

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

Christians rejoice at Christmas. You are hopefully rejoicing this night. There are many reasons why you may be rejoicing. Perhaps it's because you are with your family or at least some of your family and you are rejoicing to be in one place spending time together. Maybe you are rejoicing because you are healthy after a lengthy time of sickness. Maybe there's reason to rejoice because you are anticipating the gifts you will give to others or will receive. Or perhaps you rejoice tonight because for a moment you have a respite from the world around and can finally have a moment to sit and listen.

Now you probably are thinking, ok, now he's going to tell us how terrible all these things are and are we forgetting the real meaning of Christmas and try to spoil my joy. To be fair, there's always a temptation in all this tonight to rain on the parade of people at Christmas and react against the joy that people have. While there may be some purpose in this, it fails to get at the heart of the matter and just wants to put a bandage on the greater issues at hand while in return damaging things are good and godly.

Pastors aren't excluded from this as I will often tell people that my least favorite holiday in the church year is Christmas. It didn't use to be this until I was a pastor for a few years. The reason why it became my least favorite holiday is because it is the season of grumbling. My former district president in Iowa District East one time pointed out to me this is the time of the year that most pastors have people complain to them, get angry at them, and try to stir up trouble in the church. The reasons are varied but often stem from a certain idea or notion of what they think Christmas should or shouldn't be and if the pastor or pastors don't do things the exact way they want them to be then watch out. People also have a lot of stress as well during this time to make matters worse.

Rejoicing tonight is good. You should be rejoicing and your brothers and sisters in Christ should rejoice that you are rejoicing, pastors included. So what's the point then? Well understand all of this properly and don't fall prey and be led into sin by your own fallen flesh, the world, and the devil which want to pervert this day and turn your hearts away from the Lord. You are called to see the fruit of this rejoicing and joy is because of the joy that is the Savior's birth. Without the birth of Christ there would be no real and lasting joy and reason to rejoice because sin, death, and devil would have the final word. Let's think about this further and examine it.

If Christmas is void of Christ, if Christ is pushed aside or downplayed, forgotten, or simply just a cultural reference then there is no lasting joy and rejoicing in Christmas. The joy of a Christless Christmas is going to try and latch onto whatever it can to build this joy and make it last as long as it can and be as meaningful as it can. Nostalgia is the chief principle in forming a Christless Christmas. But the thing with this is that it's always in pursuit of joy and finds no satisfaction or fulfillment. In a sense, it's the proverbial hamster on a wheel running and going nowhere, but really it's more serious. It's always going to try and outdo the previous experience. It's like an addict that builds a tolerance to the drug and needs more of a fix to achieve a high or any type or sense of excitement.

A case and point can be seen in most of your lifetimes. Think about it for a moment when it comes to Christmas in the culture. Don't think in terms of commercialization, although that is a symptom of it, think just in broad terms and what's at the center. Think about Christmas when you were a kid. Think about what was being talked about, what was being sung about, and any number of things. Then think about what the message developed into and what it is now. Trace that line of thought and experience just in your own history. Think about the simple optic of when stores would advertise for Christmas or offer Christmas related items then versus the present.

There's always going to be a reason and message of Christmas. Take Christ out or put him on the bench or backseat and something or someone must fill that void. And finally notice how this compounds and you must keep adding to this to the extent that the new understandings about what the season “really means” and celebration must get bigger and

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better. But you know what happens in all this, you are constantly disappointed in one way or another. You are forced to evaluate your Christmas based upon standards that are constantly fleeting and subjective as you compare yourself with a Christmas that is not defined biblically. Little things that would be reason to rejoice bring with them opportunities to think what you are missing out and how it could be better. Then the devil has gotten the upper hand and before you know Christmas is...well, it's whatever it has become.

Now all this has its danger as well to get into a "reverse snobbery" to turn the phrase of C.S. Lewis. It's not simply a "back in day things were better" but to get you to think about and examine your lives according to God's word in all this and see where you stand. It's a call back to the first commandment, "you shall have no other gods" and see where you have placed your fear, love, and trust in not just at Christmas but your whole life. It's not just Christmas where this happens but really anything you face in life. You can only put things out of sight and out of mind for so long or think you have moved passed these "childish things" or think you are somehow special and have figured God out in way to rationalize he doesn't exist or because he hasn't been what you deem as fair to you or acted how you want you are done with him and you can somehow take the "high road" and tell God the way things should really be. The biblical term for all those things is foolishness and being a fool has eternal deadly consequences.

So, what, then? "Lord, to whom shall we go?" What does God say to you in all this? Well, listen again to the preaching of the angel to the shepherds. Listen and know this is preached to you tonight. "And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. 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.'"

The account of the birth of Jesus is not simply a familiar story. It's earth shattering and something to return to again and again because you see something in all this account. The prophet Haggai prophesied, "For thus says the Lord of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts."

Take all this to heart and see what this means. Go back to God's word and go with shepherds who heard the message proclaimed by the angel. "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. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!' When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds 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.' And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child."

The great Christmas hymn by Paul Gerhardt, "O Jesus Christ, Thy Manger Is" proclaims this in stanza 4, "Thou Christian heart, whoever thou art, be of good cheer and let no sorrow move thee! For God's own Child, in mercy mild, joins thee to Him; how greatly God must love thee!" The heavens have been shaken. God has rent the heavens in the dark of night and night has become day as the Light of the world dwelled with his people. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone." Behold this night, your Lord Jesus. He is God in the flesh who came to redeem you. Rejoice in Jesus born for you. The world doesn't know the joy that is found here in this place to which the shepherds ran with haste. Only with the eyes of faith can you see this day for what it truly is and rejoice with exceedingly great joy.

See God is in the manger. Here he is, a newborn, yet fully God. He who alone possesses and writes names in the Book of Life is the one who permitted himself to be listed among men as the least and poorest among them. God is in the manger just as he had been in the womb of the virgin since his conception by the Holy Spirit. He is there just as he

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would be held in her arms and carried to Egypt as a king sent men to try to kill him and he came back to his own town just as God prophesied, “out of Egypt I have called my Son.” God is there just as later when he was visited by magi who fell down on their faces and worshiped him bringing him gifts. He is there just as he grew up in the small, dinky town of Nazareth and then traveled around preaching, teaching, and healing. He is there just as he would stand before a Roman governor be condemned to death, was tortured, and suffered, and died among criminals. He is there just as he rose from the dead and appeared to the disciples. “God is man, man to deliver, and the Son now is one with our blood forever.” God is in the manger.

It’s the same God who did all these things because God is “Emmanuel” God with us. Rejoice and be glad dear people of God. That is who he is and what he does. To know God is to see Christ who is God in the flesh. To behold Jesus is to see the God who came down from his heavenly throne to fulfill God’s law perfectly for you, suffer God’s wrath against sin, your sin, for you, and die to satisfy that righteous anger in your place and then rise from the dead for your justification. Seeing God in the manger is to see the Savior of the world born for you who has saved you as the Scriptures proclaim this all to you.

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”

Dear people of God, rejoice and keep rejoicing. In Christ, then, there is real joy that informs your rejoicing and regards each thing as a gift no matter how great or small. Sentiment doesn’t define Christmas, but Christmas can be sentimental. Family doesn’t define Christmas, but families rejoice in gathering at Christmas. Your health, physical state, or situation in life doesn’t define Christmas but you can and should rejoice in what blessings you have been given during this time. No matter the circumstance Christ has been born for you. Even if you should be laying alone taking your last breaths in this world this very instant, there is joy this day. Light and life have come. Your sin is forgiven and you have eternal life. You are his and he is yours, rejoice. Rejoice with the angels, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

Don’t lose sight of Christ dear people of God. Come with haste to where he is found in his word and sacraments. Celebrate with joy that your God is still here for you and delivers to you salvation. Take all this to heart tonight and see your joy in the Lord who was born in Bethlehem. Rejoice in the many gifts and blessings he gives to you whatever they may be no matter how great or small. Most especially rejoice knowing that your Lord was born for you just as the angel proclaimed, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

My heart for very joy must leap;
My lips no more can silence keep.
I, too, must sing with joyful tongue
That sweetest ancient cradlesong:

Glory to God in highest heav’n,
Who unto us His Son has giv’n!
While angels sing with pious mirth
A glad new year to all the earth.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.