

Rejoice

True story: A few days ago, Brittany West's 4-year-old son, Cooper, came bursting into the room. "Mommy, Mommy, I want to show you how to spell Christmas. Ready? J-O-Y!"

J-O-Y! That's how God spells Christmas, too. Christmas is all about God's gift of joy.

The first to experience the joy of Christmas were the shepherds, out on the hillside overlooking Bethlehem, guarding their sheep through the long winter night. It was cold, exhausting work, constantly vigilant lest a sheep wander off, and get lost on the cliffs above... constantly vigilant lest a wolf attack, and carry off a lamb. This particular night, the shepherds were trying to stay warm, huddled near a meager fire, when the sky suddenly grew bright, brighter than the fire, brighter than the moon, brighter even than the daytime sun. A majestic, shining angel appeared, and the shepherds were terrified. Then, the angel spoke, and his voice filled the heavens: "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 the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:10-12)

Could it be true? For centuries, the people of Israel had waited for God to fulfill the promises spoken by the prophets of old and to send a Savior for His people, the Christ, the Messiah, the King who would rule with righteousness and peace forever, God's own Son.

And now, the Savior had been born... right here, in Bethlehem, the ancestral city of the great King David. But why was he sleeping in a manger, an animal's feeding trough? And why had the angels announced his birth to them, and not to Bethlehem's priests & religious leaders? They must find the baby.

The shepherds hurried into town, and searched until they discovered the newborn baby with his parents, in the stable in back of the inn. The shepherds had never felt such love, such peace. It was as though God himself were there in that stable. But instead of feeling sinful or unworthy, they knew they belonged. Rough shepherds though they were, they belonged here. God had chosen them to welcome His son into the world. Their hearts were filled with great joy.

That's what God wants for us this Christmas—that our hearts are filled with joy. Joy—that's something deeper than mere happiness. Happiness is a changeable thing, going up & down with our circumstances. But joy... joy is something constant, deep within our spirit, through rough times and good times alike, a sense of God's loving presence.

“Behold, I bring you good news of great joy!” The angel's message is not just for the shepherds, it's also for us... each one of us. “Behold, I bring you good news of great joy!” And what is the source of that joy? The angel goes on to say: “For to you is born this day... a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” Our joy comes from knowing that God has sent his Son into the world to be our Savior, to save us from our sins, and to show us God's unending love for us.

So how can we experience this joy? The shepherds did 3 things, and each one led to a deeper sense of joy. First of all, they went to Bethlehem. Remember what they said after they heard the angel's message, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing which the Lord has made known to us.” (Luke 2: 15) If they had stayed out in the fields, working through the night, they would have missed the holy child. Instead, they “went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:16)

This Christmas, it's important for us to go to Bethlehem. What is it that you could do, leaving your work behind for a short time... What is it that you could do, that would help you experience anew the wonder & joy of the first Christmas? Here are some possibilities to start you thinking: Reading the Christmas story from the Bible. Going outdoors and looking up at the stars, and remembering the star of Bethlehem the wise men followed. Listening to a CD of religious Christmas music, thinking deeply about the words that are being sung. Finding time for a good Christmas book. Coming to a Christmas Eve service, letting all distractions fade away, until you are caught up in worshipping the Holy Child. Pondering the events of the first Christmas, and writing down your reflections in a journal or in poetry. Holding a baby, maybe singing “Silent Night” as a lullaby.

In these ways, like the shepherds, we go to Bethlehem.

Then, there was a second thing that the shepherds did. The Bible tells us that they said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem, and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” (Luke 2:15). There’s something important here, something that I almost missed... the word, “us.” “Us...” “Let us go over to Bethlehem.” You see, the shepherds went to Bethlehem together. It wasn’t something they did individually; instead, they went to find the child together.

We experience God’s gift of Christmas joy, when we go to Bethlehem together. Who is it that we take with us to Bethlehem? Our spouse? Our child or grandchild or nephew or niece? Our parents or grandparents? Maybe God is hoping you’ll invite an elderly person who is lonely... or a kid who could use a friend... or a young adult who needs a mentor... or someone at work who’s going through a rough time... Think of one person—just one for now—who you want to share Christmas with.

And how do you do that? You could get a group together to go caroling—or join our church family this evening at 6:00 as we go out to sing in the village. You could plan a trip to a living nativity scene. You could stop by to visit someone who is alone and maybe read the Christmas story & pray together. You could write a note or phone someone far away. You could organize a Christmas craft with some kids, perhaps drawing or painting a nativity scene. You could watch a Christmas movie together. You could invite someone to come to a Christmas Eve service with you.

All these are ways we go to Bethlehem together.

Then, there was a 3rd thing the shepherds did. They returned from Bethlehem rejoicing. The Bible tells us: “The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” (Luke 2:20).

One of the most joy-filled Christmas carols is “Joy to the World.” I especially like the second verse: “Joy to the world, the Savior reigns! Let all their songs employ; while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains, repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy, repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.”

“Repeat the sounding joy...” that’s what the shepherds did when they returned from Bethlehem, and that’s what we can do as well.

In the stable of Bethlehem, we find a greater love than we have ever known, in the birth of Jesus, the Son of God, our Savior. Now we can share that love with others, we can repeat the sounding joy through caring actions, through expressions of support & encouragement, through random acts of kindness... This is something that lasts well beyond Christmas day... stretching out into the New Year and all the years to come, as we repeat the sounding joy.

There’s a wonderful legend about the first shepherds. In the years following Jesus’ birth, they tried to remember the angels’ song that night. It had been exceedingly beautiful, filled with joy, and they wished they could sing it now. But try as they might, they could not repeat the melody. One particular winter night, as they kept watch over their flocks and warmed themselves by the fire, they were once again trying to sing the angels’ song. Then, they heard the bleat of a lamb, far up on the rocky cliffs. It was too dangerous to go up there in the dark, yet surely the lamb would perish before the morning dawned. They shook their heads, with heavy hearts, but then, one of the shepherds, the youngest of the group, jumped up with firm resolve, and began to climb the path that led to the cliffs above. It was hours before he returned, scratched and bruised from falling on the slippery rocks, but on his shoulders he carried the lamb home safe and sound. And he told the other shepherds, “It was the strangest thing, but on the way back here, this melody came into my head.” And he sang for them the angels’ song.

Repeat the sounding joy!

This Christmas, let us go to Bethlehem... Let us go to Bethlehem together... and let us return from Bethlehem rejoicing... Repeat the sounding joy!