

The Deep, Quiet Joy of Christmas

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Bible Text: Luke 2:2-20
Preached on: Sunday, December 18, 2022

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We are in a series called "Fighting for Christmas Joy." Today, let's talk about what I call "The Deep, Quiet Joy of Christmas."

Luke 2, beginning in verse 2,

1 Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. 2 This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. 4 Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, 5 in order to register along with Mary [his wife], who was engaged to him, and was with child. 6 While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Now down to verses 19 and 20. I actually will invert them for emphasis.

20 The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

19 But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart.

David wrote in the Psalms that, "I meditate on thee in the night watches." In the stillness of the night, I have some deep and quiet joyous fellowship with the Lord from time to time, and sometimes our joys are not really meant to be shared, they're meant to be savored. Perhaps the deepest joys are quiet joys. Think for a moment about a mother with her newborn baby. The baby's just given to her and there is a joy there beyond words, a joy beyond expression. You know, I've never seen a mother when she first puts her newborn into her arms to just leap and shout for joy. Well, I know what she's been through has something to do with that but, nevertheless, there's a sweet love and joy there between mom and newborn that is too deep for verbal explanation, and how much more for this mother, Mary. She's been through quite an ordeal, a 90 mile trip, she births her

baby in a cattle stall, actually just a rock enclave in the side of a bluff that served as a shelter for animals. She lays this baby in a feed trough. Mary, the human mother of God Incarnate, the Son of God, the promised Savior of the world and verse 19 tells us, "And Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart."

Now that's quite different from what Mary experienced with Elizabeth. You remember that Mary was told by the angel Gabriel that she would conceive of the Holy Spirit and she would give birth to the Son of God, the Savior. And then Gabriel told Mary, "Your cousin, Elizabeth, also has miraculously conceived in her old age even though she has a barren womb." And when these two ladies got together, they had a spell shouting and praising the Lord and just overwhelmed with exuberance. That's a part of Christmas joy for sure, but when the Spirit of God lives in you there will be times when the things of God revealed by the Spirit are so marvelous and so holy that your mind and your emotions are brought to a profound stoppage. This is often true when the Spirit is revealing things of the person and work of Christ to us. The Incarnation is certainly one of those truths that brings us to such a place of wonder and awe that silence is all that one can express. It's a Spirit-wrought deep and quiet joy.

In 1818 on Christmas Eve, a German monk in Austria sang a new carol he had written to celebrate the Lord's birth and it was unusual because it was to be accompanied by a guitar, not an organ, and that wasn't allowed, really, in most churches in that day, and he sang these words,

"Silent night, holy night!
All is calm, all is bright.
Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child.
Holy infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace."

Doesn't the subdued sweetness and tenderness of that verse fit in the Incarnation scene?

Well, let's back up. What's the big picture? What is God up to? Well, 1 Peter 2:6 gives us a keen insight. 1 Peter 2:6 says, "Behold, I lay in Zion a choice," an elect, "stone, a precious corner stone," prized and more dear, more honorable corner stone is what that means, "and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed." Jesus, the Son of God, the Savior born on this night, in his birth was the laying of the corner stone. He is the corner stone of another kingdom. Jesus, Jesus is the stone not made with human hands. His kingdom comes into the world but his kingdom is not of this world. His is an eternal kingdom.

And all the spiritual leaders and authorities of the day would clamor toward Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the cultural, intellectual, and thought to be the spiritual center of the world. To Jerusalem men journeyed to seek the will of God and the, the hand of God and to find the kingdom of God, yet tonight God was at work in tiny insignificant Bethlehem. All the pieces were coming together and God on this first Christmas night was laying the

foundation, the corner stone, of his eternal kingdom. No, not in Jerusalem but in Bethlehem.

The Lord of the kingdom is born, born of the lowly virgin and laid in a feed trough for his bed. No dignitaries welcomed his arrival. No royal palaces were furnished for his stay. No throne was given for him to sit upon. No scepter for him to rule with. No court to govern with. No empire to reign over, at least not one that could be seen at this point by human eyes.

Here we have just a common man, Joseph, and a common woman, Mary, and some common barn animals, in a common livestock feed trough for his bed. He comes almost completely unnoticed yet he comes as the corner stone. On this first Christmas night, the corner stone was laid just as the prophets foretold. Later on Calvary's cross, the corner stone would be set and secured. Then three days after his death, the corner stone will be beautified and glorified as he exits the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. His kingdom will be built up through the work of his church and the preaching of his gospel. Then at the set time, he will return but not as the corner stone but this time as the crushing stone. Daniel 2:44 prophesies, "the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever."

The baby born of Mary, born in tiny insignificant Bethlehem, this is the corner stone of God's eternal kingdom and the crushing stone that will one day consume all others. But note in our narrative the precision of providence. In verse 1 it says, "in those days a decree went forth from Caesar Augustus," but it's more than just something that happened in those days. No, it's a specific day and a specific time. Galatians 4:4 calls it the fullness of time, and Ephesians 1:10 talks about the fullness of time that is the summing up of all things in Christ.

Jesus is not only the centerpiece of history, he's the masterpiece of history. His birth was marked out from eternity past to occur on that specific night. The text says the decree went out from Caesar Augustus. God works through the sovereign decree of an earthly tyrant to accomplish his perfect ends. What an instrument Caesar Augustus was. He was the first of the Roman Caesars, a morally corrupt, treacherous man, given to pagan superstitions. He would rise every morning before sunlight that he might worship his pagan idols. A cruel man. He had over 500 of his Senators and, and Knights murdered fearing they might be opposing him on something. He was an egomaniac. On one occasion when he lost a sea battle, he had Neptune's statue dragged down into the sea and drowned just out of revenge. So this egomaniac tyrant issues a decree and he issues it solely and simply for the advancement of his reign and for the glory of his own kingdom, yet he is, in effect, serving a lowly pregnant girl, a Jewish girl, and he is serving the high and holy purposes of the one true God. By the web of providence, a kingdom begins that night that will absorb mighty Rome and all others. You see, in a very real sense, Caesar is an unintentional official in the kingdom of God.

Then in verses 2 through 4A of our text, again we see Joseph leaving. He goes to the home of his, uh, human lineage and there Mary has baby Jesus. He had registered. Took him about a week to get there, the Bible says. But overall, what a glory of God is shined forth in these events of divine providence. In this child's birth we see divine power and divine wisdom, divine faithfulness, divine holiness, divine love.

Also, the perfection of prophecy is seen here. In verse 4 the Bible says, "Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David." The prophets had foretold that the Christ would come of the lineage of David. Jeremiah 33:15 prophesied, "In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch of David to spring forth; and He shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth." I submit to you, friends, Jesus is the righteous Branch of David. Revelation 22:16, "'I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright and morning star.'" Only Jesus could be the root of David and yet again be the descendant of David.

Luke 2:6-7 in our narrative says, "While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." This one of transcendent holiness, absolute authority and invincible power is born to this poor virgin. Does not the wonder and glory of it all rush through our hearts with resplendent joy, even a deep, quiet joy? A poor young girl confined to a cliff-side shelter for animals in the throes of childbirth would evoke the pity and sympathy of any human observer, but to understand it was more than that, this was the birth of the King of glory, the Lord God Almighty. This is beyond human minds to grasp, frail emotions to embrace, and weak tongues to declare. If we were there that night, would we not just bow in worshipful silence if we had any understanding of what was really going on?

The birth of Christ speaks of many wonderful things. Hebrews 11:38 gives us, I think, a powerful insight into it. In Hebrews 11:38, the Bible talks about men, the old patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, men of God, and it says they were "men of whom the world was not worthy." Hebrews tells us these men wandered around in deserts and slept in caves and holes in the ground, not because they were unworthy, the text says but because the world was unworthy of them. The world did not deserve them. That's one message, I think, we learn here. This one born on this day is beyond the tarnished dignities and the so-called excellencies of this world. His holy dignity exceeds the treasures of this world. He is one of whom the world is not worthy so he comes into this world not with ceremony and celebration but in meekness and obscurity.

The innkeeper could not find it in his heart to find a place for this expecting mother and her soon to be newborn, but this was not ultimately the decision of the innkeeper. You see, the innkeeper was not worthy of his presence. But none are. Joseph and Mary were the only humans privileged to be there the moment of the arrival of the Redeemer King. Joseph and Mary being educated in the Old Testament prophecies and also receiving the

promises of the angel concerning the birth of Christ, indeed must have treasured these moments more than a lifetime of worldly treasures of pleasures.

In verse 7 of our narrative it says, "because there was no room for them in the inn." Van Doren in his excellent commentary says, quote, "Jesus has consecrated all the hard places where his people pass." The innkeeper had no room for him, the world has no room for him, yet he, in his heart, has room for all. When we begin to take in the holy wonder and glory of his birth, that he came that he might save us all from the miry pit and throes of sin, are we not cast into a wondrous and deep, quiet joy?

C. S. Lewis, the famed Oxford scholar, the author of "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe," and many other very popular books, C. S. Lewis recounts the story of when he was fighting in the war, this was World War I, and he says, "I was in a trench in Somme, France, and not too far away was another trench where the German soldiers were embedded." He said, "It was Christmas Eve and a unusual silence covered the entire area." He said, "And during that silence, we heard German voices coming out of the German trench. Some of the English soldiers could understand German enough to know what they were saying but," he said, "we all understood the tune. They were singing a Christmas carol and soon one after the other, the English soldiers in their trench began singing in harmony with the German soldiers." And C. S. Lewis said, "I saw grown men weep that night, and one by one German soldiers got out of their trench and walked toward our line, and one by one English soldiers got out of their trench and began walking toward their line singing 'Silent night, holy night. All is calm, all is bright.' And in the spirit of Christmas they exchanged gifts, food rations, that's all they had. And amazingly they knew that that night in this miraculous union and peaceful setting, they were exchanging rations but in the morning they would again exchange gunfire."

You know, isn't it true that these folks, these soldiers paradoxically so were fighting for joy in the midst of the most radical enmity? And you know, if you and I seek for it, if you and I fight for it, if we know him, you can find his joy that deep, quiet joy, and you can find it like those soldiers no matter the circumstance. His joy is deeper than the world's concerns.

Is he your joy? The presents disappear. My grandchildren get so many they get bored with opening them. The lights will be turned off. The trees will be taken out. There is only one true lasting joy and that is Christ. This Christmas, let's fight for that joy.