

"BE JOYFUL"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
December 15, 1996

'BE JOYFUL'

INTRODUCTION

Children's letters to Santa Claus are always a source of great delight. Let me share a few with you...

"Dear Santa: Last year you didn't leave me anything good. The year before last year, you didn't leave me anything good. This year is your last chance.."
(Signed, Alfred)

"Dear Santa: My baby brother would like a cowboy suit. Do you have one with diapers?" (Signed, Andy)

"Dear Santa: In my house there are three boys. Richard is two. Jeffrey is four. Norman is seven. Richard is good sometimes. Jeffrey is good sometimes. Norman is good all the time."
(Signed, Norman)

Calvin (of Calvin and Hobbes comic strip fame) stands behind a tree, poised to throw a snowball at his "girlfriend". She says,

"I see you, Calvin, and you'd better not throw that snowball! I'm mailing a letter to Santa right now." Calvin asks, "Is the envelope sealed?" "Yes" she replies, "But I could write a PS on the back."

"Do you have a pen?" Calvin asks. "As a matter of fact, I do!" she answers. Calvin drops the snowball and says, "I'll bet she's bluffing, but this is not the time of the year to tempt fate."

One comedian claims his wife hasn't spoken to him since last Christmas.

"I asked her what she wanted for Christmas" he explains, "and she said, 'Oh, just surprise me'. So at three o'clock Christmas morning, I leaned over and went 'BOO!'"

DEVELOPMENT

In my ministry, I have often heard people agonize over God's will for their life. Is this God's will for me? Is that God's will for me? Did such-and-such happen because of God's will? Would you like to know what God's will is for you? I can tell you absolutely, without any hesitation or trepidation, what God's will is for your life. It is right here in Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. Paul writes,

"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus". (I Thessalonians 5: 16-18)

There it is from God's word in black and white. God's will is for you to be JOYFUL!

There's a small town out in Idaho that requires its citizens always to appear to be happy when seen in public places. Rexburg, Idaho retains an old ordinance prohibiting local citizens from walking down the street while "looking gloomy". Maybe we need a rule like that. It is God's will, according to St. Paul, for us to be joyful.

I came across a short article by a Dr. Paul Rees that had a very intriguing title. "Gloomy Caesar and Happy Jesus". The author was contrasting what we know of Tiberius Caesar, who ruled Rome in AD 30, with what we know of Jesus of Nazareth. Of Tiberius, with all his power, pomp and possessions, the historian Pliny wrote, "He is the gloomiest of mankind". But of Jesus we read that sitting in the shadow of His cross, He "took bread and gave thanks....." and when the holy supper was over, they sang a "hymn and went out". Dr. Rees concluded his article by saying,

"You and I are not to be dispensers of Caesar's gloom, but rather transmitters of Jesus' joy!"

I friend...a Jewish friend...at the 92nd "Y" was telling me that according to the Jewish Encyclopedia that no language has as many words for joy and for rejoicing as does Hebrew. In the Old Testament, thirteen Hebrew roots, found in twenty-seven different words, are used primarily for some aspect of joy or joyful participation in religious worship. In contrast to the rituals of other faiths of the East, Israelite worship was essentially a joyous proclamation and celebration. The good Israelite regarded the act of thanking God as the supreme joy of his life. Pure joy is joy in God as both its source and object. The psalmist says,

"Thou dost show me the path of life; in thy presence there is fullness of joy, and in thy right hand are pleasures forevermore."

(Psalm 16: 11)

The Hebrew Bible is a book of joy! Our New Testament is a book of Good News. That is, indeed, God's will for us - to be joyful, and to pray continually and to give God thanks in all circumstances.

Dr. Paul Rees, whom I mentioned earlier, once told about a man from Louisville, Kentucky, who had to travel to St. Louis on business. This was years ago when Christian people still kept Sunday as the Sabbath. For this man, "keeping the Sabbath" meant not riding the trains on Sunday. Thus, after he finished up his business late Saturday night, he had to stay over in St. Louis until the following Monday morning. On Sunday morning, he left the hotel looking for a place to worship. The streets were deserted, but finally he saw a policeman and asked him for directions to the nearest Protestant Church. The stranger thanked the policeman for the information and was about to walk off when he turned and asked the policeman,

"Why have you recommended that particular church to me? There must be several churches nearby that you could have recommended".

The policeman smiled and replied,

"I'm not a church man myself, but the people who come out of that church are the happiest looking church - people in St. Louis. I thought that would be the kind of church that you would like to attend."

I find I can relate to that...and perhaps you can, too. Who doesn't want to be around happy and positive people? This is the great secret that many of us have hidden from the world. God's will is for us to be joyful and positive and up-beat. I've long felt that more and more people would be drawn to this church if somehow we got the reputation around town as being the happiest-looking folks in New York City!

Here's one that caught my attention. Yvonne Dilling, a church worker from Indiana, spent time in Salvadoran refugee camps in Honduras during the time of much violence and heartache in El Salvador. One group of Salvadorans fled from their village and across the Lempa River to Honduras, while helicopters strafed the shores. Many people died in the crossing, but the refugees immediately began to build a camp. Their first task was to form three committees:

"A construction committee, an Education Committee, and the Committee de Alegria...." which translated means, "The Committee of Joy".

Celebration was as basic to the life of the refugees as digging latrines and teaching their children to read. Even in exile, they remembered to build and to plant and to dance!

One thing many people have forgotten in their Christian pilgrimage is the duty to be joyful. Maybe it is the innate joyfulness of children that caused Jesus to use a little child as the sole embodiment of the Kingdom of God. As long as children feel loved, their joy is evident and that is true even in the worst situations.

One writer tells of her trepidation at seeing the slums of Bombay. The poverty was overwhelming and hygiene was almost nonexistent. Nonetheless, the air was filled with the laughter of children at play. Psychiatrist Elisabeth Bubler-Ross speaks movingly of an even worse situation. Visiting a children's barracks in one of the German death camps after the Second World War, she had expected to see evidence of terror. Instead the walls were covered with drawings of butterflies - a universal symbol of joy.

For those of us who are adults, one thing that makes Christmas so joyful is seeing the wide-eyed expressions of wonder on little faces. Children know about joy. Adults can lose their joy so easily. What does it take to rob a person of his or her joy? What causes more holiday headaches, someone has asked: a houseful of relatives or the words, "some assembly required?" The Exedrin Headaches Resource Center took a poll to find out and here is a list of the "joy robbers" they discovered during the holiday season. Are you ready for them?

1. Fighting crowds and traffic.
2. Not getting enough sleep and changing sleep patterns.
3. Not having enough time to get everything done.
4. Spending too much money.
5. Eating or drinking too much.
6. Skipping meals because of busy schedule.
7. Getting together with friends and family.
8. Cooking and cleaning.
9. Long plane-train, car trips.
10. Being apart from friends and family during holidays.

In one of his books, John Maxwell tells about a woman who was determined to let nothing rob her of her Christmas joy - even the rejection of her family. One Christmas, Maxwell was walking through the church offices wishing everyone a Merry Christmas. Stopping to speak to one of the volunteer secretaries, he asked, "Are you ready for Christmas?" And with a smile she replied, "Well, almost....just one more Care Bear to stuff." Figuring she was making the bears for her grandchildren, he asked, "And how many grandchildren do you have?" She replied, "None....but that's okay....I went out into my neighborhood and adopted some. I figured that if I'm going to have a family at Christmas, then I'd better go round them up!"

With a little coaxing from Maxwell, she began to explain some of the problems she had with her own family. The more she told him, the more he sensed that this remarkable lady refused to wallow in the pool of pity in which so many are drowning. Christmas to her would be lovely and not lonely only because she would not allow her attitude to crash over things she could not control. Many of us could learn from that determined lady. God's will for each of us this Christmas is joy.

SOME SUGGESTIONS

So let me suggest in the remaining moments something that may be very hard for some of you. I know this. If your heart is aching this Advent Season for any reason...the loss of love in a marriage, the memory of someone you love who now is with God, concern about a teenage child, concerns about your health. Don't let despair defeat you. Joy is the Christian's obligation - it is our responsibility. Find some way this special season to defeat the blues. Join a group that is singing carols. Work in a soup kitchen. Adopt a needy child for Christmas. Think of shut-ins who have not one to care about them - do something positive, something heart-warming, something that will bring someone else a bit of joy. For joy has a way of boomeranging and giving the person who gives it more joy than the one who receives it. Joy is the natural emotion of the Christian. We dare not let it slip away.

A man named Scott Walker tells about a tragedy that came into his life and how, by the grace of God, he was able to turn it into a triumph. Holding a flashlight in his hand, he wearily watched the flood waters of Hurricane Hugo rush through the basement of his family's home. Seconds before midnight, the door had collapsed under pressure from a mounting tidal surge, and now five feet of swirling water rampaged through their storage room. By flashlight beam, he counted basement steps rapidly being crested by water.

"Four more steps and it will be in the living room",
he thought helplessly.

Then he saw it - a large cardboard box bobbing its way out the door. He gasped, and without thinking, he plunged into the water. He grabbed the box and struggled back to the steps. The box contained Christmas decorations collected over the years, and he was not about to let them be washed away.

He peeled open the soggy container and sighed with relief. Inside were the beautiful mahogany figures of their family's nativity scene, carved years ago in the Philippines where his parents were missionaries. It had become the focal point of his family's Christmas, reminding them of the true meaning of the season. "We almost lost it" he whispered, as he dried the wet figures with a towel. "We almost lost it."

As he began the preparations for Christmas that year, it seemed to Scott that too often he had lost the true meaning of Christmas. Familiarity from years of repeating the Christmas Story acts like a tidal surge...sweeping away the wonder and the mystery and the joy of the birth of Jesus. This coming Christmas, he wanted to look at the wooden figures of his family's Nativity Scene with new eyes. He wanted to hear the Christmas story with new ears. He wanted to sing with new fervor those beautiful carols that take us back across the year.

Scott Walker discovered what many of us have discovered. The joy of Christmas is so precious. We cannot afford to let it slip away without having it take up residence in our hearts. After all, this is God's will for us - that we should discover that joy and then share it with others!

PRAYERS

"BE JOYFUL"

A Sermon By

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Do we have anyone here from Idaho? If so, you're probably aware of the fact that there's a small town in Idaho that requires its citizens always to appear to be happy when seen in public places. Rexburg, Idaho retains an old ordinance that prohibits its citizens from walking down the street while "looking gloomy". Maybe we need a rule like that. Anyway, it is God's will, says Paul, for us to be joyful and who are we to question St. Paul.

"Gloomy Caesar and Happy Jesus" is the title of an article by Dr. Paul Rees in which he contrasts what we know of Tiberius Caesar - who ruled Rome in 30 AD - with what we know of Jesus of Nazareth. Of Tiberius Caesar...with all his power and pomp and worldly possessions...the historian Pliny wrote, "He is the gloomiest of all men". But of Jesus we read that sitting in the shadow of His cross on the night He was betrayed, "took bread and gave thanks...and when the supper was over, they sang a hymn and went out". Dr. Rees concludes the article with these words,

"You and I are not to be dispensers of Caesar's gloom, but rather transmitters of Jesus' joy!"

A Jewish friend at the 92nd Street Y was telling me recently that no other language has as many words for joy and rejoicing as does Hebrew and that in the Old Testament, 13 Hebrew roots that are found in 27 different words are used primarily for some aspect of joy or of joyful participation in religious worship. In contrast to the rituals of other faiths of the East, Israelite worship was essentially a joyous proclamation and celebration and that for the good Israelite, the act of thanking God was the supreme joy of his life. Pure joy is joy "in God" as both its source and object. The Psalmist says,

"Thou dost show me the path of life. In Thy presence there is fullness of joy, and in Thy right hand are pleasures forevermore"
(Psalm 16: 11)

The Hebrew Bible and our Old Testament is a book of joy! And our New Testament is a book of "Good News". God's will for us, indeed, is to be joyful...and to pray continually and to give thanks to God...in all circumstances.

Dr. Paul Rees whom I mentioned a moment ago tells of a man from Louisville who had to travel to St. Louis on business...over a weekend and this was back in those years when Christian folk still kept Sunday as the Sabbath. For this man, "keeping the Sabbath" for him meant not riding the trains on Sunday and thus... after finishing up his business late on Saturday, he had to stay over in St. Louis until Monday morning. On Sunday morning, he left his hotel looking for a church in which to worship. The streets were deserted as he stepped out of the hotel and spotting a policeman, he asked him for directions to the nearest Protestant Church. The stranger thanked the policeman for the information he gave him and was getting ready to walk away when he asked the policeman,

"Why have you recommended that particular church to me....there must be several churches nearby that you could have recommended....." The policeman smiled and said, "Well, I'm not a church man myself...but the people who come out of that church are the happiest-looking church people in all of St. Louis...I thought that would be the kind of church you'd like to attend!"

I relate to that and perhaps you do, too. It's always more fun to be around happy and positive people. Yes, God's will is for us to show a bit of joy, to be "up-beat", positive and affirming. Someone told me some time back that of all the churches he had visited in this city that this church had the "happiest-looking" folks sitting in the pews. I hope it's still true for it made my day, but here's one that caught my attention.

Yvonne Dilling, a church worker from Indiana, gave time in a refugee camp in Honduras during the time of much violence and heart-ache in El Salvador. She told of how one group of Salvadorans fled from their village and across the Lempa River to Honduras, while helicopters strafed the shores and many people died in the crossing, but the surviving refugees immediately began to build a camp and their first task was to form three committees. The committees were:

"First: a construction committee. Second: an Education Committee. Third: the Committee de Alegria, which translated means, "The Committee of Joy!"

In other words, celebration was as basic to the life of those refugees as the digging of latrines and teaching their children how to read. Even in exile, they remembered to build and to plant and also to dance!

One writer tells of her trepidation at seeing the slums of Bombay, where the poverty was just overwhelming and hygiene was almost non-existent. Nonetheless, the air was filled with the laughter of children at play. And psychiatrist, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross speaks movingly of an even worse situation when she speaks of visiting a children's barracks in one of the German death camps after the War where expecting to find evidence of terror, she instead found the walls covered with drawings of butterflies - a universal symbol of joy.

I see too many people...adults...who in their Christian pilgrimage have forgotten to be joyful and perhaps it was that "innate" sense of joyfulness of children that caused our Lord to use a little child as the sole embodiment of the Kingdom of God. As long as children feel loved, their joy is evident and that is true even in the most difficult and even in the worst situations. For those of us who are adults, one thing that makes Christmas so joyful is seeing the "wide-eyed expressions" of wonder on little faces. Children know about joy while adults can lose their joy so easily. Their faces turn blank and sour and sad.

Why does that happen and what does it take to rob a person of his or her sense of joy? Not feeling loved? I'm sure that has something to do with it. Someone has asked what it is that causes more "holiday headaches" - a household full of relatives or those words, "Some assembly required?"...which I interpret to mean, "you're expected to be there!" Well, the EXEDRIN HEADACHE RESOURCE CENTER took a poll to find out the answer and here is their list of the "Joy Robbers" they came up with during the Holiday Season. Ten of them. Any of them touch you?

- (1) Fighting crowds and traffic.
- (2) Not getting enough sleep and changing sleep patterns.
- (3) Not having enough time to get everything done.
- (4) And spending too much money.
- (5) Eating or drinking too much.
- (6) Skipping meals because of a busy schedule.
- (7) Getting together with friends and family.
- (8) Cooking and cleaning.
- (9) Long plane-train-car trips.
- (10) Being apart from friends / family during the holidays.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

God's will, I believe, for each of us this Christmas is to experience a bit of real joy! And let me suggest in the remaining moments something that may be very hard and very difficult for some of you.

If your heart is aching this Advent for any reason...the loss of love in a marriage, or the memory of someone you love who now is with God, or perhaps a concern about a teenage child, or maybe some concerns about your own health or that of someone close to you....please, don't let despair defeat you. Let me remind you that JOY is the Christian's obligation. It is our responsibility. Find some way this special season to beat the blues and let joy ring in your heart. Join a group that is singing carols. Work in a soup kitchen or get involved in a Feeding program for the needy. Adopt a needy child for Christmas or think of some shut-ins you can visit or call or even send a card to...someone who has no one to care about them. Do something positive, something heart-warming, something that will bring someone a bit of joy. You see...

Joy has a way of "boomeranging" and giving the person who gives it more joy than the one who receives it. Joy is the natural emotion of the Christian, and friend....we dare not let it ever slip away from us.

Scott Walker tells about a tragedy that touched his life and how - by the grace of God - he was able to turn it into a triumph. Holding a flashlight in his hand, he stood at the top of the stairs watching the flood waters of Hurricane Hugo rush through the basement of his family's home. Seconds before mid-night, the door had collapsed under pressure from a mounting tidal surge and now five feet of swirling, muddy water was rampaging through their storage room. By flashlight beam, he counted the number of basement steps rapidly being crested by water. He thought to himself...."Four more steps and it will be in our living room...."

And then he saw it...a large cardboard box bobbing its way out the door. He gasped and without thinking, he plunged into the water...grabbing the box and struggling to bring it back and up the steps. That very box contained the Christmas decorations collected over the years and he was not about to let any of them be washed away.

He peeled open the soggy container and sighed with relief. Inside were the beautiful carved mahogany figures of his family's Nativity Scene, carved and purchased years ago in the Philippines where his parents had served as missionaries. It had become the focal point of his family's Christmas...reminding them of the true meaning of the Christmas Season. "We almost lost it.....we almost lost it", he whispered to himself.

CONCLUSION

As we continue with our preparations for Christmas this year, let us be on guard lest like Scott Walker we almost end up losing the real thing, the real meaning. Familiarity from years of repeating the Christmas story can act a bit like a tidal wave...tidal surge....sweeping away the wonder and the mystery and the joy of the birth of the baby, Jesus. Let us look at those wooden figures of our nativity scenes with new eyes and to hear the Christmas story with new ears and to sing with new fervor those beautiful carols that take many of us back across the years. I think that Scott Walker discovered what many of us have discovered...the joy of Christmas is so precious. We cannot afford to let it slip away without having it take up residence in our hearts, for after all, this is God's will for us....that we should discover that joy and then share it with others.

PRAYER Help us to be sensitive, O God, to Your presence and to Your nearness in these moments...on this Third Sunday of Advent. We ask for ourselves this year the most meaningful Advent Season we have ever had....that we can remember.

Drive us to our knees....to THE BOOK. To an awareness of our sins and our selfishness, to our shortcomings and to a careful searching of our virtues, to a serious examination of carols glibly sung, and words lightly spoken.

So that when Christmas morning breaks for us this year, we may have something more to show for our much running about than tired feet, wrapped presents, grumpy spirits, empty pocketbooks and regrets for cards not sent and for gifts not given. All of this we ask in the name and spirit of Jesus, the Child of Bethlehem whose day of birth we prepare to celebrate. Amen.

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INTRODUCTION

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"Dear Santa: Last year you didn't leave me anything good. The year before last year, you didn't leave me anything good. This year is your last chance..."
Signed, Alfred

"Dear Santa: My baby brother would like a cowboy suit. Do you have one with diapers?"
Signed, Andy

"Dear Santa: In my house there are three boys. Richard is two. Jeffrey is four. Norman is seven. Richard is good sometimes. Jeffrey is good sometimes. Norman is good all the time."
Signed, Norman

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"I see you, Calvin, and you'd better not throw that snowball! I'm mailing a letter to Santa right now." Calvin asks, "Is the envelope sealed?" "Yes" she replies, "But I can always write a PS on the back."

"Do you have a pen?" Calvin asks. "As a matter of fact, I do!" she answers. Calvin drops the snowball and says to himself....."I'll bet she's bluffing, but this is not the time of the year to tempt fate..." He drops the snowball.

A friend claims his wife hasn't spoken to him since last Christmas.

"I asked her what she wanted for Christmas" he explains, "And she said, 'oh, just surprise me'. So at three o'clock Christmas morning, I leaned over and went 'BOO!'"

GOD'S WILL FOR YOU

Across the years of my ministry, I've often heard people agonize over God's will for their life. Is this God's will for me? they may ask. Or, is that God's will. Did such-and-such happen because of God's will? Would you like to know what God's will is for your life. It's right here in Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. Pauls writes,

"Be joyful always. Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus". (I Thessalonians 5: 16-18)

There it is my friend from God's WORD...in black and white. God's will is for you to be JOYFUL! To be joyful.

I can relate to that and maybe you can, too. It's always more fun to be around happy and positive people. Yes, God's will is for us to be joyful and positive and "up-beat". Some one told me recently that of all the churches he has visited in this city, that we have the "happiest-looking" folks in our pews. Believe me, that made me happy. But here's one that caught my attention.

Yvonne Dilling, a church worker from Indiana, spent time in a refugee camp in Honduras during the time of much violence and heartache in El Salvador. One group of Salvadorans fled from their village and across the Lempa River to Honduras, while helicopters strafed the shores. Many people died in the crossing, but the surviving refugees immediately began to build a camp and their first task was to form three committees. They were:

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I think that many people have forgotten in their Christian pilgrimage to be joyful. And perhaps it was that innate sense of joyfulness of children that caused our Lord to use a little child as the sole embodiment of the Kingdom of God. As long as children feel loved, their joy is evident and that is true even in the worst situations.

For those of us who are adults, one thing that makes Christmas so joyful is seeing the wide-eyed expressions of wonder on little faces. Children know about joy while adults can lose their joy so easily. Why does that happen and what does it take to rob a person of his or her sense of joy?

Someone has asked what it is that causes more holiday headaches...a houseful of relatives or the words, "some assembly required?" (which I interpret as "you're expected to be there...") Well, the Exedrin Headaches Resource Center took a poll to find out the answer and here is the list of the "joy-robbers" they came up with during the Holiday Season. Ten of them and see if they touch you.

- (1) Fighting crowds and traffic. (2) Not getting enough sleep and changing sleep patterns.
- (3) Not having enough time to get everything done.
- (4) Spending too much money. (5) Eating or drinking too much. (6) Skipping meals because of a busy schedule. (7) Getting together with friends and family. (8) Cooking and cleaning. (9) Long plane-train-car trips. (10) Being apart from friends and family during the holidays.

In one of his books, John Maxwell tells about a woman who was determined to let nothing rob her of her Christmas joy, even the rejection of her by her very own family. One Christmas, Maxwell recounts, he was walking through the church offices wishing everyone a Merry Christmas. Stopping to speak to one of the volunteer secretaries, he asked, "Are you ready for Christmas?" And with a smile she replied, "Well...not quite, but almost...I'm getting there...I have just one more CARE BEAR to stuff". Figuring she was making the bears for her grandchildren, he asked, "And how many grandchildren do you have?" And she replied,

"None...but that's okay...I went out into my neighborhood and adopted some....I figured that if I'm going to have a family at Christmas, then I'd better get busy and go round them up."

With a little coaxing from Maxwell, she began to explain some of the problems she had with her own family and the more she told him, the more he sensed that this rather remarkable lady was refusing to wallow in the pool of self-pity in which so many are drowning. Christmas to her would be lovely and not lonely only because she would not allow her attitude to crash over things she could not control. Perhaps we can learn something from that determined lady.

CLOSING SUGGESTIONS

God's will, I believe, for each of us this Christmas is to experience a bit of joy. And let me suggest in the remaining moments something that may be very hard, very difficult for you...some of you.

If your heart is aching this Advent Season for any reason...the loss of love in a marriage, the memory of someone you love who now is with God, or concern about a teenage child, or maybe some concerns about your own health or that of someone close to you....please don't let despair defeat you! Joy is the Christian's obligation. It is our responsibility. Find some way this special season to defeat the blues. Join a group that is singing carols. Work in a soup kitchen or a Saturday Feeding program. Adopt a needy child for Christmas or think of some shut-ins whom you could visit who have no one to care about them. Do something positive, something heart-warming, something that will bring someone else a bit of joy.

For joy has a way of boomeranging and giving the person who gives it more joy than the one who receives it. Joy is the natural emotion of the Christian, and friend, we dare not let it ever....I say ever...let it slip away.

Scott Walker tells about a tragedy that touched his life and how, by the grace of God, he was able to turn it into a triumph. Holding a flashlight in his hand, he wearily watched the flood waters of Hurricane Hugo rush through the basement of his family's home. Seconds before midnight, the door had collapsed under pressure from a mounting tidal surge, and now five feet of swirling water rampaged through their storage room. By flashlight beam, he counted the number of basement steps rapidly being crested by water.

"Four more steps and it will be in the living room"

he though helplessly to himself. And then he saw it...a large cardboard box bobbing its way out of the door. He gasped and without thinking, he plunged

into the water. He grabbed the box and struggled back to the steps with it. That very box contained Christmas decorations collected over the years and he was not about to let any of them be washed away.

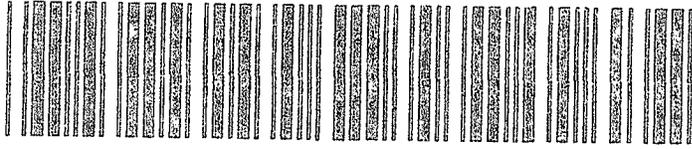
He says that he peeled open the soggy container and sighed with relief. Inside were the beautiful mahogany figures of his family's Nativity Scene, carbed years ago in the Philippines where his parents were missionaries. It had become the focal point of his family's Christmas, reminding them of the true meaning of the season. "We almost lost it" he whispered to himself...."We almost lost it."

CLOSING IT UP

Well, as he began the preparations for Christmas that year, it seemed to Scott that too often he had lost the true meaning of Christmas. Familiarity from years of repeating the Christmas Story acts like a tidal surge.....sweeping away the wonder and the mystery and the joy of the birth of the baby Jesus. This coming Christmas, he said, he really wanted to look at those wooden figures of his family's Nativity Scene with new eye snad to hear the Christmas story with new ears and to sing with new fervor those beautiful carols that take us back across so many years.

Scott Walker discovered what many of us have discovered. The joy of Christmas is so very precious. We cannot afford to let it slip away without having it take up residence in our hearts. After all, this is God's will for us....that we should discover that joy and then share it with others.

PRAYER



Bookmark