

Christmas JOY!!
Christmas Day II – Year B
December 25, 2011
Luke 2: [1-7]8-20

Welcome to Christmas Morning. I just love this day and all that it means. For me, it's the fact that God chose to live among us as human – to experience all that we experience, good or bad. No other religion has that. God with us.... I love it. And I love Advent and all the decorative happenings around the area. I really like to decorate my house with Nativity scenes: I collect them. We were up in Oregon after Thanksgiving to get our house up there ready to sell and move Rod's parents closer to us. So I'm all about tossing stuff away and I sent a lot of old Christmas stuff to Goodwill so others could have it. But I was looking for one of my nativity scenes that I thought I had left up there and I could not find it. I thought – it must be in California. So when I got home – I looked and I couldn't find any of my nativity scenes. I panicked! I thought I had given them all to Goodwill. I was so depressed, then into denial, and then into reasoning – well others will enjoy them. I was heartbroken. Then I came upon this storage bin and lo and behold – there were all of my nativity decorations. Such joy came over me – I took them all out and I have filled our place with every one of them – there are 20. I have one in my bedroom, several on my bookcases, one in each bathroom..... I have some from Egypt, Mexico, Vietnam, Africa. I have one that was made in China – it's one piece and Mary is gazing lovingly at a sheep instead of baby Jesus (you know – somehow I don't think Jesus would mind that). I brought one of my favorites with me today.....

This one is my favorites because it is so joyful – look at the colors! There's movement in the design. The Wise Men look like they are dancing. And Mary – she isn't just sitting there gazing on her baby – she's excited – marveling at his presence. Even Joseph looks pretty bouncy.

This nativity, over all my other ones is what I feel should reflect the joy that this day brings. The joy that Jesus brings into our lives. And today's gospel is filled with that joy!

The shepherds are watching the sheep during the night, when *suddenly* the darkness was abruptly overcome by the brilliance of heavenly light. This is exactly what God has done in Christ Jesus. He has interrupted the dark sorrow of our lives, or even just the day to day ordinary routines, with the brilliance of joy.

The angelic greeting was the typical greeting of God's messengers in the Scriptures: "Do not be afraid." What is it about angels that require these immediate words of comfort?? An angel announced the birth of the Savior of the world. Then a whole host of angels appeared. Notice the angels were sent to a poor, rag-tag, band of common, hard-working shepherds, who were going about their normal routine late-shift work. These shepherds are actually social outcasts – they live away from home, leaving their families unprotected. They do not own the land their sheep are grazing on, so they could be considered thieves if they haven't worked out an arrangement with the land owner. But here's an interesting tidbit, it is commonly assumed the shepherds were guarding the flocks used in Temple sacrifice. Perhaps symbolically the

shepherds, who guarded the sacrificial sheep, were some of the first to behold the sacrificial Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Nonetheless, it is to these unlikely and “quote” unworthy characters that the first news of the birth of Jesus is given, not to the Kings, Caesars, and Chief Priests. But perhaps it is precisely the despised and the disreputable that are most in need of - and the most receptive to - the joy of this Good News. It shows us that no matter where we are, it is not out of the way for God to visit us with His presence.

As we listened to this story, the sense of the joy the angels felt being able to announce the birth of Christ is obvious. The army of heaven was delighted to tell the story of the birth. You get the sense they could not wait to tell the good news of grace and peace of God in Christ Jesus. They were so excited about telling everyone that God’s presence had now entered the world.

The shepherd’s response to this joy is immediate ...”Let us go **see**...” Now the word “see” has a deeper meaning than just to observe. It implies experiential knowledge. So they were really saying...”Let’s go experience this so we will know completely.” This contagious sense of joy is caught by the shepherds when they came upon Jesus. They could not contain their joy and so went back to everyone else. Isn’t that how it is when you have that special experience in getting to know Jesus that first time? The zeal of a new Christian is hard to resist – even though we can be pesky at times.

The world needs this contagious joy. There are way too many people unemployed or homeless. Many are just one or two paychecks away from being on the street.

Ironically our culture seems to be in a continual pursuit of joy. Perhaps that’s why the malls are full and the parking lots at bars are rarely empty. People are looking for joy, but they’re striking out.

As many people learn this time of year you can’t have joy by fighting the crowds each December evening in a shopping mall. The gift you just had to have doesn’t produce eternal joy. How long does it last, fifteen minutes? You’d have to feel sorry for the person who claimed to feel real, deep, abiding joy after receiving a “Salad Shooter” or the amazing “ginza knives” on Christmas morning. In a world given to the pursuit of joy through materialism and entertainment, it isn’t surprising people are so devoid of real abiding joy.

One reason is that joy cannot be self induced. I thought I was pretty good at creating my own happiness – I really did not believe God and happiness were two words that went together. Getting the things I wanted, being treated as someone special gave what I thought was joy, but it never lasted very long. Then I needed the next best thing. It wasn’t until I saw those who served Jesus doing the mundane and often dirty jobs in life (like the shepherds) experience a joy and peace that passeth all understanding that I saw the connection between God and real, eternal, abiding joy. I experienced the incarnation of God in my life. I felt the love of God and I needed to share it – just like the shepherds. That was 26 years ago and the joy has never left.

This is God's answer to a hurting world: it is seen in the Christmas narrative: Jesus is born. Christ the Lord arrived in the flesh. Joy is a byproduct; it is the result of this historic event – that really happened. Joy is not found by looking for joy. His very appearance is the cause for real joy. God wants us to experience real joy; therefore, God became flesh. He sent His one and only Son into the world. Christ the Lord is born to us. Now joy comes.

The shepherds heard the good news and once they got over their fear, chose to go and see for themselves. They decided to take a risk in order to know for themselves the Messiah had come.

We, too, must take a risk and experience the birth of Jesus in us. It is a risk because it requires us to look beyond the temporal things we try to do for ourselves, to look beyond the obvious, and to realize it isn't something we can give to ourselves. This joy comes from God; from a tiny infant born in a small corner of the world.

This occurs not only on an individual level, but also on a corporate level. We are called to see the Christ child. We are called to experience Jesus in our lives and to truly know Him. This is done individually and communally. We will know Christ best and experience Him most when we see Jesus in the lives of the Body of Christ around us. The shepherds heard in community, they experienced the birth in community, and they told it in community.

Take a risk. Come and see. Experience and know: Christ the Lord is born to you this day. *Amen.*