

Sharing the News!

Luke 2:8:20

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⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

“Don’t be afraid,” said the angel to the shepherds when Jesus was born. “I’ve come to bring you good tidings of great joy.”

Great joy. Have you had any great joy lately? Any joy at all? Joy isn’t the same thing as pleasure, I’m sure you know. Most of us live as if the angel said, “I bring you good tidings of great pleasure that will be to all people.” We’re very big on pleasure. Our whole culture is oriented toward it. Big-screen TVs, iPods, double mochas, Jacuzzis in our motel rooms, sleek, gas-guzzling automobiles. We’re really very good at pleasure.

I read a story about two soul-winners down in Texas, a veteran and a novice, who had been out all day calling on people and winning them to the Lord. Late in the day, they drove out to a neighborhood of big ranch houses on two-acre lots and pulled into a driveway behind a Porsche and a BMW. As they were approaching the door, they happened to walk past a picture window and they glanced inside. The man of the house was sitting there in his skivvies in a big leather relax-a-chair —“the kind,” as Ken said, “that conduces, and induces, and reduces, and seduces you”—and it was pointed toward a great television screen on the other side of the room where he was watching a football game. In one hand he held a can of beer, beaded with moisture, and with the other hand he was languidly stroking the head of a beautiful dog. From time to time, he appeared to sight along his big toe at something on the screen across the room.

As the veteran soul-winner was reaching for the doorbell, the novice suddenly caught his arm. ***“Just a minute,” he said. “Before we go in there I want you to tell me something. What kind of good news do we have for him?”***

It was a point well taken. *If the angel had said, “I bring you good news of a great pleasure that will be to all people,” they didn’t have a thing to contribute to that man’s well-being.* He had everything. He had it all.

But joy is another matter, isn’t it? Most of us have a reasonable amount of pleasure in our lives but not a surplus of joy. Joy is subtler and richer and deeper than pleasure. *Pleasure is derived from the flesh, joy belongs to the soul.* The Bible makes that distinction. It gives short shrift to the man who tore down his barns and built bigger ones to hold everything, and then said to himself, “Eat, drink, and be merry, because tomorrow you die.” It seems that our pleasures often conspire to crowd out a sense of true joy. They do, don’t they?

From time to time, we all need to stop and keep track of all the little joys we have during the day.

I have tried that. I ran across some of those lists only recently. There were usually ten or twelve or maybe even fifteen things on a list—all very simple things; a bit of poetry that kept running through my head, the texture of old tree bark, the smile of an elderly church member, the sound of a friend’s voice on long distance, the luminous blossom of a morning glory, a squirrel scampering ahead of me on the sidewalk.

I remember how amazed I was that I was having all these little joys and yet hadn’t been seeing them, hadn’t been noticing them. Just making the lists helped. Soon I began noticing the joys as they occurred, and before long I was feeling like my old self again.

And you know what I also noticed? I began giving thanks for the joys. I did. Inevitably, I felt some kind of connection between them and God. That’s because joys inevitably lead us to God. This is what the Bible wants us to see, that God is the center of all joy—which is why the coming of Christ meant “great joy.”

Next Sunday, we will be gathering to worship and celebrate a new year! As we come to this year’s end and anticipate the year to come, we all need to remember that life at best is unpredictable and totally not fair! Each day of life has its troubles.

The angel promised this at the beginning of Luke’s Gospel. And at the end of his Gospel, Luke told the story of those two disciples from Emmaus. Do you remember them? They were on their way home from Jerusalem after Jesus was crucified, and they were dragging along as if they’d lost their best friend. Suddenly Jesus appeared and walked with them. They didn’t recognize him. But he asked them, “Why are you so downhearted?” They said, “You mean you’ve been in Jerusalem and you have to ask? We thought Jesus was going to be the Savior of the world, and today the Romans killed him.”

Jesus began to remind them of all the scriptures that described how the Savior of the world must suffer and die. It was surely the greatest Bible lesson of all times. When the disciples reached their home, they begged Jesus to come in. And when he was giving the prayer of blessing over the bread before they ate it, they suddenly realized who he was, and he disappeared from their midst just like that.

They were so thrilled that they couldn't contain the excitement. It was dark and the roads were undoubtedly dangerous, but that didn't matter. They had to get back to Jerusalem and tell their friends they had seen the risen Christ. They wouldn't ever forget how they felt. "Didn't our hearts burn within us?" they said. And the Gospel says "they returned to Jerusalem with great joy."

Do you see the connection? God and joy. Christ and joy. Somehow all of our little joys are caught up in the greater joy of knowing God and being in Christ. It isn't that they aren't real in themselves. It's just that they receive their fullness, their real amplitude, when we see that they're all somehow connected to God.

It is a joy that can be called, "extravagant or overwhelming joy." The greatest kind of joy there is! It is a joy that comes to turning loose of our endless pursuit of material things and looking at life through our hearts. It is a kind of joy that changes our lives. We can have a Joy that casts everything in a new light; joy that transforms everything; even our worst sorrows and disappointments.

Our problem is that we look at the problems instead of looking at the fulfillment of this Christmas season. God has come through Jesus Christ to love us, regardless of the problems and ills that befall us.

We all need to remember the Book of Job, and how God at one point had asked Job if he could make a horse or if he could make a whale or any of the other magnificent creatures God had made. We all need to be overwhelmed with joy as we celebrate our lives in God's beautiful world.

This is what I've been trying to say. You and I have a lot of little joys if we only take the time to notice them. Our days are actually full with them. And all those little joys become amplified and connected when we see them within the greater joy of knowing that God made the world, and that God was somehow, in Christ, redeeming the world.

Merry Christmas!

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