

From the Pulpit of the Japanese Baptist Church of North Texas
December 16, 2018

Joy of Discovery

Luke 2:15-20

2:15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

2:16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.

2:17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

2:18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

2:19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

2:20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

1. Joy of Advent

Advent candles are basically purple. This comes from the liturgical color of church. The liturgical colors are consisted of four colors which are purple, red, white and green. Purple means "repentance." Red means "passion" and "the Holy Spirit." White means "glory." And, Green means "life." For example, we use "purple" during the Lent, and "red" in the Holy Week. "White" is used Easter, and "red" on Pentecost. We use "white" on the Trinity Sunday, and "green" on Sundays after Trinity. The cloth of each color, which decorates the sanctuary, tells the worshipers that each season comes.

The purple color of Advent teaches us to prepare for the birth of Jesus Christ, our Savior, with repentance. But, today we have forgotten to wait our Savior quietly and look back ourselves during Advent. As soon as Halloween is over, stores start putting Christmas goods and there are Christmas parades and Christmas concerts continually after Thanksgiving Day. There is no more “Advent,” and Christmas comes abruptly. In Japanese society, Christmas is thought one of a year-end parties that people are drinking and making lots of noise. “Purple” of Advent teaches red face people with drinking to calm the noisy mind down and become “sober.” “Purple” indicates soberness holding down hot blooded and calm down noisy mind. Just like a hymn tells us, “Ponder nothing earthly minded, for with blessing in His hand.”

But, the third candle of Advent, “Candle of Shepherds,” has the different color. It has “rose” color which weakens the color purple. Because “Candle of Shepherds” shows “joy.” Waiting the Savior and going in front of God quietly are not hard penance. This fills our minds with joy.

“Christ” and “Mass” are connected to make the word “Christmas.” Since “mass” means “worship,” we can say that Christmas is the worship to Christ. The joy of Christmas comes from Christ, not coming from parties, gifts, concerts nor events. The joy is in the worship to Christ. If you are Christian, you should know this joy. People who do not know this real joy think that “laugh” and “entertainment” are “joy.” But “laugh” and “entertainment” are temporal things. After these feelings are gone, only emptiness is left. People try to fill the empty feeling with chasing continuously events

like a year-end party, new year party, Valentine Day, and so on. Henri Nouwen says, “We, busy about many things, begin to seek after the small, flighty sensations brought about by artificial stimulation of the senses.” I think this is true. During this season, I wish, we, Christians, should enjoy the joy coming from Christ, and share the joy in worshiping Christ with other people.

2. Joy of Listening

So, how can we personalize this joy and share it with people? Let's learn from the “shepherds” in today's passage.

The first point is that this joy was told by the angels. Luke 2:10-11 says, “And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.’”

In ancient times, an announcement of a prince’s birth was called “good news” or “the gospel.” At the same time, people received an amnesty, tax exemption, and welfare. God lets the angels announce the birth of Jesus, the Son of God and the King of kings, the Lord of Lords. The shepherds heard this “great joyful” news through the angels send by God.

Shepherds can’t keep sheep in a city. So they leave the city and live in a mountain with the sheep. I think that life was quite simple, unlike life in a city. They seek grass in the morning, walk around the mountains for water. When the sun goes down, they move the sheep in the enclosure and they also sleep with the sheep. They kept doing it everyday and the first Christmas day was supposed to be the same day as usual. But, that day was different from their normal day. The day

was changed by the angel's announcement, a message from God.

The joy of the shepherds did not come from themselves. It was what came from outside. No, it came from above. Many people do not know that they are filled with gifts from heaven, those coming from God. Many of us believe that happiness comes from around us. So, we will make every efforts and spare tons of time to build our success in this world, accumulate our wealth, keep relations with a lot of people. However, we do not look up to God and we will not give it time to wait for a gift from heaven.

We live in this world. We live in relationship with others. It is important to have food, clothes, shelters, education, health, human relations. But do not forget that they come from God above. This is what Jesus said in Matthew 6:31-33 "Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." And James 1:17 says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."

Many people perceive faith is to encourage themselves by themselves and to save themselves with their own power. To them, "hope," "peace," and "joy" are something they can create by changing their own feelings. If so, we do not need to believe in Jesus Christ. Any religion, any teaching, any faith will be acceptable as long as it strengthens my belief.

However, we surely know that "people do not have the power to

save themselves.” Trying to save yourself by yourself is like by grabbing the shoelace of yourself and floating up in the air. Salvation comes from God. Faith is to trust God. Faith is not to trust ourselves. The “joyful news” of salvation comes from heaven. Faith is to listen to God’s words and obey them. Faith is not subjected to his own enlightenment or personal belief. The shepherds heard the “joyful news” that the Son of God was born. And they found the Savior. We are listening to the same “joyful news.” When listening to this message from heaven and accepting it, our life will be changed by heavenly might.

3. Joy of Seeing

Furthermore, the angel not only announced the birth of the Savior but also gave the shepherd a “sign.” That is “a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:12) When the shepherds heard the words of God delivered by the angel, they said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us,” (Luke2:15) and immediately went to the town of Bethlehem with great haste.

Due to the census, there would have been a lot of people in Bethlehem, but finding a baby according to the word of the angel was not a long time consuming. It was because there can not be many babies were born that day and laid on a manger with the livestock. When the shepherds found a Savior who was born as a baby, they were clearly convinced that the appearance of the angel and what the angel told were not a dream or a vision, and were filled with joy. Luke 2:20 says, “And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God

for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

A “sign” is placed for us to see. The shepherds did not finish just by listening to the angel’s words but saw the “sign” evidencing the words, and convinced the word of God. Faith begins with “listening.” So faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:17) There is nothing more important than listening to God's word and keeping to listen. But faith is also “seeing.” The word “to see” in the Bible is used to mean “to understand.” Faith is not only to listen to the word of God but to understand and convince what the word means.

“The baby laid down by a manger” was the “sign” of the Savior, but, it seemed to be small and shabby. Although the angels appeared in glory, the Son of God was kept in the livestock in a small figure. He became small enough to get on the palm of the hands. That was not suitable sign for the Son of God, the Lord of angels. The Son had to shine in greater glory than the angels’.

However, the shepherds did not stumble over this sign. The shepherds saw the great salvation work of God in this poor figure of the Savior. At that time the shepherds did not know the cross of Christ or the resurrection. But they saw, believed, and understood that God would save the world by this baby. In the first place, the one called “a sign” is only a small one. As Arizona had a sign called “Two Miles to Grand Canyon,” the signage would be an aluminum plate of at most 6 feet in length and 4 feet in height. However, if you believe that and run the car, you can see a huge fault of 227 miles of red rock. Although a “sign” is small, the content that it points to is much bigger. Faith refers to see a small “sign,” to believe it, to understand it, and to

participate with the God's great salvation works that the “sign” shows.

The shepherds heard the message from God. Not only did he listen, but he also what heard, "watched," understood, and convinced. The shepherd did not waste “joyful news.” By that they were filled with the joy of seeing the Savior, Christ, and the joy of worshipping the Savior. Let us also listen to this news of joy. Let’s tell it to people. We can not save ourselves. We need something from outside, from above, and the word of God. Then, follow the word that you have heard. Let us find the Savior Christ. Invite people who still do not know Christ to the place where you seek Christ. With the people, I would like to be filled with the joy of discovery that Christ is the Savior full of power, glory, and love.

(Prayer)

Dear God, who sent us the Savior, You have sent the message of the birth of the Son to the poor people such as the shepherds, not the mighty or the wise people of this world. The shepherds would be filled with the joy of finding Christ, also met the joy of being found by God. Please give us the same joy as well. We pray this in the name of the Savior Jesus.