

"THE JOY OF CHRISTMAS"
December 22, 1991

TEXT: Luke 2:10 "And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people."

"Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people." With those familiar words, the angel of God announced Christ's birth nearly two thousand years ago. And ever since, the word, "joy", has been identified with Christmas. So much so, that the hymn we just sang is now heard almost exclusively at this season of the year.

But it was not always that way. When first written, "Joy to the World" was not considered a Christmas carol. It was used as a general hymn, like Henry Van Dyke's "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee." And it was just as likely to be sung in May or August as it was at Christmas. But somehow all that changed over the years. And we have shut it up in a box all wrapped in bright colored paper and carefully labeled, "Do Not Open Until Christmas."

In part that might be because joy is an emotion that makes some of us feel uncomfortable. Unlike happiness or pleasure, joy is a very deep and powerful emotion. It can overwhelm and dominate us, rising up within like an irresistible fountain which, bursting forth, overflows everything we think and do.

It can alter our perceptions and move us to the most extravagant actions. The woman who anointed Jesus with a whole jar of precious ointment, for example, did so in response to joy. And St. Paul willingly went to trial in Rome that he might, as he, himself, wrote, "Finish my course with joy." And the Book of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus, "For the joy that was set before him endured the cross."

But the very power of joy can sometimes be threatening. We tend to be suspicious of things that can dominate us. Since the time of Plato we have rejected extremes and glorified the golden mean. We are more comfortable mastering our emotions than being mastered by them. And one of our most cherished virtues is self-control.

So, realizing as we do that joy can not be controlled, we go through the better part of life either ignoring it altogether or else degrading it to substitutes which can be more easily handled. Things like happiness and merriment. Is that not what we wish each other --even now at Christmas? "Merry Christmas and

a Happy New Year." What puny imitations! Any heathen with too much eggnog in his tummy can have a "merry" Christmas.

What God offers, what the Christmas angel announced to those shepherds on that hill outside Bethlehem, is not happiness or merriment, but joy. And that, my friends, is something very different. Samuel Dickey Gordon put it this way. "Joy is distinctly a Christian word and a Christian thing. It is the reverse of happiness. Happiness is the result of what happens of an agreeable sort. Joy has its springs deep down inside. And that spring never runs dry, no matter what happens. Only Jesus gives that joy. He had joy, singing its music within, even under the shadow of the cross. It is an unknown word and thing except as He has sway within."

Some years ago, my wife and I were in London, waiting to see the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. As we waited, a guided tour joined us. The guide pointed to a flagpole on the roof of the palace and said, "Do you see that flag? That is the Queen's own pennant. It means she is currently in residence." In the same vein, someone has written that "Joy is the standard that flies in the heart when the King is in residence."

Now please do not misunderstand. I am not talking about shouting and hand-clapping and liberally spicing our conversations with "Hallelujah" and "Praise the Lord." There are those who express their joy in just such ways, and that is fine for them. But there are other, quieter ways. Henry Fielding once wrote, "Great joy, especially after a sudden change of circumstances, is apt to be silent and dwells rather in the heart than on the tongue."

Certainly, that is the way it is with me. I can be as foolish as anyone at a football game or some other happy occasion. But when I am overtaken by real joy, I am apt to be downright dignified. In Shakespeare's words, "Silence is the perfect herald of joy. I were but little happy if I could say how much."

But, however we express our joy, we ought to have it. Isaiah promised, "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." (Isaiah 12:3) And again, "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." (Isaiah 35:10) "The surest mark of a Christian is not faith, or even love, but joy." (Samuel Shoemaker)

Still, the question remains, "Granted that joy may be wonderful, but how do we get it?" Well, to begin with, we need to understand what joy is not. William Barclay writes, "The one thing that all men need to learn about joy is that joy has nothing to do with material things, or with a man's outward circumstances. It is the simple fact of human experience that a

man living in the lap of luxury can be wretched, and man in the depths of poverty can overflow with joy."

That is the beauty of joy. It does not depend on things around us over which we often have little or no control. Joy is not to be found in the absence of trouble but in the presence of Christ. As St. Paul reminds us, it is a gift of the Spirit, and, as such, it can not really be earned or achieved. But there are things we can do to put ourselves in a better position to find it. And these are the very things those shepherds did so many years ago.

First of all, they listened. When the Good News was announced to them they heard it. Really heard it. They were not so distracted by the hustle and bustle of life that they missed it. Perhaps that is why Luke mentions only the shepherds out there on the hillside and says nothing about those travelers crowded into Bethlehem. Could it be that the angels appeared to them too, but they were too busy to notice? And what about us? Can it be that angels still come to us, singing of peace and joy, but we are too busy to hear them?

Secondly, having heard the Good News, the shepherds did something about it. They did not say, "Oh that's just a lot of superstition." They did not write it off as irrelevant or wishful thinking. They did not say, "That's nice!" and then go right back tending their sheep. They heard the Good News and said, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." "And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger." (Luke 2:15-16)

Like any good scientist, they tested their hypothesis. It always amazes me when people reject Christianity as irrelevant or unscientific without even testing it. That is not scientific. It is lazy. As George Bernard Shaw once wrote, "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and not tried."

And, finally, the shepherds shared what they heard and saw. That is when their joy really began. "And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying that was told them concerning the child, and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them." (Luke 2:17-18) In the words of the poet, Lord Byron: "All who joy would win must share it; Happiness was born a twin."

There you have it. "Joy is not gush. It is not jolliness. It is perfect acquiescence in God's will because the soul delights itself in God, Himself." And the way to find it --or rather to be found by it-- is three-fold. First, to listen to God's Good News --really listen. Hear what it says --not just to someone else, or even to everyone in general-- but what it says to you --right now, today. Then, try it. Put it to work in your life. See if it lives up to its promises. Experience for

yourself the wonder of it, the beauty of it, the joy of it. And, finally, share it with others. With as many others as you can.

So may you know the joy that passes all understanding. And may you have much more than just a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. May you have a Blessed Christmas and a truly joyous New Year. AMEN.