

# UNSPEAKABLE JOY

**Rev. Dr. Lora F. Hargrove**

*“... Unspeakable joy - a joy that only You can give, a joy that only You can sustain, a joy that only You can explain - in Jesus’ name. Amen. Amen.”*

I taught you a song last week on peace and I need to let you know that that song has two other verses - the second verse is on joy. So, I’m hoping you’re gonna go with me just for a moment that we might set the atmosphere even more for God’s word on today. We sang last week about peace. I have wondrous peace. Singing ...

*I have joy, unspeakable joy in my heart today  
I have joy, unspeakable joy in my heart to stay  
And there’s nothing in this world that can take it away.*

*I have joy, unspeakable joy in my heart today  
(Come on, sing that with me)*

*I have joy, unspeakable joy in my heart today  
I have joy, unspeakable joy in my heart to stay  
And there’s nothing in this world that can take it away.*

*I have joy, unspeakable joy in my heart today.*

The scripture has been read in your hearing from the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke. I just want to lift some verses that we did not hear.

Luke 2:8-18; 20 - “Now, there were shepherds in the same country living out in the fields keeping watch over their flock by night and behold, the angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them *do not be afraid for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people for there is born to you this day in the City of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.* And suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host praising God and saying *glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men.* So it was when the angels had gone away from them into heaven that the shepherds said to one another *let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass which the Lord has made known to us,* and they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen him, they made widely known the thing which was told them concerning this child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told to them by the shepherds.” Verse 20 says, “and then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told to them.” I’d like you to meditate with me for just a few moments on the subject of Unspeakable Joy.

There have been quite a few well written open letters to the President of the United States from young people, African-Americans, in particular, all over this country as they have addressed the state

of our nation from their perspective. They have been riveting, they have grabbed certainly not just my attention, but the attention of many. We came together on last Sunday and talked about the importance of us standing together as a people and doing something, even if your something is not marching, even if your something is not protesting, that you do something because our lives matter just as much as anybody else's does, and so we are, hallelujah happy and peacock proud to see many of you all in black doing something to say that black lives matter to you. But on December 6<sup>th</sup>, as many open letters have been written to the President, a letter appeared in the Guardian news outlet that was not an open letter to the President, but a letter about the President and a visit to the Oval Office by young people - mostly black young people. It was a meeting that the President called not of high powered individuals, but of unknown youth around the country so that the President could hear them up close and personal and this is what they heard as recorded by one of the attendees.

**What President Obama Told Me About Ferguson's Movement - Think Big, But Go Gradual**

*When my fellow young leaders and I walked into the Oval Office this week, we felt empowered and powerless at the same time. The President said we shouldn't demand too much too soon.*

*On Monday, representatives from a community in active struggle against state sanctioned killing, violence and repression met with the President of the United States of America. Not "civil rights leaders," "not activists," not "spokespeople." This wasn't a group of "Beltway Blacks," this wasn't a delegation of "respectable Negroes," this wasn't an assemblage of "yes men and women."*

*"We" were from Missouri (Ashley Yates, Brittany Packnett, T Dubb-O, Rasheen Aldridge); from Ohio (James Hayes); from New York (José Lopez); and from Florida me (that's Phillip Agnew). It all happened quickly and, yes, we were all skeptical.*

*We all knew that the White House stood to benefit more from this meeting than we did. We knew that our movement families would fear the almighty co-opt and a political press photo-op. We have been underestimated at every juncture, sometimes from all sides. But this was an invitation that you accept - period.*

*The invitation was extended with a clear goal: the president wanted to hear about what was going on around the country. We answered that call with clarity and brutal honesty.*

*No amount of rehearsal or choreography can truly prepare you for the tense moments standing outside the door of the Oval Office. Nerves raced through my body. I looked at the faces in our delegation. If anxiety was present in any of them, it didn't show.*

*The door opened, we sat down, exchanged cordialities and went to work.*

*Brittany, director of St. Louis Teach for America, opened and recounted a speech she delivered to her students, on the eighth day of August, imploring them to stand tall and be affirmed leaders only to find that, after the ninth day of August, none of that mattered in the eyes of the state.*

*"The first time I was tear-gassed on the streets of St. Louis was with an eighth grader," Brittany said.*

*Rasheen, who at 20 years old is the youngest member of the Ferguson Commission, told the president that his fight did not begin on the day Michael Brown died - that he had been committed to the struggle of poor people long before the state killed another unarmed black man.*

*T Dubb-O, the artist, activist and community voice, laid out with pain and poetic prose how life in St. Louis isn't life but an existence of survival, where none of the "hope" and "progress" of which the president spoke is evident at all.*

*"I'm tired of rapping about pain and survival," T Dubb-O said.*

*José Lopez spoke of a 10-year old in New York, one of over 17,000 members of Make the Road New York, who – at a school rally in support of the police – refused to celebrate, who spoke out about the fear that they had put in her heart. This 10-year-old girl now faces expulsion.*

*James Hayes came from Ohio to the Oval Office, and he brought John Crawford and Tamir Rice along with him – delivering their eulogy in his introduction.*

*I brought my mother, my father and my four brothers: Jordan Davis, Israel Hernandez, West Englewood and Trayvon Martin.*

*Ashley brought home our tale of two countries – of the "other America" – telling the President that women – women like Sasha and Malia – are standing on the front lines, facing the full fury of an oppressive state.*

*And in the streets, Ashley said, "Silence is betrayal."*

*We told President Obama that we were not the "People's Spokespeople." We told him that we had neither the power, positions nor desires to stop the eruptions in the streets and that they would continue until a radical change happened in this country. We told him that we had no faith in anything, church or state. We told him that the country was on the brink and that nothing short of major capitulations at all levels of government to the demands of the people could prevent it. Straight talk like that.*

*We asked for the president to utilize his pulpit to spark the governmental culture shift that this movement calls for. We told him to end the Department of Defense's 1033 Program, to end federal funding to police departments with histories of discrimination, harassment and murder. We beseeched President Obama to invest in community-based alternatives to policing and incarceration and challenged him on the lack of data on the state's systematic and under reported killings of unarmed black and Latino people.*

*He listened intently. He responded passionately. He agreed with many of our points and offered his take on the current State of the Union. He presented the reforms that have dominated the discourse in the hours after our meeting. He cautioned us against demanding too big and stressed gradualism. He counseled us that the wheels of progress turn sluggishly and reminded us of the progress that got us to this point: a room full of black folk in the Oval Office. He asked for our help, harkening*

*back to his organizing days when, in the streets of Chicago, the cries of the people shifted the landscape. We debated on the power of the vote and the lack of faith in the Democratic Party.*

*We did not budge.*

*Only time will tell whether the stories of Renisha, Tamir, Mike, Eric, John, Aiyana and others will shape the course of history in policy, practice or culture. No one knows whether our “impactful” meeting with this nation’s first black president will yield any change that people in Ferguson or Flint or Chicago can feel. It is yet to be seen, though one can hypothesize, what will come of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing.*

*We walked out of that meeting unbought and unbowed. We held no punches. There was no code-switching or bootlicking; no concessions, politicking or posturing. The movement got us to this meeting. Unrest earned this invite and we cannot stop.*

*If we don’t get what we came for, we will shut it down. President Obama knows that and we know it. No meeting can stop that.*

I thought that that was an important letter to share because while we love our President and we do and while we pray for our President and we do, some of us sometimes forget that our President is still the government and not God and so, therefore, we need to be able to speak truth to power, even if that power is in the face of a black man sitting in the Oval Office. We thank God for God placing him there, we thank God for what God is doing with him in there, but we are at a point in time in our history where we need to be able to pull off the rose-colored glasses and see our situation for exactly what it is.

His hands are bound in so many ways, but our hands are not. His mouth is bound because of the office that he sits in, but our mouths are not. This is not an indictment on the man - it is an indictment on the office. I want you to hear me clearly. And I’m so glad that we had people that are considered “nobodies” that are considered on the lowest rung of society that were able to go in and speak their minds and stand their ground and say what it is that they needed to say in order for movement to begin to happen because you know that we have a history, even in our culture, that children are seen but they are not heard. Well, I’m here to tell you that there are some children that are now being seen and heard, even in the midst of the march that happened on yesterday, and we thank God for doing something. Don’t get me wrong. But when there is battling back and forth between the old guard and the new guard, and the old guard doesn’t want to let go and doesn’t want to let the new guard in for a new day of what it is that is happening to our people, we still got problems that we need to work out. We still have things that we need to unpack. We still have situations that we need to call to task, and if we can’t do it as a church, who can do it?

It broke my heart to hear these young people talk about the fact that they have lost hope. I don’t really care about the government losing hope in the government - ‘cause your hope shouldn’t be there anyway, but that they’ve lost faith. I want these young people to understand that there are people of faith who understand where they are, who understand where we need to go and who will not stop doing what thus saith the Lord until it gets done!

Luke's gospel reminds us in a similar way that although the government has an agenda - at the beginning of this Book, everybody was called to be taxed, everybody was called to go to their own towns for the government's agenda, but I need somebody to understand on this Lord's day that God's got an agenda that'll trump the government's agenda every time.

And in Luke's gospel, we come from Luke's perspective which is an agenda of inclusion on the part of God. God's agenda is an agenda of community. It is an agenda of working together. It is an agenda of the South African concept of Ubuntu which simply means that as individuals we cannot express ourselves by ourselves; as individuals who are a part of humanity, we can only be who God has called us to be in relationship to one another. That's a fancy way of saying, "I need you and you need me," and we need each other if we are going to get through this challenge of racial decline that we find ourselves in. It is that interdependence that God has in mind by creating us in His image and in His likeness, and that is the means by which Ubuntu talks about how we will be empowered by the Holy Spirit - just like these young people who met with the President.

Whether they knew it or not, they were empowered by a Spirit that they have yet to understand fully. They were empowered because the Holy Spirit that I know doesn't just function in the four walls of a church building. The Holy Ghost that I'm familiar with functions outside the walls of the church, functions in the Oval Office, functions in Congress, even when it looks like it's all going down like four flat tires. The Holy Ghost can pull it back together and set us on the path of unity in our community - even in the face of unwavering faith because I don't believe that these young people have no faith. I believe that they are in a place where their faith is faltering and if you tell the truth this afternoon, as believers in Jesus Christ, we have all had personal, private situations - we might not have told nobody else where we wavered in our faith.

We wondered whether or not God was really going to come through for us and I'm here to tell you that God can work with you even when your faith is wavering. God can do something with you even when you're on the edge of faith and on the edge of the dark of night, God can turn it around and bring it back full force because that's just the kind of God that we serve.

Even in the face of wavering faith, we'll still be able to carry out courageous acts of good works when you know that the Holy Spirit is at work *in* your good works, especially when those good works are toward the poor and the oppressed. The Bible says in the same country, there were shepherds living out in the fields watching over their flock by night. Well, I would contend that there are sentinels in Ferguson living in the field that took to watching over their flock both day and night.

Both shepherds and sentinels were keeping watch over the sheep; the shepherds because their sheep needed tending and care, and someone to watch over them, but the young sentinels around this country, because they recognize that black and brown sheep need to have someone to care for them as they care for themselves. There need to be those who are willing to be watchmen and watch women on the wall for the cause of Christ. That is exactly what it is that we are seeing. No matter what place you may find them in, no matter whether or not they, like the shepherds, are at the bottom of the social rung. Their age puts them there, their activism puts them there. Truth be told, if you

ask the dominant culture in America, we all at the bottom rung whether we got a Ph.D., an MD or no D behind our name. As far as they are concerned, black folks are at the bottom of the barrel.

Young people are viewed like the shepherds were viewed - despite their good deeds, despite what they tried to do - despised because they were marginalized because of their message and their mission, but yet they both have a Maya Angelou *Still I Rise* kind of mentality. Why did God make His presence known to the shepherds out of all of the people that God could have shown God's self to with the birth of the baby Jesus? Why did the Lord decide to reach out to those at the bottom of society's barrel? Why? To bring validation to the message of joy for all people - everybody! Who better to carry such a powerful message that God's got joy for all people but those who are minimalized and marginalized?

There is no politician, no political pundit that could have delivered the message that these young people delivered in the Oval Office better than they did. God has a way, y'all, of pulling the unknown out of obscurity for such a time as this to accomplish God's goals on God's behalf and for God's purposes. Nobody had heard of the Reverend Traci Blackmon until Ferguson happened and this Pastor-sister has been on the ground, on the front lines from day one, not for a spotlight but so that justice might be served - fighting for justice for her community because that's what God called her to do.

There are many others in our midst, some sitting right here in this congregation doing your part on behalf of the Lord your God to make sure that black lives do matter. In the midst of this "Black Lives Matter" Sunday and in the midst of this Advent season - a season that's supposed to be a season of anticipation - we are looking in the face of so much agony. We are face-to-face with so much pain. So how do you still have joy? How do you still have joy when there seems to be so much that is not joyful happening all around? It's not just what's on the national scene, it's not just what's on the local scene. Truth be told, as good as y'all look in your black today, as wonderful as you came in the doors lifting holy hands and praising God, there's some things going on in your own life, in your own family that you would rather not talk about because it's agonizing and it's painful and you are sitting there trying to figure out how in the world are you going to have joy when I've got all this other stuff swirling around me. How am I still going to have joy when I don't even feel like getting out of bed? How will I have joy when I don't have two nickels to rub together? How will I have joy?

I've been asking myself the same question. How will we make our way toward joy? And I would submit to you that Jesus has got a way because Jesus is the way. That's how you get a hold of joy - when you make Jesus the center *of* your joy. Oh, yes you can and yes, you will have joy if you want it. When you hold on to God's unchanging hand, you may have tears streaming down, you may have a headache for 11 days, you may have financial issues that you cannot work out - all I got to say to you is *but God, but God will step in and fix it up and turn it around*. It may be tough, but God will take your frown and turn it upside down 'cause that's just how good God is. Ahh, but joy in the face of difficulty - the difficulty in our community and the agony of our brothers and sisters, even in the midst of that, we can walk in the spirit of Ubuntu where not only black lives out there matter but black lives right in here matter.

What am I saying? It's great that we can stand for the cause. It's great that we can fight the good fight for the cause of our community and for the cause of our people. We need to fight the good fight, we need to pick up the banner and run with it. But not to the point where we skip over the fact that there are still people that we ain't talking to right here in the sanctuary. There's still people that you pass by in God's house - may be you didn't hear me on that - in the House of the Lord because you've got an attitude and an issue, because you've got a situation, because you've been sucking on lemons - I don't know, but you cannot be authentic out there, hashtagging yourself that black lives matter from sun up to sundown and talking about your brothers and your sisters in Christ right here at 608 North Horners Lane like it was all right, like it's acceptable.

If you're going to do Ubuntu out there, I recommend that we start practicing it in here with each other whatever the issue is. I don't care who was right or who was wrong.

Don't you want to have a different Christmas this year? Don't you want to be able to move into Christmas being able to say to the Lord I have forgiven every wrong done against me and not only have I forgiven it, but I pray that the wrong I've done to somebody else is forgiven against me. It's about practicing. Practicing what it is we preach. Knowing what we should do and actually doing it are two different things.

We find the shepherds on the night shift minding their own business of keeping their heads above water, making a way when they can. Y'all, they had a rough job. They were at the bottom of the ladder, bottom of the rung for the social status of their day. But, they came to find a miracle in the mundane. An angel stood before them and the up close presence of God was shining all around them and they were scared out of their minds, but the angel said to them *do not be afraid because I bring you good news of great joy for ALL people*. It was the birth announcement of the century. It was the announcement of the birth of 8 lbs, 6 oz Jesus! Although their lives were hard and they may have been hardened, although their lives were mundane, probably with very little to be joyful about, they were the ones that were given the gift of joy in spite of themselves. They were given *nevertheless* joy, they were given *anyhow* joy, they were given *in spite of* joy. It came in the form of God informing them of God's *no respecter of person* policy.

If God would make God's self attainable and available to the very least and the left out, surely this God is a God who will make Himself available to you and available to me. That's why this joy is unspeakable joy because it's joy that you can't explain it, but joy that once you attain just a little bit of it, you can barley contain yourself. Let me tell you three quick things that this joy will do and I'm going to take my seat. This joy - **this unspeakable joy - is the joy that saves**. In the midst of sin, it saves. In the midst of heartache, it saves. That's the reason why Jesus was born - to save us from ourselves. While we were yet sinners, the Word says, Christ died for us, but guess what, He could not have died unless He had been born and so, I've got to thank Him on the front end before I start praising Him on the back end. The Word says *born to you this day is a Savior*.

It is joy that saves - **this joy unspeakable is also joy that sees**. It sees possibilities in the midst of problems and pain and as painful as the article was that I just read, in some ways it helps us to see that a new day is possible, that new possibilities are possible.

See, when the shepherds were told that they had been given good news of great joy - after they got over their fear - they said to each other *now, let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass that the Lord has made known to us*. Honey, joy will make you see stuff you ain't never seen before. Joy will make you see through the pain over to the possibilities, and that ain't nothing but the Lord's doing. Not only does He make you to see and make me to see what we have not seen before, you looked at your situation and saw a problem. He looked at your situation and saw a promotion. You looked at your situation and saw failure. He looked at your situation and saw favor. He will make you see what you have not seen before. And not only will God do that, He not only will make you see, He is the God *that* sees! Go ask Hagar about it while she was wandering in the wilderness, God stopped her just to tell her *Baby, I see you!!*

I need somebody to know this afternoon, even in your obscurity, even though you think you can't be seen on the back row in the balcony, God sees you! He sees your pain. He sees your strain. He sees your heartache. He sees all of that, but He also sees what is possible to he and she that believes. He is a God who gives unspeakable joy - **joy that saves, joy that sees - oh, yes it is.**

**But finally, it's joy that celebrates.**

The reason that that pink candle was lit on this Sunday is because the third Sunday of Advent is known as Gaudete Sunday - in other words, it is Latin for "rejoice." It's because during the Advent season, I know we stay focused on the birth of Christ, but very much like the Lenten season, it's supposed to be a season for you to take stock of yourself. It's supposed to be a season for us to be penitential before God, but this Sunday - Rejoice Sunday - is a Sunday where you're 'posed to put that sadness aside and get to rejoicing with the Lord your God because there is much to rejoice for, there is much to rejoice in and rejoicing is just a different way of saying celebrating. It is a Sunday where we lift up praise to God for the joy of God's redemption.

Even today as we mourn our young black men and women who have laid down their lives, lost their lives, we can rejoice in the fact that 'though we are mourning the dead black youth in our midst, we can rejoice in the delivering power of Almighty God. I don't know about you, but I want to rejoice in God my Savior. I know I'm skipping forward a little bit, but after this scripture we just read, Mary steps in with the Magnificat where she lets you know *I rejoice in God my Savior because He has looked down upon me in my lonely estate and has picked me up, turned me around and placed my feet on solid ground*. That's the hard groove remix of the Magnificat, but let me tell you this - even though we came dressed in black, even though we mourn there, we don't mourn as those who have no hope. We are the redeemed of the Lord and the redeemed of the Lord ought to say so. As a matter of fact, because we have the joy that saves and the joy that sees, when we get to the celebration, we find out that they went - the shepherds went - to behold the Christ Child for all people. They went on your behalf and they went on my behalf. They went for the oppressed and the depressed. They went for the downtrodden. They went for the rich and they went for the poor. They went for all people because they were given the gift of this announcement to spread the news and to tell it.

The Bible says that Mary pondered all of this in her heart. Mary, like many other women, was on the front lines in biblical times and in our time but I wonder whether or not you recognize the fact that there were female shepherds on the front lines of biblical history.

If you jump back to Genesis 29:29, we're told that Rachel was tending her father's sheep - that ain't nothing but a shepherd. If you jump over to Exodus, we are reminded that Moses met his wife as she came out to draw water for her father's sheep - that ain't nothing but a shepherd. And as I came on this Lord's day, I decided I was going to prove to y'all that at least some of the shepherds in Luke's text had to be women.

I was reminded that verse 20 tells me that when the shepherds, after they had seen all that they needed to see, after they had heard everything that God wanted them to hear, they went back, they returned glorifying and praising God. I just want to let you know that the brothers are much more reserved than that. I believe, Pastor, that the male shepherds, when they saw the miracle in the manger, Jesus, when they heard the Word from the angel, and were engulfed by the heavenly choir nodded their heads acknowledging what had just happened by saying "*dat's all right...yeah...I'm gonna give God mad props on dat right there.*"

But the sister-shepherds? I do believe one picked up a tambourine, others went to praising, jumping, and shouting their troubles over while the brothers gave a high-five and said *all glory be to God* because He is the God of unspeakable joy. Are there any female shepherds in the house that wanna let God know that you've got unspeakable joy? Are there any cool brothers in the house donning your black that wanna give Jesus a high-five and a head nod to let the Lord know that YOU know what's up? I don't know about you, but I need some of God's unspeakable joy on this afternoon. As a matter of fact, I feel pretty good - I ain't got no more headache now. Maybe, I just needed to get the Word out. So, we thank God for God and God alone.

Come on and give Him some praise - unspeakable joy. Can't explain it, but you can attain it, but it's there nevertheless. Joy, joy gentlemen! Joy, joy women! Boys and girls, joy, joy! God's great joy. Joy, joy in my soul. Hallelujah! The doors of the church are open if you're able to stand to your feet. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! If you're able on this afternoon, if you're here today and you have never given Jesus a head nod to accept Him as Savior, if you have never praised your way into salvation, today would be a good day to give God your heart and allow God to give you unspeakable joy in return.

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