

The Road to Bethlehem
“The Road of Joy”
Philippians 4:4-7

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Browse through any local book store and you will be bombarded with books on joy. Joy of Cooking, Joy of Sex, Joy of Not Working, The Complete Joy of Home Brewing –just to name a few.

Our Advent word for consideration today is JOY. The Bible is full of joyful sayings:

“The joy of the Lord is our strength” (Nehemiah 8:10)

“Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy” (Luke 2:10)

“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4)

A nervous pastor conducting his first Christmas Eve Candle Lighting Service, watched anxiously as the light moved its way from candle to candle through the Sanctuary. With all the candles burning, the pastor spoke up boldly and said, “Now that everyone is lit, let us sing ‘Joy to the World’.” It is the powerful affirmations found in that great hymn of Isaac Watts that I want us to ponder today.

JOY TO THE WORLD, THE LORD IS COME!

Surprise, surprise God is here. *“The word became flesh and dwelt among us.”*

Most of us live routine lives. We eat at the same restaurants, watch the same TV shows, shop in the same stores, and sit in the same pews at church. Life is just easier that way.

If surprises surface in our lives they are usually surprises of disaster. The tornado was terrible, the murder was brutal, the rape was unbelievable, the starvation is incomprehensible. Just when you think that predators and imposters have hit the pit, they find new uses for the internet.

What would it take for us to be surprised by joy? The most incredible good news I know is that the Lord is come. Not has come, not will come, but is come. Let every heart prepare him room as “heaven and nature sings.”

In every other religion of the world, human kind is searching for God. They climb mountains, observe rituals, pursue meditations, in hope they will somehow be able to connect to the Divine and satisfy their spiritual hunger.

Christianity is different. In Christianity God pursues us. He is the good Shepherd in search of the one lost sheep. He is the loving Father waiting with open arms for the prodigal to come home. He is the God of the universe reducing himself to an

embryo in order to identify with the likes of us.

JOY TO THE WORLD, THE SAVIOR REIGNS!

“Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you.”

It was the great 20th century theologian, Karl Barth, who said the whole Christmas story is contained in those words, “A savior is born for you,” not just for the shepherds, not just for the wise men, not just Anna, and Simeon and the early believers, but a Savior born for you, for me.

Could you use some saving today? There was a time when I thought being saved consisted of walking down an aisle at a revival meeting, kneeling at an altar and repeating the mantra that Jesus was my Savior. Such acts of faith can be good beginnings, for God will honor even one step of faith.

But salvation is so much more than a personal response to a public appeal. Salvation is the transformation of heart and mind and soul. Salvation frees us from fear, from fear of death, from fear of failure, from fear of rejection, from fear of others. Salvation assures us we are loved unconditionally. A Savior is born for you.

Salvation saves us from guilt. We have done those things which we ought not to have done, and left undone, those things which we ought to have done. We have failed to love our neighbors and hear the cry of the needy. We need a Savior to help us. A Savior is born for you.

Salvation is release from self-centeredness. Life is not about you. It is not about me. Life is about loving God and serving others. Some of us are searching for happiness when what we need is holiness.

Eugene Peterson wrote, “Centering life in the insatiable demands of the ego is a sure path to doom. Life confined to self is a prison; a joy-killing, neurosis-producing, disease-fomenting prison.” But thank God almighty, a Savior is born for you. Maybe it’s time we prayed with King David. *“Restore to me the joy of my salvation.”*

JOY TO THE WORLD, YOUR TROUBLES ARE LIMITED!

“No more let sins and sorrows grow.”

Every time we send a youth group on a mission trip or a group of adults to Russia, Africa, Honduras, or Mexico to work with our partner churches, they come home with one lasting impression. “We couldn’t believe how joyful these people were.” Whether living in AIDS infested Africa or hurricane ravaged New Orleans, our mission teams have constantly reported, “incredible joy among people who have nothing or have lost everything.” How can this be? “We have everything, but we are not joyful. They have nothing, but are full of joy.”

Joy is not a product of possessions, pleasure, busyness, affluence, accomplishment. Joy is the experience of knowing that nothing, not sickness, failure, famine, war, or even death can separate us from the love of Christ.

Paul says, *“Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.”* He wrote that from a Roman prison while waiting execution. This old soldier of the Cross who had been ridiculed, stoned, shipwrecked, flogged and abandoned, refused to let the circumstances of life destroy the joy he found in serving his Lord.

Joy is a choice we make. Life can make us bitter or it can make us better. It can leave us grumbling or make us grateful. We decide what we will do with what is.

Joy is a hope we embrace. Every problem has a life span. No trouble enjoys everlasting life. Things may not get better, they may even get worse, but thanks be to God who gives us the victory. For in all things, we are more than conquerors through him who loves us.

Joy is a presence we encounter. As the German theologian, Moltmann puts it, “God weeps with us so that one day we may laugh with him.”

JOY TO THE WORLD, TRUTH SHALL PREVAIL!

“He rules the world, with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness.”

When Jesus was on trial for blasphemy, Pontius Pilate posed this question. What is Truth? That question has never been more hotly debated than now.

For some, truth is relative; you’ve got your truth, I’ve got mine. We ought not to speak in terms of absolutes. For others, truth is a narrow-minded opinion. I have the truth and others are missing it. Let me say this. “Not everyone who quotes the Bible speaks the truth.” For still others, truth is inconvenient. In a world of lies, spins, half-truths, and “never confess unless you get caught,” can we trust anybody to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—even under oath in a court of law?

Jesus said, *“If you continue in my word, and are really my disciples, you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free”* (John 8:31-32).

Truth matters. A talkative pastor walked up to a little boy standing beside a stroller with a baby inside. “What’s your brother’s name?” inquired the pastor. The kid replied indignantly, “If he were my brother his name would be Bobby, but that’s not my brother, she’s my sister, and her name is Susie!” If we keep asking the wrong questions we are likely to keep getting the wrong answers.

As long as we continue to know nothing definite about God we are free to be the

captains of our fate and the masters of our soul. But we do know something definite about God. God is love; God is just; God is merciful. God is revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Let us live truthful lives. Jesus prayed, "*Sanctify them with truth.*" Let us walk in the light of Christ. Let us live in full disclosure. Let us speak the right truth, at the right time, in the right way, to the right person, for the right reason, so help us God.

In a world that could use a little good news, maybe it's time for Christians to repeat the sounding joy!