

Christmas Eve – 2020

Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

Joy; this is the night, the event where we come face to face with the content of eternal joy. Man was created in such a way that he might know, that he might experience joy. Emotionally, spiritually – joy is a reality that comes crashing into the heart of man. The very reason you are created to know what joy is, to be able to luxuriate in its power, to exalt in its sublime sensation is because from eternity God willed to send His Son into this world, into our flesh, to be one with us. That the eternal Son of God should be born of the blessed Virgin is a source of joy for our Father. The Father's own joy in His Son is the reason you were created to know this feeling, this spiritual phenomenon. He gives to us what is His.

“And the angel said to them: ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord’” (Luke 2:10-11). The first three fruits of the Spirit are a trinity of Christmas blessing: love, joy, and peace. Sandwiched between love and peace is a thrill of the heart that no cloud can cover. Herod can't kill it. Pilate can't crucify it. Death can't keep it in a tomb. God is committed to us and we are set free from sin. God is committed to us and life is the product. God is committed to us and His holiness, His incarnate holiness, invades this fallen world.

Joy; you have known it. In a multitude of ways, in many settings, the bliss of joy has shined its light in your heart. What about the first time you did a flip off the diving board? How about the first time you heard the Beach Boys... Fun, Fun, Fun? Joy; when you held your infant, your precious newborn in your arms. Joy; in eighth grade, when you screwed up your courage to ask the girl you had a crush on to go to the sock hop with you... and she said “yes!” When you recessed down the aisle, arm in arm with your new husband, your new wife. Oh, you've known joy – you were created to know joy – tonight is the reason. God coming to us in unqualified humility, full of grace, full of Divine authority, yet lying in a manger – the Son of God brings His life into your own and the announcement of His arrival brings great joy!

There's a reason for this. Joy is anchored in reality. Joy is an authentic response to something that is true, something that is objective yet personal and consequential. At its core, joy is something way more than a mere mood. What is joy? It is the marvelous realization that life has been enlarged. More! Not a greedy more but an elevated more – bigger, higher, deeper. Joy is the marvelous realization that God has blessed you, given you more than what you are capable of achieving on your own; that He, out of divine love, has opened a door that is closed to your mortal nature, closed to your petty efforts, closed to human ambition.

What is supremely obvious this year is that death is an enormous obstacle in our collective minds. Death has ruled public policy this year. Death has made headlines. Death has determined what we will and won't do. Death is worn on people's faces. Death is no phantom; it is real. Death is not more. Death is less. I'm not prone to claustrophobia. Thank God I'm not prone to claustrophobia because I've been in the MRI tube more times than I can count. Have you ever felt claustrophobic? Like the walls are closing in? Like Luke and Leia and Han in the

trash compactor? And the Loch Ness Monster brushes by your leg? What makes you vulnerable to death is your sin. Your sin is real. Your sin makes life less, not more. According to Scripture, according to God's righteous judgment, the walls of death have every right to close in on you. Men fear death because they know that their sin is real and that they have no righteous place to stand, no righteous weapon of their own to use, no personal defense that matches death's power, death's arsenal.

Human iniquity is in full view during a pandemic. Men oppress other men. Those in power use it on others while evading their own edicts. Strip clubs are open while churches are closed. What does *that* say about us? Hoarding, tribalism, a dictatorial spirit – the chaos of man's sinful heart is in full view. An MRI tube is nothing compared to a coffin. There is no cheerful technician who will just push a button and slide you out of your coffin. The world's answers to death are vapid, empty, vain. The followers of Christ have never followed the world. A weird, quirky dance is being danced right now as the world turns away from the church and attempts to find its own answer to death. But you are here. On this quiet winter's night, in this sacred space... you are here.

A few nights ago, a score of saints went caroling to our shut-ins. The youngest among us typically rang the doorbell and the aged lumbered from their La-Z-Boys to the front door or the picture window or the porch. For most, it was a surprise – an uplifting surprise. We singers had a standard repertoire – ones everybody knows and loves, most you will sing tonight. Silent Night, Hark the Herald Angels Sing and we departed asking for figgy pudding (We Wish You a Merry Christmas). The smiles on those we visited were a powerful reward. Years fell away from some faces, some folks cried, and others just beamed. But one of our songs, one of our Christmas carols just seemed to roll off the tongue – the words came rolling out in a natural cadence, a stream of syllables that captured that night and this night. You know these words: Joy to the World, the Lord has Come. The carolers had the “MORE” of Christmas to give and those who listened were buoyed by the Song. Joy! It is a real product to the real message of a real Savior who comes to render up His life that we might live.

The shepherds ran with haste to “see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us” (Luke 2:15). What did they see? A baby, in the unlikeliest of places. A manger, a feeding trough for barnyard creatures. A King; they saw the King of kings and the Lord of lords. They saw divine majesty and unending love and immense power – veiled in flesh, the Son of God was lying in hay. The eternal Word, who created all that is, who is life, who rules the cosmos and brings light out of darkness – He was this child, Jesus, the Christ. He comes to bring joy. He comes to die. Blood and cross, sacrifice and tomb, He comes to render up His life. The unlikeliest place, a cross, is where the King wills to go. Sin is vanquished in His crucified flesh. Death dies in God's corpse. There is to be no coffin for you – Christ is risen and Christmas brings God's infinite power to bear on us. He is our righteousness. He is our defense. He is our resurrection. He is God's weapon of choice to defeat Satan and hell. Remarkable! He is so strong and yet He comes to us so vulnerable. Christmas does not keep a safe distance from you. He comes near. God Himself is made man and dwells humbly in our midst. God comes close.

More. So many of us are like Oliver Twist, knowing that it is our lives, not our stomachs that are lacking. Please sir, I want some more. Mr. Bumble, the militant wretch who runs the workhouse

where Oliver and the other orphans live is disinclined to acquiesce to Oliver's request – means Mr. Bumble said “No.” Please sir, I want some more. Before you were even born, the Lord God Almighty saw to it that you had more. More life, Christ's life. More love, Christ's love. More hope, more joy, more peace. Heaven; Christmas unleashes the eternal joy of heaven. “For to us a child is born; to us a son is given” (Isaiah 9:6). God draws near with His holiness and lifts up a beleaguered people. More! Qualitatively more! We are enriched! We are highly favored! On this night you feast on Christmas joy, you feast on the bread of life, you receive all that Christmas offers as you receive His body and blood. Joy is in this house. The fullness of Christmas breaks into this Divine Service and God Himself serves you with more.