

Good News of Great Joy by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV)

The Birth of Jesus

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, *“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”* And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, *“Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”* So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Good News of Great Joy

What are some of your favorite things about Christmas?

Christmas Lights?
Family gatherings?
Gift giving?
Eggnog?
Cheesy Hallmark movies?

I love all these things (well...most of them), but for me it's singing the great carols like *Joy to the World*, including the fun "*heaven and nature sing*" and "*Repeat the sounding joy*" parts.

I'm a stickler for waiting until after Thanksgiving to sing the carols, but it's just so joyous to sing:

Hark the Herald Angels Sing
Away in a Manger
We Three Kings
Deck the Halls

... and many more. I love singing carols with all of you in worship or when we go out caroling to our shut ins. I love singing *Silent Night* with candle in hand in the darkness. There's something magical and mysterious about singing together, visiting one another, smiling together, and enjoying the hope of salvation—God with us! It's about the joy that's come into our lives, into our world. The joy that God loves us so much that he gave.

The good news is that God is a joyful God and a gift-giving God. God gives the gift of ... himself.

Even for God it's more joyful to give than to receive. And through Christ, he invites us to share in this abundant, joyful life. The birth of Christ to me, means the arrival of

Salvation
Forgiveness
Innocence returned
Hope
Another chance
The possibility of change
A fresh start and new life breaking forth from the old
The promise of peace
The preciousness of relationships

The comfort and sheer audacity that God cares so much about us that he became one of us to show us the way to him.

But joy isn't just a song or a seasonal thing—it's also a decision, a way of life. Joy is an intentional act and sometimes you have to do a bit of searching for it before you find it.

Some missionaries experienced this challenge when they were translating the Bible into an Eskimo dialect. There was no real word in Eskimo for joy. So the translators had to find a different concept to communicate the meaning of joy. They searched and studied the culture. They found one of the most joyful times for an Eskimo family are when the sled dogs come home at night and are fed. The dogs are yelping, jumping, and wagging their tails. The children are a bit hyper too—jumping up and down and giggling along with the dogs. Even neighbors sometimes join in the festivities.

So when the Scriptures say that when the wise men made it to Bethlehem and saw that the star stopped over the place where the baby lay, the Eskimo Bible literally says, "upon seeing the child, the wise men wagged their tails!"

I like that image of joy. Wagging our tails. Joy draws us out of ourselves. We forget ourselves when we're joyful. We remember how blessed we are. We revel in life. In fact God himself is our joy. St. Augustine centuries ago prayed to God,

"Happiness is to rejoice in you and for you and because of you."

The word joy comes from the same root as the word grace. Joy is a gift from above—it's something beyond us. Joy lifts our countenance and our hearts.

Nehemiah encouraged the people of Israel when they were rebuilding Jerusalem:

"... for the joy of the Lord is your strength." (Nehemiah 8:10)

Peter, Paul, and Mary knew the importance of joy:

Peter wrote in his first letter that followers of Jesus are "filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy." (1 Peter 1:8)

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Romans 14:17)

Mary in the Magnificat belted out in song, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!" (Luke 1:46-47)

When the angel appeared to the shepherds announcing the birth of Jesus, they said:

"Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy!" (Luke 2:10)

The first words that God will say to us when we meet him in glory:

'Well done, good and faithful servant ... enter into the JOY of your master.' (Matthew 25:23)

Joy happens when you let go, revel in God's extravagant love, and you become a child again. When you scrape off the icy bitterness from the windshield of your soul. You let the Spirit defrost your spirit. And you can see where you're going again.

This doesn't mean that we have to be fake and pretend that life is just one long Hallmark Christmas movie marathon. Happiness is dependent upon favorable circumstances and fairy tale endings.

But joy—joy is different because it can be experienced across the full spectrum of life situations thrown our way. The unlimited Spirit supplies our joy—even when we're not feelin' it. Joy sustains us in the hard times—keeping the embers of hope burning in us.

We read in the Scriptures,

“for the joy set before him, Christ endured the cross.” (Hebrews 12:2)

I like how Barbara Holland puts it:

“Gloom we have always with us a rank and sturdy weed, but joy requires tending.”

So let's tend our joy and celebrate the little things, Immanuel. Let's laugh at our mistakes. Let's cheer others from the bench. Be a joy giver, not a joy-stealer in your relationships. Let's joyfully trust that God is tending the garden of our lives. Simplify and minimize. Take inventory of your life—ask God to clarify what are needs in my life and what are wants. Am I trying to keep up with the Jones's? How can I enjoy what I already have?

“Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her king.”

Amen.

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