Sermon – Joy (Christmas in the Gospels)
Sunday December 14, 2025

Introduction

Did you know that there are over 1,000 diagnosed phobias? Some of them are a little… unusual. For example, there's…

- Anatidaephobia, the fear that somewhere, somehow, there's a duck watching you.
- Pteronophobia, the fear of being tickled by feathers.
- Arachibutyrophobia, the fear of peanut butter sticking to the room of your mouth.
- Chorophobia, the fear of dancing.

We can laugh at these fears – at least most of them, because they seem so ridiculous. But we all know that there are some fears that aren't so funny. Fears that keep us up at night.

- What if I lose my job?
- What if my kids make the wrong choices?
- What if I never find a relationship?
- What if I can't recover from this loss?
- What if I never feel close to God?

These fears:

- Tighten your chest and make your heart race
- Replay worst-case scenarios in your mind.
- Strain your relationships.
- And steal your joy.

And for many of us, Christmas doesn't silence those fears, it magnifies them. Because we find ourselves thinking about:

- the year that didn't go as we had hoped.
- tensions in our relationships.
- Financial pressures that strain us
- Uncertainty about the year ahead.

How do we find joy when our hearts are so heavy?

Sermon Series

We're in a series called *Christmas in the Gospels*. Over the next few weeks, we'll explore the Christmas story through the four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Each gospel gives us a unique perspective on who Jesus is and what his arrival means for us.

Now, when we think about Christmas, we tend to think of the familiar characters: Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, angels, and of course, baby Jesus. They're comforting. They're familiar. They're the people we sing about in carols and put on Christmas cards.

But today, we're going to look at a very different character—someone you don't usually hear about in Christmas sermons. He's not warm, he's not comforting, and he's certainly not on a Christmas card. His name is Herod. His story in Matthew 2 shows us something we're all too familiar with—fear, control and power.

Now in Matthew, when the Magi from the east arrive asking, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" what's Herod's response? He doesn't rejoice. He doesn't celebrate. What does he do? The Bible says:

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed… (Matthew 1:3)

Now the word *disturbed* doesn't really capture the true meaning. In the original Greek, the word Matthew uses is *tarasso* – everyone say *tarasso*.

Tarasso means to be shaken to the core, to be utterly unsettled, to feel like your world's been turned upside down. Herod's *tarasso* would drive him to paranoia, manipulation, and ultimately, violence.

But before we judge him too quickly, there's something we need to recognize: there's a Herod in all of us.

Not in the sense that we're going to slaughter babies, of course. But just like Herod, our fears can make us controlling and harsh. They'll distort out reality and steal our joy. And Herod shows us what happens when our fears rule our hearts; but the Christmas story shows us that there's another way.

What I want to do today is look at how Christmas speaks into our fear. We're going to talk about What Fear is, How we try to protect ourselves from it, And how we can move from fear into joy.

First, **What is Fear?**

Fear is one of the most primal human experiences we have. It's the feeling that rises up when something you love feels threatened. Because at its core, fear is the awareness that you're not in control.

We all know that feeling don't we? The voice in your heart that whispers:

- Something might go wrong
- Something might be taken from you
- And when it happens, you won't be able to handle it.

Fear shows up everywhere in the Christmas story. When the angel appears, Mary is afraid, Joseph is afraid, the shepherds are afraid.

Herod's fear is different though. When he hears about the baby born in Bethlehem, he's not just concerned, he's terrified. Why? Because this baby isn't just a child; it's a threat to everything he's built his life on.

You see, to understand this, we need to know a bit about Herod. Herod wasn't the rightful heir to the throne. In fact, he wasn't even a Jew – he was a descendant of Edom, a people who had been forced to convert to Judaism a few generations earlier.

This means that Herod wasn't the legitimate king; he had only become king by aligning himself with Rome through alliances, politics, and force. Deep down Herod knew this. He knew he didn't belong. And his fear exposed the cracks in his identity.

This hit close to home for me this past year. Because after 19 years of serving as the Group Life Pastor at Cornerstone, I stepped into the role of Discipleship Pastor. Now I knew that it came with a lot of weight. I knew there would be:

- More responsibilities to manage.
- New challenges to navigate.
- Tough decisions to make.

And the question that kept haunting me was: *Do I have what it takes?*

- Can I do the role?
- Can I manage the responsibilities?
- Will my relationships change? Will people see me differently? Will I feel lonely and isolated?
- What will happen if I fail and fail publicly?

On the outside, I was doing my best to navigate this transition. But on the inside, it was exposing cracks in my identity and revealing fears I didn't know were there.

Deep down, a part of me wondered: *What if I don't belong? What if I'm not enough? What if one day people see the real me and are disappointed?*

Maybe you know that feeling too.

- Feeling like your accomplishments aren't enough.
- Worrying that eventually someone will discover you're "faking it."
- Feeling inadequate at work or in your relationships—even though you're trying your best.
- Constantly comparing yourself to others and always feeling like you come up short.
- Wondering if you have what it takes.

We have a name for this. (Does anyone know what it's called?) Impostor syndrome.

Impostor syndrome is the nagging feeling that you're living your life is on shaky ground. That deep down you're not enough and one day people will find out.

Herod felt it. I've felt it. And maybe you have too.

So **How do we try to protect ourselves from fear?**

Our natural response is self-protection. Herod tried everything to protect his throne.

- He built fortresses along the eastern border to protect against his enemies.
- He completed public projects to appease the people.
- He even killed family members he believed were threats to his power.

And then the Magi come asking about the true king? So what does Herod do? He tells them:

Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him. (Matthew 1:8)

Of course, this is all about control and manipulation. He's only pretending to worship the child while secretly he's plotting to kill him. And when the Magi don't return, he loses it and orders the killing of all the boys in Bethlehem under two. Fear often turns destructive.

Now Herod's actions may be extreme, but doesn't fear drive us to want to take control of our lives?

Controlling other people

Raise your hand if you know someone who's always trying to control other people? I said raise your hand, not point at them! Maybe you feel like someone's always trying to control you. Or maybe if you're honest, you're the one who tries to control others.

Here's the thing. People who try to control others are almost always deeply afraid. They have a voice that says:

If I don't manage this, everything will fall apart. The people I care about will make the wrong choices. Bad things will happen if I don't step in.

Does that sound familiar?

But trying to control people almost never makes things better, in fact it usually makes things worse. Because the more you push people, the more you push them away. After all, who likes being controlled? No one. Trying to control people only leaves them feeling resentful. What starts off as "care" for you usually turns into conflict for them.

Controlling circumstances

Some of us respond to fear by trying to control our circumstances. We plan, we strategize, we try to think ten steps ahead. Because we think:

If I can predict every possible scenario and outcome and plan everything perfectly, nothing will ever go wrong.

We try to plan every detail, anticipate every problem and control every outcome – believing that our plans will protect us. Does that work? Of course preparation is good, but when it's driven by fear, it will drain you. You'll end up exhausted, anxious and disappointed.

Why? Because life rarely works out the way you want it to. That's just reality. People will surprise you. Unexpected things will happen. Plans will fall apart. And if your security is based on everything working out perfectly, all it will take is one unexpected moment to send your world crashing down.

Controlling image

Fear can also drive us to control how others see us. We hide our mistakes, we overperform at work or at home and we present a polished version of ourselves on social media.

Because we think: *If people see the real me, they won't like me. So I'll just create an image that they will like.*

But controlling our image is exhausting. It keeps us performing, it keeps us from truly knowing ourselves and it keeps us from making real connections.

So whether we're controlling people, our circumstances or our image, the pattern is the same: **Fear drives control, and control always makes things worse**. It escalates anxiety, strains relationships, and steals our joy.

So if trying to protect ourselves and control our situations doesn't work, **How do you move from fear into joy?**

Matthew 2 is really a story about two different kingdoms.

Herod represents the kingdom of the world. He lives in a palace, commands armies and eliminates threats. His kingdom is built on power and control. This is the kingdom all of us were living in.

Then there's Jesus. He represents the kingdom of God. He comes into the world as a defenseless baby. He's born to teenage parents with no status, wealth or influence.

He would grow up teaching that those who want to be great must become a servant, those that want to be first, must be last, those who want to enter God's kingdom must be like a child.

He would eventually die on a cross. Even though he had all authority and power, and could have called down his angel armies to stop it all, did he use that power? No, instead he chose the path of weakness, humiliation and suffering. Not because he was powerless but because this is what true power looks like in God's kingdom - where strength comes through weakness.

And here's what it all comes down to: **If Jesus really is the true King, then you and I no longer have the right to be the king of our own lives.**

In other words, the kingdom of the world is a kingdom of power and control. It's a kingdom of striving and fear. It's a kingdom that leads to fear, loss and ultimately death.

But here's the good news, you were made for another kingdom. You were made for a kingdom where greatness is found in service, where strength is found in weakness, where joy is found in surrender.

Jesus invites you to enter into this kingdom, into his kingdom, the kingdom of God. How will you respond?

You could respond like Herod. You could see Jesus as a threat to your throne. You could hold on tighter to your power. You could shut yourself off from the One who wants to give you joy.

Or you could respond like the Magi. People who had spent their whole lives searching for meaning. And when they heard about a child who might be the true King, they didn't ignore it, they didn't hold on to their comfort, they didn't cling to their status—they set out to find this king.

- They searched for him, following his light.
- They bowed down before Him - humbling themselves and letting go of control.
- They worshipped Him – recognizing his beauty and authority.
- They gave Him gifts - offering all they had as an act of allegiance and trust.

And what happened? Matthew tells us, they were **overjoyed**. Because in Jesus they had finally found what you and I have been longing for – true meaning, true purpose and true joy.

For many of us, this season doesn't always feel joyful. Some of you feel heavy. You're worried about your family, your future or your finances. You're overwhelmed and exhausted. You're running on fumes and wondering how much more you can take.

So how do you move from fear to joy?

You respond like the Magi.

- You seek the true king, even when all you can see is a little light.
- You bow down, surrendering your need to be in control.
- You worship, turning your heart away from fear and toward God's love.
- You offer Him your life, giving him all you have as an expression of your allegiance and love.

And what happens when you do that? You'll discover joy.

- Not a joy that depends on proving you're strong, but a joy that comes from admitting you're weak.
- Not a joy that depends on holding onto power, but a joy that comes from letting go of control.
- Not a joy that depends on striving and earning, but a joy that comes from receiving it as a gift.

So this Christmas, you don't have to cling to fear, control, or performance. Come to the true King. Let Him meet you in your weakness. And receive from him the joy that comes from perfect love—a love that takes away our fear.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank you that you are a good God. A God of joy. A God of hope. A God who understands what each one of us is going through. We come before you believing that you are at work in the world and in our lives - even now, working your good purposes for us. We need your strength, we need your love, we need your joy,

So opening our hands in a posture of surrender, Jesus, we lay down our cares at your feet. We lay down our need to control people, our lives and our image. We lay down our hearts, our fears and our dreams. We lay down everything our hearts are holding onto and release them to you.

And as we lay these things down, we ask that you would teach us to trust you, that you would give us your peace, that you would fill us with your joy.

Perhaps some of us here are like Herod, pretending to worship you while deep down, we want to protect our throne, stay in control and live the lives we want to live. The Bible calls this sin.

But thank you Jesus for reminding us this morning that you came into the world, not so we could have Christmas parties and presents, but so that you could rescue us from our sin and from our fears. By being the perfect sacrifice for us through your death on the cross.

So that we could receive your forgiveness, your new life and your joy. The Bible says that if we confess our sins, You are faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Maybe today the Spirit is convicting some of you that the fear you're experiencing comes from trying to build your own kingdom and protect your own throne. And the life you truly want, a life of purpose, love and joy can only be found in Jesus, the one who came in weakness.

But to receive this gift, you need to give up your thrown, lay down your crown and give Jesus your life. And if that's what you want, with everyone's eyes closed, would you raise your hand.

And now, in solidarity with everyone here let's all join together in prayer. Repeat after me:

Heavenly father, thank you for sending your Son Jesus. Thank you that he came as a baby in weakness. Thank you that he went to the cross to die for my sins. I confess my sins now. Cleanse me and make me new. Fill me with your spirit so I can live for you and for your kingdom. Transform me to become more like Jesus as I follow him every day. Thank you for new life, I give you all of mine.

And now we pray that you would be glorified in our lives, in our church and in our world, today and every day – and all God's people said…

Amen