an old squeaky car door and stepping on the tail of a cat—that's kind of the sound that was produced. And so I remember singing and just belting it out in choir and I kept getting this look. You know the look I'm talking about, like if you've ever watched American Idol, sometimes the judges give *that look* during the auditions. That look that kind of says, "Can the person that's singing not hear themselves singing? Why are they singing?" After the class, my choir director pulled me aside and said, "Josh, you've got a special voice. I just need you to sing a little quieter." But all I heard was, "Josh, you've got a special voice," which fueled it all the more for me to just belt it out. And that's continued to this day. I'm sorry if you're ever around me in church; I'm tone deaf and can't carry a tune, but I'm gonna belt it out. Maybe that's you? Maybe not. Maybe your idea of spreading Christmas cheer is singing loud for all to hear. I don't know what it is. But I'm not talking about volume. What I'm asking, is the reason why you would sing. What is it that causes somebody to sing because all of us are looking for something, aren't we? We've written songs about so many different things. And we have a desire to sing about something that matters; to find that thing that our souls have always been looking for and sing about it. There was a song that was sung a couple thousand years ago on a hillside. The shepherds that were actually there camping out, watching their sheep. Now I'd like to share a little bit of that with you today from Luke chapter 2. It says,

> **And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shown around them, and they were terrified.** (*NIV, Luke 2:8-9)

If you think of it back in this day, shepherds were not the elite of society. In fact, they were often the ones that were looked down on, forgotten, considered unclean. And yet, it's to these people that this

messenger shows up. Nobody when they were young said, “When I grow up, I want to be a shepherd.” It just didn't happen. Remember when Israel was looking for a king? They're going through all of Jesse's sons, and they got to the end like, “Is that it?” Remember who was left out, who was forgotten, who they didn't even bother to go get? “Oh, yeah, there's David, but he's just a shepherd.” But it's to this ragtag group that God sends messengers with a message that will change the world. Listen to what they said.

> **But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.”** Don't be afraid. Now I don't blame them. If I were in the middle of the night camping out and there was a raccoon outside my tent, I'd get freaked out, let alone an angelic being that shows up with a blaze of all of his glory. He said, **“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”** (Vs. 10-12)

Did you catch that? Good news not for some, not just for the elite, not for those that have it all together. For everyone—for you, for me, for the shepherds, good news for all of us, a Savior has been born. Not the way we would expect it. Not in a palace, not with a parade in front of Him, not with all the bells and the whistles; in fact, something totally different. He humbly came in the form of a baby. That's strange. To unassuming parents—it's not what I expected—and is now resting in the feed trough of an animal. It's not the picture I would have painted, but He came. Verse 13 says,

> **Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those whom his favor rests.”** (Vs. 13-14)

Why would God come into the mess of this world? You know why? Because He loves you, He longs to have a relationship with you, He is relentlessly pursuing you. Because the Holy God of the universe looked and saw us in our brokenness, in our sin, and wanted to rescue us and sent His most prized gift, His Son, Jesus Christ to live a life. The life that you and I couldn't live—a perfect life here on Earth—and die a death in our place, the debt that we should die. Why? So that we can be reconciled, so that we can be restored into a relationship with Him because He rose from the dead and victory over the grave. This verse tells us that peace is offered. Not like peace like life's gonna be perfect and there's no more illness, no more sickness, no more tragedies or trials or struggles—not that. Peace in the fact that you and I were enemies with God because of our selfishness, because of our sin, but God was not content to leave it that way. His Son died on a cross to reconcile the relationship for us. Verse 15 goes on to say,

> **When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherd said to one another, “Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherd said to them. But Mary treasured up all these and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.** (Vs. 15-20)

Twice now we've seen this word **praising God**. The angel choir struck up in the song of glory to God because of the peace He's provided; a soul song that's been long for through the ages. And now the shepherds, they hear the news, but they don't stop there. They go to meet Jesus. And as they return, they strike up a song and they tell others.

There's a lot of things that we could sing about in life, isn't there? There's a lot of things we can give our life to; there's a lot of different things that we can choose to give value to and exalt. But there is only one thing in the world that will ever satisfy the void and the desire in our soul, and that's Jesus Christ. That's the whole hope of Christmas. And He's come and He's given His life as a gift, so that you and I could have a relationship with Him. So, I've got to ask you a question. You, like those shepherds, have now heard good news. But don't just leave it there; don't take my word for it. Go and meet Jesus yourself. Choose to let go of control of your life and realize the gift that He's given you through His Son. It's simple, it's choosing to realize and say, "God, I understand that I'm a sinner. I realize that you are the Savior, and I choose to put my faith and trust in You and You alone." Tonight, right now, this Christmas, could change the rest of your life. If you've not chosen to give your life to Christ, I invite you right now in the seat where you're sitting say, "Jesus, I know that I need you, I know I'm a sinner, I know that you are the Savior. And I choose to follow You." And if that's you, like those shepherds, don't leave it there. Before you leave this place tonight, tell somebody else about that. Because that, friends, is the message that puts a song in our soul to sing both now and forevermore. That is the reason we sing.

> *Jesus, thank you so much, that in Your grace You do not leave us in the state we're at. But You offer life to us; full life, abundant life, peace, joy, hope—all that we long for is found in You. God, thank you for the gift of Your Son on the cross. Thank you that You will be with us through this world, no matter the circumstances. God, thank you for Christmas; the reminder of the gift that we have in Your Son. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.*

Video:

I grew up in a family where we went to church regularly and did all the church activities, so I knew about God. I believed in God, but I didn't have a relationship with Jesus. That came later in life. God put some special people in my life that there was something about them that I admired and I wanted; that was Jesus. Last December 3, I was diagnosed with acute Myeloid Leukemia, which is an aggressive blood cancer. The odds aren't good. And everything changed that day. My house was partially decorated for Christmas—I had my Christmas tree up, some shopping done, big plans for baking and celebrating. And my doctor said—it was a Friday when I found out—and he said, "If it weren't the weekend and the hospital beds weren't full, I would admit you right now. But go home, have the weekend, and Monday you're being admitted for over a month." So I had two days to tell family, to find a wig, to get ready. I also remember the day my oncologist told us that chemo was just going to buy me time and if I wanted to live, I needed to have a stem cell transplant, which was risky. And suddenly, life became really precious. And I didn't want to die. My husband James and I knew we needed to give it to God, that we couldn't do it on our own, so we surrendered it all to Jesus. One of the verses that I focused on a lot was Isaiah 41:10 and it says, ***So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; and uphold you with my righteous right hand.*** *Sometimes in my hospital bed at night, I would just talk to God, and I knew He was there, I could feel Him. And I would imagine myself holding Jesus' hand and looking into His eyes while He pulled me through the dark times. And He would say, "Just hold on to Me." And then things weren't so scary when I focused on that. My stem cell transplant went as planned. Recovery was really tough, but I am currently in remission. And about eight months post-transplant I still have*

challenges and restrictions, but God has really been good to me. I didn't want to die. I don't want to die, but yet, I know when that day comes, I'm not fearful of dying because I know where I'm going. I look forward to Christmas so much—to decorating like crazy, to celebrating Jesus' birth. God is right there if you call on Him and put your complete faith in Him. Trust Him, surrender, and let Him write your story. He will come alongside you wherever you are and lead you and never leave you. He is so faithful.

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