

The Gift of Evangelism

Eph 4:7-13, 1 Thess 1:4-6

Well brothers and sisters, as we wrap up this sermon series on “what gifts did you receive for Christmas” I want to ask you - what’s the best Christmas present that you’ve ever received; a particular toy... some beautiful jewelry... maybe a new car?

And as you try to think about an answer to that question let me share the story of Carrie Watt’s best Christmas present with you.

Carrie is a young woman from New Zealand, and back in August of 2012 she was diagnosed with cervical cancer.

Although the doctors were confident that they could treat it with chemotherapy and radiation, by May of 2013 the cancer had spread throughout her body and she received the awful news that she was terminally ill.

Given the initial optimistic diagnosis she never expected to receive such devastating news. She said “I was thinking the worst-case scenario might be radical surgery. I never thought they were going

to say there was nothing they could do.” But Carrie had a tough spirit and was determined to fight on in spite of her terminal diagnosis.

And with the help of family and friends and people in her community she was able to raise money for alternative cancer treatments and drugs.

She was determined to do everything possible, and so she continued with a second round of palliative chemotherapy and some non-government funded drugs, combined with diet and exercise changes.

Six months later – on November 29th of 2013 she met with her oncologist and was told that her cancer was completely gone!

How did she react to the news? "I haven't stopped smiling," she said. “Nothing can really prepare you for getting such good news, when you've been told the worst. It was absolutely amazing.”

"We told people straight away after we walked out of the appointment, and popped some champagne that night.

But there are definitely lots more celebrations to come – this is the best Christmas present ever."

And I think we'd all agree receiving that was some amazing news leading up to the Christmas season, and we can see why it would be the best Christmas present ever.

Now I don't know what your best-Christmas-present-ever was? But maybe you've also had an experience where you got some really good news for Christmas.

Like finding out at the last minute that your family or friends whom you haven't seen for years are able to come visit for Christmas... That would be good news!

Or maybe you heard that a family member got engaged, or that a couple whom you know is finally expecting their first child? That's good news!

Or perhaps the company that you work for had a really good year and they decided to double the Christmas bonus!

That's good news... and a bunch of extra cash! Or maybe you weren'tt feeling very well leading up to Christmas, cough – fever – runny nose... and you were thinking maybe you had come down with Covid but... that text came in and... you tested negative!

So I think we would agree that this is a wonderful thing to receive for Christmas – the gift of good news.

And a very appropriate gift at Christmas as well, since you could argue that the very first gift given when Christ was born was in fact - the gift of good news.

Remember what the angels said to the shepherds? "*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news...*" (Luke 2:10) The gift of good news...

But what qualifies as good news friends? I mean really good news, the kind of good news that could be considered a gift?

You might remember a car commercial a few years ago where some guy hears that Honda, or maybe it was Kia is having a sale -

and he thinks it's such great news that instantly nothing else going on around really matters any more...

a car drives through a dirty puddle and soaks him head to toe by, he discovers he's put his hand on some sticky gum on the escalator, he spills his coffee on his computer and blows it up –

he's actually having a pretty bad day.... but throughout it all he's grinning from ear-to-ear because this car sale is such great news...

Makes me think of how Carrie Watt said "I haven't stopped smiling!"

She could have gotten a speeding ticket on the way home from that doctors appointment, given herself or her fiancé a black eye popping the cork on the champagne, dropped her engagement ring down the sink - whatever... it wouldn't matter - she had received such good news nothing could make her stop smiling!

So – let me suggest that the kind of news that qualifies as really-good-news, the kind that is a gift – is the kind of news that brings joy.

Getting the news that your cancer is gone after you've been told it was terminal... well that certainly brings joy.

What news would give you joy friends? What news would make you smile even though you're having a terrible day, even though you are going through some hard times, even though we are in the midst of a pandemic?

Would it be getting the news that you've won the lottery? That your mortgage and all of your credit card debt has been forgiven?

That the global economy is recovered, your stocks are surging and your RRSP values are higher than they ever were? (Thanks Gamestop!) Or that somehow we managed to get anti-energy policies reversed and confirmed that we could actually get pipelines built without any protests and opposition?

These things are pretty good news... they would keep us smiling for a while.

And certainly, we've all experience how news can be good news these days when it pertains to vaccines, dropping caseloads and hospitalization numbers and the lifting of health restrictions.

But I wonder friends - would the news that the angel told the shepherds give you that same sense of joy? *"Do not be afraid. 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."* (Luke 2:10-11)

Now let's be honest – does your heart skip a beat when you hear that scripture verse, does your pulse start racing, is there a moment of disbelief because this seems too good to be true?

Does it leave you grinning from ear-to-ear for the next week no matter what else happens? Probably not...

At best because it's so connected with all our Christmas traditions it might bring up pleasant memories and good feelings when we hear it... but joy? real authentic joy? Not so much.

There's that old saying "familiarity breeds contempt" and quite frankly we've heard this "good news" so many times over the years that it is "old news..." and it's become a bit stale, it's lost its potency to create joy for us.

Additionally Christmas can often be a very difficult and lonely time for people, who are without, or away from their family, or who have lost loved ones, or have received some bad news – this year being no exception to that under the circumstances.

Which makes the announcement of "good news" that happened two thousand years ago seem trivial and far removed from the trouble we face today, especially in a pandemic.

And... there are many other people who do not hear this announcement as "good news that brings joy" simply because they

don't believe in Jesus, and they find the claim that he is the Messiah and His call to surrender your live to him, to be offensive.

But in spite of all this brothers and sisters, we can't get away from the angel's words, especially as we look back on what we received as a gift for Christmas – *“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people...”*

So if we believe the word of God to be true then somehow the announcement of Jesus' birth ought to give us joy, it ought to bring other people joy, genuine authentic joy that is evident in us no matter what we might be going through.

Please understand that this is not about displaying a superficial positivity, or putting up a good front for other people.

The truth is that if we don't have joy we can't produce it, we can't make ourselves feel joyful. Joy is something that happens to us, it's given to us by God. That's why King David pleads with God in Psalm 51:12 *“Restore to me the joy of your salvation”*

So, brothers and sisters as we've been talking about what gifts we may have received this Christmas, why not also ask what gifts did you give others this past Christmas? And as we are considering the grace-gifts that the Holy Spirit can give us – why not ask for a gift that enables us to give gifts... Ask for “the gift of good news” that brings great joy.

Because the good news is that “the gift of good news” is something that **the Holy Spirit gives** to us, it is a grace-gift along with healing, discerning the spirits, prophecy, tongues and the all the others that the scriptures mention...

It is the grace-gift of evangelism. Maybe you didn't know it, but that literally what the word evangelism means “good news.” And in Ephesians 4:11 which we read this morning, we see that Christ gives evangelists to the church – that is believers who have the grace-gift of evangelism, of good news - to equip us for works of service and to build us up.

Now I have to confess that I've always thought that an evangelist is someone who does gospel presentations and invites people to

consider the reasons they should make a decision to believe in Jesus as their savior... and that evangelism is all the activities where we intentionally present Jesus to non-Christians as their savior.

But in studying the grace-gift of evangelism what's really come alive for me and what I want to share with you this morning is that evangelism is all about good news!

And someone who has the grace-gift of evangelism has the Holy Spirit working in them so that as they talk about Jesus and what He came to do, what He has done in their lives, what He is doing in their church and so on... it comes across as good news to those who hear it.

Regardless of their circumstances, or what they believe, or how they are feeling, because the Holy Spirit empowers that good news in such a way that it brings joy...

That is what happened when Paul shared the good news in Thessalonica.

He writes to the Thessalonians *"our gospel, our good news, our evangelism - came to you not simply with words... but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction."* (1:5)

And listen to the last verse of what we read *"you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit"* (1:6)

You know friends as I hear what that verse says... it gives me hope, and it gives me joy.

To know that the power of the Holy Spirit can cut through circumstances so that when people hear the words of the Christmas angel; *"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."* (Luke 2:11)

Or the words of Jesus; *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor."* (Luke 4:18)

Or the words of the Apostle Peter; *"Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name."* (Acts 10:43)

When people hear these words, The Holy Spirit can enable them to welcome them as a message of good news with deep conviction and they can put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ!

And this gives me hope and joy friends, because it means that evangelizing our community is not only possible – but that we can be extremely effective in it.

Why? Because we'll be sharing "good news" empowered by the Holy Spirit – and not merely by our own skills.

And relying on our own abilities is part of the reason why most Christians I know shudder when they hear about "evangelism" even here at Valleyview...

We are very comfortable with talking about reaching out to our community, with the terms "doing mission" and "being the blessing" or even with "making disciples..." but throw that word "evangelism" into the mix and we become a bit apprehensive and reluctant about it.

A few years ago now Cheryl Gill and I went to a seminar to investigate a potential evangelism program for Valleyview.

And it quickly became evident that the success and effectiveness of this particular program would rest on the skill and ability of our congregants to engage their friends and neighbors in a way that would make it feel natural and genuine to go over to their house for dinner and then watch a video about eternal spiritual matters.

And after the presentation was done, Cheryl and I looked at each other and we both said "I don't think our people would feel comfortable doing this – they are not ready for this!"

If we decided to try to get the majority of our congregation trained to run such an evangelism program – that would take an incredible amount of work to get everyone out to some training sessions - where we would have to help anyone who is introverted get comfortable with approaching their neighbors and inviting them over...

And get everyone to memorize and practice delivering a credible sales pitch about why their friends should come over to dinner, and then have everyone practice saying transition phrases to make it less awkward when it comes time to switch over from dinner and visiting to watching a video...

That's a lot of work to get people to do something that depends on their skill and ability which has limited and declining effectiveness.

And to be honest – most of these kinds of programs focus on particular theological truths or propositions which most people today would find irrelevant - they certainly wouldn't hear them as good news.

Anyways, I'm sure you can see why relying on our own skills and abilities or such programs for evangelism is a big part of why we are so reluctant to engage in it.

Not to mention that it is becoming painfully obvious that these programs are no longer very effective.

Now I don't mean to be overly critical of these programs and efforts – God has certainly made use of them... and they can become very effective when they are providing a structure for people to use the grace-gift of Evangelism.

But their growing ineffectiveness in our current context highlights that people forget it's the Holy Spirit working, not the program. And it's a reminder for us as a church to refocus on asking the Holy Spirit to equip people in our congregation - with the grace-gift of evangelism.

Yes, we all have a responsibility as followers of Jesus to live out our faith, and as Peter instructs us *“be prepared to give the reason for the hope that you have.”* (1 Peter 3:15)

But sharing good news which results in joy and salvation - that is a specific grace-gift and we haven't all received that gift.

So – that is good news too isn't it. No more pressure trying to convince people to accept Jesus, no more worrying about how many people you can claim to have led to the Lord...

Instead you can pray that the Holy Spirit will give more people at Valleyview this grace-gift... and keep in mind the Holy Spirit may gift you for this task! You see it may not be your gift now – but the Spirit can always give you more gifts than what you already have.

So you can't avoid the responsibility to share your faith with others or contribute to the Church's mission of making disciples because "*evangelism's not my gift.*" Try asking the Holy Spirit for it – you might be pleasantly surprised at what happens.

If the Spirit does gift you in this way you will notice a marked difference from before when you were afraid to evangelize, or when you depended using a program or method, or you simply weren't effective.

Instead you'll find that you'll share good news stories about what Jesus is doing in your life, in other peoples' lives, or in our church...

and the good news will be a bit different each time because different people need to hear different things to welcome the

good news and put their faith in Jesus – and the Holy Spirit knows exactly what that is.

You don't have to worry about covering all the four spiritual laws, or whether or not you lead them in a sinner's prayer... that sort of material is for those with the gifts of pastoring and teaching to take care of later on.

Just share whatever good news story about Jesus that the Holy Spirit prompts you to share and you'll know the Spirit is at work when you see it bring joy into their lives.

So – the gift of Evangelism... not so awkward or scary anymore is it? Why wouldn't you want to be an evangelist? The bearer of good news that brings great joy!

(It means you'll have good looking feet – Isaiah 52:7 says: How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news)

But seriously - wouldn't you want to have a gift from the Holy Spirit which enables you to effectively cut through suffering,

skepticism, doubt, polite disinterest and powerfully share the good news about Jesus with those who don't believe in him? Especially in a time right now when good news and joy seems to be so hard to come by?

Brothers and sisters, please... pray to receive the Gift of Evangelism, pray that many people in our Church would receive and use this grace gift, and that it we would have opportunities to use it to take the Blessing Project to the next level that God has planned for us. It will help us be more effective in reaching and blessing people in our community.

But it's not just about the non-believers... Christians need evangelism just as much as non-Christians do – because evangelism is about good news that brings great joy.

We all need to hear the stories of good news about what Jesus is doing... that is why we have been sharing the Blessing stories on Sundays. Did you know that everyone who has shared a blessing story was doing Evangelism when they shared that story?

Think back – what was your most blessed blessing story that you heard? Which one was it that encouraged you to go and do a blessing project?

Personally, I never get tired of telling the story about how the project got started because of someone who saw one of our signs that got thrown in a ditch and how he retrieved it, set it up and again called us up because he had some money that he wanted to give to us so we could help him help other people. That was good news. That was good news that gives us joy!

So we need our evangelists to evangelize us as well – to pile on the stories of good news, keep'em coming, because it adds to our joy – it increases our joy.

And we need joy friends because the scripture tells us "*the Joy of the Lord is our strength*" (Neh 8:10)

It's what keeps us grinning from ear-to-ear in spite of whatever we may be going through... and that will cause a lot of people to ask us for an explanation of the hope we have in us.

And the explanation is that we're always hearing good news about what Jesus has done and is doing – and we'll end up sharing the stories we've heard...

And this is how the Holy Spirit can give opportunities for non-evangelists to share good news – and suddenly we are extending the reach of our evangelists.

What they've shared - carries on through us and brings joy to even more people.

So, we need our evangelists, we need evangelism... just as much as non-Christians do – because the good news of evangelism strengthens us with joy!

So brothers and sisters – Are you starting to think, maybe I kind of want this gift?? I pray that it is so, I pray that you will ask for this gift, that our church will be abundantly blessed with it – because the gift of good news, evangelism is sorely needed these days...

I don't even have to tell you look around – I know you are seeing and feeling it everyday. As the scriptures say *“the fields are ripe for harvest, but the workers are few- pray that the Lord of the harvest would send out his workers.”* (Matt 9:37)

Brother and sisters, I know that if we ask in Jesus name, His Spirit will give us this gift - the gift of good news – that will bring about a great harvest of faith in Jesus Christ as savior and Lord.

After all – that's the gift that started Christmas – good news of great joy that will be for all the people!

Amen.