

The Nativity of Our Lord – Christmas Eve
December 24, 2008
Luke 2:10-11

“Lighten Up!”

It’s been a tough year in many ways. When people’s jobs and homes and savings are on the line, as they are on a level not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s, we sit up and take notice. The old joke asks what is the difference between a recession and depression? Answer: a recession is when our neighbor loses his or her job; a depression is when we lose our job. In all of this, we find that we are taking many things very seriously. Especially now, with the nation and world reeling in economic meltdown, we are prone to take ourselves even more seriously. We anxiously watch our investments dwindle down, wonder about how we’ll put the kids through school, and realize that retirement will have to wait. Times are indeed very tough right now. But dare I say it? “Lighten up!” Those two words, “Lighten up!” are part of everyday American speech, and we usually say this when somebody is way too intense, and taking himself or herself far too seriously. Those words are a reality check for us: “Lighten up!” Given the state of affairs nationally and globally, in the midst of our anxious concerns and fears, the message for this Christmas Eve is entitled “Lighten Up!” May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

The world into which Jesus was born several thousand years ago resembles very much our contemporary world today: rampant greed and corruption, suspicion and mistrust of institutions and their leaders, poverty and injustice, shifting people groups and populations, unrest and a desire for purpose and meaning in life. So, if the world hasn’t changed much in 2000 years, did Jesus’ birth really accomplish anything? Does the message of God becoming flesh have anything to say to our jaded worldview? I believe it does, and it begins with the message that the angel brought to those shepherds in the hills outside Bethlehem on that first Christmas night: **“I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord”** (Luke 2:10-11). If there is one thing that is noticeably and terribly absent from our contemporary lives in the early years of this twenty-first century, it is joy. Where is the joy? Where is that deep contentment that enables us to withstand the pressures, the ups and downs, in life, and not be consumed by them? Where is the joy?

My friends, lighten up! Joy is not spelled F-U-N; it is not mere entertainment or the accumulation of material goods. It goes much deeper than this. The joy I’m talking about comes from outside us, just like the angels brought **“good news of great joy”** from God to the shepherds. That good news of great joy came from outside them. A good number of our beloved Christmas carols point us to this truth. Let’s consider a few: **“Joy to the World”** – why? Because **“The Lord is come!”** **“Oh, Come, All Ye Faithful, joyful and triumphant”** – why? **“Come and behold him, born the king of angels; Oh, come, let us adore him... Christ the Lord.”** **“Good Christian friends, rejoice with heart and soul and voice.”** – why? **“Give ye heed to what we say: Jesus Christ it born today.”** And one that’s been going through my head a lot recently, the Sussex Carol: **“On Christmas night all Christians sing to hear the news the angels bring, News of great joy, news of great mirth, News of our merciful King’s birth.”** Stanza two gets to the heart of the matter here: **“Then why should men on earth be so sad, since our Redeemer made us glad, When from our sin he set us free, All for to gain our liberty.”** Would there be joy in our Christmas celebration if we, like the Who’s in Whoville, had a Grinch who stole our Christmas? Would we gather on Christmas morning, **“the tall and the small [with] singing! Without any presents at all?”** Would Christmas still come if it came **“without ribbons... without tags... without packages, boxes or bags?”** Is our Christmas joy dependent on these things?

The coming of Jesus brings in a time of joy. The effect of Jesus’ work and preaching, his miracles and healing, his suffering, death, and resurrection, is to bring joy. Luke’s Gospel, from where this Christmas

Gospel is taken, has joy as one of its basic themes. And this joy has its source beyond mere earthly, human joy. It is a joy *in the Lord* and it comes from outside ourselves, as Paul the apostle tells us: **“For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”** (Romans 14:17). These gifts – righteousness, peace, and joy – are things that money cannot buy, and they are needed now more than ever in our world. When trouble and distress come our way, and they will, our joy in the Lord is not diminished because of outward circumstances. We take as our example the Lord Jesus himself, **“looking to Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, scorning the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God”** (Hebrews 12:2). And so, because of Jesus and the deep and abiding joy he gives us, we are able to persevere and hold fast, even in uncertain times, even in times of hardship, distress, and pain. The “good news of great joy” which the angel brought to the shepherds so very long ago continues to ring out in the lives of God’s people today. The joy of sin that is forgiven and remembered no more, covered with the blood of Christ, is God’s Christmas gift to you and me, to the world. Because of Jesus, the Word-made-flesh, we can lighten up.

People in our world are hungry for joy. But where is true and lasting joy to be found? That’s where we come in. My friends, it’s time to lighten up – to lighten up the world; to be shining with the light and joy of our newborn King. Remember the words of Jesus: **“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid... Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven”** (Matthew 5:14, 16). That’s our calling as the redeemed people of God – to carry the light and joy of Christ our Savior out there into the world where there is darkness and sorrow, so that they might receive what we ourselves have received: the good news of great joy that unto you, unto us – unto everyone – is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace, good will toward men. Amen.