

"A Season of Joy"

December 24, 2016

Luke 2: 8-14:

⁸ That night in the fields near Bethlehem some shepherds were guarding their sheep. ⁹ All at once an angel came down to them from the Lord, and the brightness of the Lord's glory flashed around them. The shepherds were frightened. ¹⁰ But the angel said, "Don't be afraid! I have good news for you, which will make everyone happy. ¹¹ This very day in King David's hometown a Savior was born for you. He is Christ the Lord. ¹² You will know who he is, because you will find him dressed in baby clothes and lying on a bed of hay." ¹³ Suddenly many other angels came down from heaven and joined in praising God. They said: ¹⁴ "Praise God in heaven! Peace on earth to everyone who pleases God."



Tonight is such a special night. Tonight we gather in this sacred space as do many others throughout our community and throughout the world, to celebrate the birth of the Christ child. It is such a special night because it can allow

extraordinary things to occur. For example, during the great World Wars, on this night, the adversaries all along the front would cease fighting, would come together to sing Christmas carols, and some would even exchange gifts. It is a night that transcends much that is wrong with our world. It is a night filled with love and compassion and warmth. It is the night that Christ was born. It is a night that forever changed the world. Let us pray.

At the heart of the Christmas season is a spirit of joy. The joy that comes from the birth of Christ is a joy that is palpable, that is tangible. It is a joy that is contagious. Like that Christmas song that gets stuck in your head no matter what you do, at Christmas, joy spreads because it is infectious. Our joy at this time of the year is founded upon the birth of Christ. We have joy in the season of Christmas because we are celebrating the birth of Jesus, the Savior of the world, the one who came to give us life and to set us free. Jesus is an amazing gift to the world, to you and to me.

Our opening reading tonight, from the book of Isaiah, was written about 700 years before the birth of Jesus. When Isaiah was a prophet, it was a dark time in Old Testament history. The kingdom was divided into north and south. The northern kingdom, Israel, had been defeated and many had been carried into captivity by the Assyrians. The Babylonians were on the rise and would soon come to dominate the whole region. The southern kingdom, Judah, was deep into idol worship and faced the impending doom coming with the Babylonians. They too would know exile. Things looked bleak. Hope was dim.

It is into this time in history that Isaiah writes. In verse two, Isaiah writes,

“Those who walked in the dark have seen a bright light. And it shines upon everyone who lives in the land of darkest shadows.” The prophet spoke of a light to come, of one who would bring light to the world. In the birth of Jesus, we find the one who brings light into the darkness of our world, the one who rules with



compassion and justice, the one who brings hope, the one who comes to save the world.

Tonight we will leave this place and return to our homes. Some will return to homes with many gifts under a beautiful tree. Others will return home to wrap gifts and to build and assemble gifts to go under beautiful trees. Some will go home to open gifts yet tonight. Christmas, after all, is about gifts. But no matter what is under the tree or what will be under the tree, the greatest gift that comes at Christmas is from God. The gift of Jesus our Emmanuel, God with us, is the greatest gift anyone can receive at Christmas.



Gifts come in many shapes and in many forms. In one way, for God, the birth of Christ is like that gift that sits at home right now under your tree, or perhaps yet hidden away in a closet, the gift some of you cannot wait to see opened. It is the gift that you took so much time considering, so much time picking out. You cannot wait to see the expression on their face when they finally unwrap the gift. Maybe you'll even let them open it tonight. Maybe to wait until tomorrow would be more than you could bear. In the same way, God offers mankind this gift of Jesus Christ and God cannot wait to see His children open the gift. Once it is opened, they can begin to partake in the wonderful life that is lived when one is in relationship with Jesus.



For others, you are the one waiting to open the gift. That box has been sitting under the tree for a few days now. Or maybe you found it tucked away in a closet or hidden in the garage.

It is driving you crazy what might be. You cannot wait to open the gift to reveal what is inside. You really hope that you can open it when you get home from church tonight! The gift of Jesus is like this for some of us. We begin to know what Christ offers each of us. We begin to have a glimpse of what life looks like when lived in a personal relationship with Christ. As our understanding grows, we get to the point where we cannot wait to open this gift and to begin living in relationship with Christ. And God is just as eager!

There is a third scenario as well. Some sense that the gift that God offers in Christ is a wonderful gift, but the gift remains unopened. There are many reasons the gift does not get unwrapped. Maybe one feels the time is not right. Maybe one thinks that their past is too big of a barrier for God's love to overcome. Maybe one feels too unworthy of God's wondrous love. None of these things is an issue for God. There is nothing we can do or say or think that would make God withhold this gift. God gives the gift freely, to any and to all. It is a gift given in love without any prerequisites, any restrictions, any limitations, any statutes, or any expiration dates. But for some, the gift goes unwrapped. In the meantime, God sits and watches, waiting and hoping for each of us to open the gift of life that Jesus offers.

In our second reading, from Matthew, we gain a little more understanding of just what this gift means. As the angel is speaking to Joseph, he is instructed to “name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins”. Tonight we celebrate the birth, but the birth is also about the death, about what Jesus will do on a cross on Calvary. Not only did Jesus come to give us life in the here and now, but Jesus also came to give us the gift of eternal life. This gift came with a price on the cross. What a gift Jesus gave to the world and to you and to me!



Much of the Advent season is about waiting and expecting. God sent Jesus to change the world and God so hopes that Jesus will do that for each of us. This is what God expects and what God waits for. But God will not force us to accept the gift of Jesus Christ. God loves us too much to force us into a relationship. God allows us each to choose. At this special time of the year, God so wants to welcome each of us home — home to a special gift that’s just for us, but we have to unwrap it. We have to make that choice. We experience true joy when we say “yes” to that relationship, when we unwrap the gift. The gift is a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. But, again, it is our choice. We must each come to the point of confessing with our lips that Jesus is Lord. We must each profess our faith in Christ and must each begin to form a personal relationship with Jesus.

The gift is offered. It is right there. All you have to do is unwrap it. But a word of warning. When you open this gift, all is not instantly great and wonderful. Friends, faith is a journey. It is a long, slow process. It is a journey built on love. God loves each of us unconditionally. But God is jealous for our love and wants our full attention. God wants a total commitment. God does not expect perfection, but expects progress. It is a daily walk. And through it all, God is faithful to us. God waits expectantly, gently nurturing our faith, patiently guiding us, lovingly helping us grow in our love of God and our trust in God.

Those who have already unwrapped the gift celebrate the gift tonight. They also want to celebrate with you. We invite you to share the joy of knowing that God loves you more than you can ever comprehend. It is a love that never fails, that never ends. God loves you today, tomorrow, forever.

In the last passage we read, from Luke 2, we again hear of the joy that comes in the birth. The angels proclaimed, *"I have good news for you, which will make everyone happy. ¹¹ This very day in King David's hometown a Savior was born for you. He is Christ the Lord."* A savior has been born! He is Christ the Lord! Luke goes on to write, *"Praise God in heaven! Peace on earth to everyone who pleases God."* We please God when we choose God. We please God when we love God. We please God when we unwrap the gift of Jesus Christ.





Tonight God says to us all, "I'm here. I've been waiting for you. I love you." Come to Jesus, all who are weary; He will give you rest. Come to Jesus, all who thirst; drink of the living water. Come to Jesus, all who are troubled; He will give you peace. God wants to say to each of us, "Welcome home. I love you."

A life lived in Christ is a life lived to the full. It is a life of peace. There will be trials, there will be hard days. But when you know the unending love and mercy of Jesus Christ, the path through the trials is not walked alone. Jesus is by our side. His love never fails, so we are never alone. This is the gift God wants us to unwrap this night, tomorrow, and forevermore. For the gift of Jesus Christ, we say thanks be to God. Amen.