

December 24, 2009

Houghton Lake United Methodist Church

## Good News of Great Joy

**Luke 2:1-20**

**Pastor Tom Anderson**

Merry Christmas to everyone! On behalf of my family, I want to thank you for your gracious welcome this past year; for the wonderful house that we live in; and for your prayers, many kindnesses and support. We are honored and humbled to be with you as your new pastor and to serve our Lord Jesus in this time and place.

The state of our congregation is strong. Tonight we are sitting under a new roof. We are surrounded by a fresh coat of paint, and we are listening to a brand new organ. Among us this evening there are 14 new members and 8 of them are brand new Christians. One of those new Christians wrote in their Christmas card these words, “Christ has turned my life around. I’ve got a long way to go, but since I was introduced to Christ, everything is different. I’m even getting along with my neighbor.” There are people among us tonight who are celebrating their first few months of sobriety. There are people among us tonight whose marriages have been saved. There are people among us tonight who have experienced divine healing of their bodies. These are the signs and wonders of God among us.

The Bible says in Jeremiah 29:11 that God has a plan for us, a plan to prosper us, a plan to give us hope and a future. I believe that God is calling us up to the next level as a congregation. In the New Year, we will be hearing, studying, and praying about the *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*. In the spring of the year, we will sit down as an entire church family to assess who we are, to decide what God’s future for us is and to make a plan to build on our strengths. Are you ready? 2010 will be a year of dreaming dreams, seeing visions and then stepping out in faith into the future God has planned.

The first words of the Christmas angel were “Do not be afraid.” (Luke 1:13) We are living in anxious times. People really are afraid for good reason: 14.5% of us are unemployed, and 30,000 more of us are being sent off to war. But the angel spoke in the darkness to a group of impoverished shepherds: “Do not be afraid.” (Luke 2:10)

Courage is one of the cardinal virtues of the Christian life. If you do not have courage, none of the other virtues matter much because you will not stick to them; you

will fall into either panic or paralysis. Christmas calls for courage. To act in fear is to believe that there is no god, and it is all up to you to get whatever you can get out of life. To act in fear leads people in one of two extremes: to try to control every last detail of life, or to sit paralyzed, desperately hoping to cut your losses through retreat. Fear is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more we are afraid of something, the more power that something has over us, and the more likely that something will dominate and control our lives, be it unemployment, addiction, or war.

To act in courage is to act out of conviction that there is a God and he loves you. Courage comes from three sources: 1) our knowledge of the facts—a baby was born in Bethlehem 2009 years ago; 2) our faith that this baby is the Son of God; and 3) the Holy Spirit, who is the one who witnesses to the truth and applies the truth to our hearts so that we are filled with blessed assurance. Knowledge, faith and the Holy Spirit, these are the sources of courage. Courage is God’s gift to us at Christmas. Courage to face the future unafraid because we are convinced there is a God and his name is Jesus.

Next the angel said, “I bring you good news.” (Luke 2:10) In the Bible this word is always a verb and never a noun. “Good news” is not a noun I can possess, it is an activity that I receive and share in. The good news is about how an ordinary baby is really the Son of God, how water gets turned into wine, how death on a cross becomes God’s victory over sin. The good news is about how the ordinary becomes the extraordinary and I share it with you.

Last year in a jewelry shop in the Keweenaw, the owner showed me a ratty-looking rock that had been found by a busboy raking leaves in Copper Harbor. The rock was black and seemed to be coming apart in flakes. It was pretty ugly. If I had found it, I wouldn’t have touched it since it reminded me of a rotting chicken carcass. I probably would have kicked it into the bushes. But the wiser busboy brought his find to the jeweler. It turned to be a piece of rare fern copper, and the jeweler paid him \$8,000 for his prize.

The truth of Christmas is often kicked aside. It is wrapped up in such ordinariness: a humble peasant baby born in the distant past in a forgotten corner of the world. The Bible says that “the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.” (2 Corinthians

4:4) Who is the god of this age? His name is Fear and Despair. Do not give into him, or he will blind you, and you will not know the joy of Christmas!

The angel came to announce “great joy.” (Luke 2:10) Jesus is the man of joy. He is the happiest man who ever lived on the planet. Jesus came so that his joy might be in us and our joy might be complete. (John 15:11) But be careful with the joy Jesus gives you. Do not be like the people who hear the word and receive it with joy but they have no root so they only last a short time. (Matthew 13:20-21) When trouble comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Joy must have its root in courage. That is why courage is one of the cardinal virtues. It is courage that will make the joy of Christmas endure and bear much fruit in your life.

Lastly, this good news of great joy is for *all the people*. (Luke 2:10) The truth of this is underscored by the humble circumstances of Jesus’ birth. It is further emphasized by the visit of the wise men who were religious leaders from a distant land. The Bible says that “Christ appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.” (Hebrews 9:26) He is for all ages, all nations, all races and all times. Do you know him? Are you for him? Have you received him and do you believe in him as your savior? He has much he would like to take from you. He would like to take away your fear and your sorrow. He would like to give you the gifts of courage and joy.

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come!  
Let earth receive her king;  
Let every heart prepare him room,  
And heaven and nature sing.*

*No more let sins and sorrows grow  
Nor thorns infest the ground.  
He comes to make his blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found.*