

The Light of Joy

If I were going to make a movie about the birth of Jesus, I think the first scene would be of the shepherds, as they kept watch over their flocks, on the hillside near Bethlehem. I would show them shivering in the cold, dark night, exhausted and hungry, as they tried to stay warm by the meager fire. They would be talking about the struggles they faced—a child who was desperately ill, a friend who drinks too much wine, a neighbor woman who was widowed, a son who had left home and joined a gang of thugs ... they would be talking about the fears they had about the future... and about how their all prayers to God seemed to go unanswered...

And then, suddenly the sky growing bright... brighter & brighter... and a dazzling angel speaking: “Be not afraid, for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in Bethlehem, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” And then, the heavens filled with angels, and all of them singing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace, goodwill among men.”

And now the shepherds, hurrying down the hillside, into the town. Knocking at doors, inquiring at the inn, until they find the newborn baby, Jesus, in a stable out back, sleeping in a manger. Then, Mary lifting the baby from the hay and placing him in the shepherd’s arms. The joy of that moment... the complete, deep joy... you see it in the shepherd’s eyes as he holds the tiny infant.

The promise of the prophet Isaiah has been fulfilled:

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.
Thou hast multiplied the nation,

Thou hast increased its joy;
 They rejoice before thee...
 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.” (Isaiah 9: 2-3, 6)

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
 And the dessert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
 And rejoice with joy and singing.” (Isaiah 35:1)

Joy! Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

But what does this mean for our lives today in the year 2015? Let’s take a few minutes to think about God’s gift of joy, as we watch a beautiful video.

[Show: “Joy” <https://skitguys.com/videos/item/advent-worship-collection>]

Joy! Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

So how do we experience God’s gift of joy at Christmas? I think 3 things help: to listen, to look, and to laud.

First of all, Christmas is a time to listen—to listen with our heart to the angel’s proclamation: “Be not afraid, for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in Bethlehem, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” (Luke 2: 10-11)

What an amazing promise! Jesus, our Savior, is born. We are not alone in the struggles of life. God knows the things we’re going through; God cares about our problems, our needs. God understands our grief, our fears, our stress, our pain. That is why he sent his own Son, Jesus, into the world—to be our Savior, to show us His love, to forgive our sins, and to walk beside us day by day. The angel’s message is deeply personal, meant for each one of us,

directly: “I bring you good news. For you, a Savior is born.” Especially at Christmas, we are invited to listen, to hear God’s promise for us.

Secondly, we are invited to look. To look for signs of God’s presence. The angel told the shepherds: “This will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:12)

So, too, for us today, God sends signs to remind us that he is with us, sometimes small things... sometimes, huge... A Christmas song, playing on the radio... a child, sharing their excitement... the words in a Christmas card... an unexpected kindness... each one carrying encouragement, inspiration, joy. Look!

Listen... look... and laud... “Laud,” it’s an old-fashioned word for praise, for giving thanks. According to the Bible, after the shepherds have found the Christ child, they laud the Lord God: “And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” (Luke 20:20)

This is so important for us, as well—to take time to thank God. To pause—maybe at the end of the day—to reflect on all the blessings we have received, and to express our gratitude to God in prayer. But not just in quiet prayer... I picture the shepherds so filled with joy and excitement that they tell everyone they meet about the new baby, God’s own Son! We, too, have many opportunities to tell our stories about God’s loving care for us... for instance, the time for sharing our joys during Sunday morning worship... or, in conversations with friends & family... Like the shepherds, we laud the Lord, our God.

Listen... look... laud... God gives us the gift of joy, in the birth of Jesus, our Savior.

One person who discovered God's gift of joy was a pastor by the name of Dave Beckwith. He tells his story in the latest issue of *Guideposts* (retold from the December 2015 issue, pp.22-23.) You see, last Christmas, someone stole his joy. Literally. Three weeks before Christmas, he & his wife, Joanne, decorated their home. The family down the street had an inflatable Santa Claus. Their next-door neighbors had icicle lights. And they had 3 big wooden signs, strategically placed and illuminated with spotlights: "Love" "Joy" "Peace" However, the next day, when Dave went out to get the morning newspaper, he noticed that there was a gaping hole in the display: "Love" "Peace"... No "Joy." He thought maybe someone was borrowing it... he kept waiting for "Joy" to reappear as Christmas approached. But it never did...

On Christmas Eve, he told the story of the missing joy as part of his Christmas Eve sermon. Afterwards, as he was greeting people, a couple approached. Edyie, who was in his Bible study group, followed by a tall man with shaggy brown hair. She introduced him as her ex-husband, Tom. The pastor had already heard about Tom's troubled past. Edyie asked if the pastor would counsel them, and they set up a time during the coming week. Tom looked reluctant, and didn't say anything until the very end of the conversation, "Pastor, I can make you a new Joy sign if you'd like. I'm a carpenter, you know."

They began to meet regularly. It was clear that Tom would rather be anywhere else than in the pastor's office. He was a man broken down by life: a high school drop-out, an ex-con, a compulsive gambler and a drug user. But underneath it all, the pastor sensed that there was a tender soul that yearned to be free. He was the kind of guy who would give his last dollar to a

stranger. And he sure loved Edyie. But he had no interest in God, in forgiveness, or in the Bible's promises. After 3 months, the pastor was ready to give up.

Tom didn't forget the Joy sign, though. In April, he called to let the pastor know that he'd completed the project. The pastor took him out to dinner to thank him. Tom seemed nervous. He fiddled with his menu, then put it down and blurted, "Pastor, I get it."

"Get what?"

"The key to love, joy, and peace."

"Yes?"

"It's God."

The revelation had come a week earlier. Tom had been cutting the wood for the Joy sign when a strange thought crossed his mind. *Where do love, joy, and peace even come from?* And then it hit him: "There is no love or peace without God! And that is the very key to joy. He was so convinced of the message that he made a fourth sign. One that said simply God.

Peace... love... joy! There are God's gifts to you this Christmas. Amen.