

Calm and Bright - Glories Stream - Psalm 86:9-11, Luke 2:8-14

Norwalk Christian Church, December 9, 2018, Calm and Bright Series, Advent 2, Year A

Clark Griswold tried as hard as he could to have the perfect, old-fashioned, family Christmas. But nothing went as planned. I should pause for a public service announcement: if you haven't seen the best Christmas movie of all time, *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, well, then too bad, I'll try not to ruin every plot line.

I wrote about my love of this movie in the Church Newsletter last year, and several of you shared your love of this movie, so I know there are some fans out there. But for those who haven't seen it, I should say it is not always appropriate for young ears, but it is always funny. And it's funny because everything goes wrong.

The Griswolds go to cut down their own Christmas Tree, but forget the saw. When they finally have the perfect tree decorated, it burns up. The Christmas bonus is cancelled. Cousin Eddie shows up. The visiting in-law families do not get along. There's a squirrel. Cat kibble jello. A dried-out turkey, and the pledge allegiance prayer.

Clark Griswold's perfect, old-fashioned, family Christmas is a mess.

The central scene of the movie is really a parable for the whole film, when Clark Griswold has decorated almost every square inch of his home with Christmas lights. When it's time to turn them on, the whole family gathers outside, in the cold on the lawn for the big reveal, and Carl is proud of his hard work.

"Two hundred and fifty strands of lights," Clark says, "for a grand total of 25,000 imported Italian twinkle lights." As the lights are about to be turned on in all their glory, Clark announces: "I dedicate this house to the Griswold family Christmas. Drum roll, please." And he starts singing, "Joy to the world."

And...and...nothing.

Not one strand of lights light up. Not one bulb glows. No light. No glory. No joy. Nothing.

And his father-in-law says, "I hope you kids see what a silly waste of resources this was." Nothing ever goes right with Clark Griswold.

And don't we know that feeling. Nothing seems to ever go right. Too often, we don't even take the risk, for the fear that things might go wrong. We give up because we try. What if we're not good enough? After all, who am I to experience joy? We sing, "Joy to the World", but joy can be so very hard to find.

Sometimes it seems like “Joy” is nothing but a “silly waste of resources.”

Foreboding Joy. That’s what Brené Brown calls it in her book *Daring Greatly*. “We’re always waiting for the other shoe to drop,” she says. “That expression is a relic of the past, originating in the early 1900s, when new immigrants and people flooding to the cities were crammed into tenement housing where you could literally hear your upstairs neighbor taking off his shoes at night. Once you hear the first shoe hit the floor you waited for the other shoe to drop.”

Some of us live our lives this way, waiting for the other shoe to drop. “We dress-rehearse tragedy,” Brené Brown writes, imagining something bad is going to happen when in reality, everything is good. But joy opens us up. It leaves us vulnerable, she says. And that vulnerability scares us. What if we lose the thing that brings us joy. And we miss out on the joy, waiting for the tragedy, waiting for the next shoe to drop.

In the first century, there were fewer people more vulnerable than shepherds. The Christmas Story shepherds are hired hands, not flock-owners. The lowest of low-wage workers, working all night watching someone else’s sleep.

Night is when we are the most vulnerable. When the light is not shining, and you can’t see what’s coming. When shadows appear as monsters and every sound is coming right for you.

These shepherds lived a vulnerable life right on the edge of society. But it is there, on the edge, that the angels appear. And they are terrified.

Wouldn’t you be? Surely they didn’t see this as a divine appearance--but something that might not only take the lives of their flock but their own lives as well.

And so the first words out of the angel’s mouths is, “Do not be afraid.”

Why? Because I’m bringing you good tidings of great joy. Wonderful, joyous news for all people! But if you want to experience the joy, you have to let go of the fear.

Fear makes us feel like we are on the edge. If we are jumpy already, anything that reeks at all of difference or change can feel like a threat. We get hyper-aware and on the look-out for the bad stuff we hear about every day, on the news, on our phones, seemingly everywhere.

Everything and everyone can be a threat seen through the eyes of fear. But it’s more than that, isn’t it? Because if we’ve ever experienced loss, if we’ve ever experienced pain, if we’ve ever failed, lost it all, opened ourselves up only to be let down--why would we want to take that risk again?

Isn't it easier to avoid the pain by missing out on the joy? You don't have to clean up afterwards if you never throw a party. You don't have to risk heartbreak if you never love. You don't have to worry if you never try again.

But you know what...Clark Griswold...he tries again. It's why this movie should be listed as one of the greats, because after every spectacular failure, he tries again and again. He checks every light bulb. And eventually, he find his dumb mistake and his how shines bright with glory.

And there's a lot of setbacks, and glorious failures, and he almost breaks down and calls the whole thing off--but in the end, in the ashes of a burnt up tree, there is joy.

“Silent night, holy night. Shepherds quake, at the sight. Glories stream from heaven afar. Heavenly hosts sing, ‘Alleluia’. Christ the Savior is born. Christ the Savior is born.”

The second verse of Silent Night is our theme today. It's why we've gone out of the traditional order of the Advent wreath and talked about Joy on the second Sunday of Advent instead of the third. But when does Joy ever come in the right order.

“Glories stream”, that's how the beloved Carol puts it. That's often how it is with joy. In the midst of darkness, after spectacular failure and deep disappointment, joy starts streaming in. Sometimes blinding, cracking through the darkness to shine it's light.

“Glory”, it's not a word we use a lot anymore. It's an Old Testament word. The ancient Hebrew texts are full of Glory. “Glory” often has to do with God's presence. When God is with the people, there is often a bright light that shines.

Throughout the scriptures, “glory” often has to do with “shining,” with light. God is light. God's presence, God's deliverance, God's strength is with us like a pillar of fire, or the burning bush, or, later in the story, a the star that is accompanied by the theatrics of angels bringing their singing to the shining.

But there's something more to this light, this glory. “Glories *stream*,” the carol says, but from where do they stream? *From heaven afar*. God's glory, streaming from heaven to earth.

The Glory *is* God's presence come near. It shines because God is here. The light not only points to God, the light *is* God.

And it seems bright and mighty, but if you come closer, you will see. The light is shining, not from some twinkling star or majestic angel, but from a newborn baby. Talk about vulnerability. What can be more vulnerable than a baby?

What set the heavens off that night, what shown the glory, what made the shepherds quake, what changed history, and has kept us singing “Joy to the World” from then until now, wasn’t angels or stars, but God coming near. God becoming a baby--one of us--risking it all, becoming human, God becoming vulnerable.

God’s risky vulnerability cracked open the heavens, and the glory streamed out and God as Christ became our light, shining in the darkness and in our hearts, lighting up the whole world, declaring throughout history--this is what Joy looks like. Joy has come into the world.

Do not be afraid. Open yourselves up. Take the journey to see joy.

It’s risky, but it is worth it. Joy is always worth it.