

"JOY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 36th Street
New York, New York 10028
December 17, 1989

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INTRODUCTION

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My nerves are at the mall, worrying whether I should have gotten the other necktie for Dad. My stomach is still at last night's party begging for more Christmas cookies.

My heart is stuck in traffic somewhere between mother's house, my boy friend's house and the adoreable man I saw at the Post Office...."

Her boss then asks, "What is it you want, Cathy?" And she replies,

"May what's left of me sneak home early and take a nap?"

Some of us may be feeling just about that frazzled. Isn't it wonderful to take a few moments to collect ourselves quietly here in Church and to center on the majesty of the Christmas message. Our theme for this Third Sunday of Advent is JOY!

DEVELOPMENT

Comedian Dom DeLuise tells about one of the best Christmas gifts he ever received. He says that there was a time when nothing made him laugh. "Everything was wrong - life was hopeless and I was useless". When his son asked what he wanted for Christmas, DeLuise replied, "HAPPINESS - and you can't give it to me". On Christmas Day his son handed him a piece of cardboard with HAPPINESS written on it. "You see, Dad", his son said, "I CAN give you happiness!" DeLuise' depression was shattered.

It's really amazing how children can bring us happiness. And that's what Christmas is really all about. We often say that Christmas is for children. But that's untrue. A child opening his or her new toy from Santa does not feel nearly the happiness Mom and Dad feel at that moment. Children do bring us joy, whether they are ours or some one else's. But there is ONE CHILD that has brought more joy into more people's lives than any other. He is the Christ Child of Bethlehem. The prophet Isaiah anticipated what His coming would mean. He wrote,

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord."

We love to sing that carol, "Joy to the World". But why? What is there about the coming of the Christ Child that brings joy into our world?

A VERTICAL DIMENSION TO LIFE

First of all, Christ's coming reminds us that there is a vertical dimension to life.

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"The mortgage is paid. We're fully insured. The kids are okay. We're healthy. And we have each other. It all equals happiness."

With a confused look on her face his wife said, "Walter...would you please run through that again...just one more time?"

In For Better or Worse, adolescent Michael looks at the tree with all of its presents around it and thinks,

"I wonder what I'm gonna get. I asked for video tapes, a laser tag, track pants, a camera..."

Grandpa comes in with a huge smile. As he and Michael stand there together in front of the tree, he says,

"You know, Mike...we've got it all! We've got our health, our home, a warm fire, good food and family. Only a fool could ask for more!"

We agree with Grandpa, but yet...deep in our hearts we yearn to believe that there is something more. We could list the things for which we are thankful this Christmas - food, family, health, a nice home and all those blessings this world can afford, and they are still not enough. Many possess all these things, but still have a deep emptiness in their hearts. I believe that is why - even though they may ignore the Church the rest of the year - they feel a tug...and love to hum the carols at Christmas time. Those carols are a good reminder in this old world that there is a vertical dimension to life...that though our health deserts us and though our loved ones are taken from us and even if our homes burn down, there is still reason to go on because, from out of the deepest recesses of eternity we yearn to believe that God really did send His own Son into our world to have dealings with our doings.

That great London preacher and pastor of a generation ago, Leslie Weatherhead, illustrates this beautifully. He told of a postal clerk in his country who handled the mail to Santa Claus. The clerk was called the "Nixie Clerk" because he handled all the mail that was "nixed" because of an insufficient, or inaccurate or an illegible address. Here is a letter sent to Weatherhead by the "Nixie Clerk". It read,

"Last Christmas the letters began to pile in, as usual, addressed to Santa. I suppose I get hundreds of letters every year. On Christmas Eve I was working late and was very sad and lonely over in my corner.

There was a great rush at the windows and the office, and the malls were loaded with Christmas gifts and greetings. A merry crowd rushed through the corridors and laughter sounded all around, but a great shadow of sorrow rested over me and my eyes burned as I bent over my work. Finally, the messenger brought me the last few "Nixies" of the day and laid them on my desk. I took up the first one mechanically. Attached to it was a note from Postman Number 34.

'This was given me by a little girl at 302 Walnut Street' said the note. My body tingled when I read it because that address was my own home! The envelope was a small one addressed to Santa Claus, North Pole. I recognized my own little girl's cramped writing. This is what she wrote,

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If you could give my Daddy something that would make him stop crying all the time, it would be the best thing you could do for me. I heard him tell mummy that only eternity could cure him. Could you give him some of that? Be sure to take the thing to Charlie and I will be your good little girl."

Could you give him a little "eternity?" We need from time to time a reminder eternity - that there is more than rocks and trees and houses and clothes and food and even our physical bodies. Christmas is that reminder.

Isaiah said people would rejoice because the glory of the Lord would be revealed. The world hungers to see that glory. For a moment, at least, in the star shining and the carols being sung and love being expressed, the world catches a glimpse of that glory. Christmas comes and as it does, it reminds us that there is a vertical dimension to life.

A JOY FOR ALL PEOPLE

In the second place, Christmas reminds us that the joy of the Christ Child in Bethlehem is joy for all people...even those who don't deserve it.

A disappointed second grader trudged up the front path leading to the porch of her home two weeks before Christmas and said to her mother with a sad expression on her face, "I'm to be one of the shepherds at the manger in the Christmas play".

Said her mother,

"That's wonderful, dear! But why so sad?"

"I wanted to be an angel. They're the ones that sing the song of rejoicing. I can't rejoice until I'm an angel."

That little girl was suffering from a common misconception...that only the angels get to rejoice. If so, it is only because the non-angelic do not know the Good News. The coming of the Christ Child is for those who know they haven't been all they ought to have been - who have sincere regrets over time misspent, values misplaced, actions misguided. He cares about us, too.

Now, that doesn't mean we can excuse our sinful and selfish behavior. Marvin, the cartoon character, shows infant Marvin writing his letter to Santa,

"And Santa...although I may not always be perfect, I think you would have to find me innocent of any wrong doing by virtue of the fact that I'm a little baby, unless, of course, you're one of the theological persuasion that believes in original sin."

Well, Marvin, most of us who have lived some time believe in original sin. We believe that sin is part and parcel of our human nature, but because it is part of our nature does not allow us to evade responsibility for our actions. We do not get off the hook that easily. Still, sometimes we need to be reminded that God is not like Santa. As the subway poster has reminded us in recent days, God loves us "naughty or nice". So, "come home, all ye faithful". "Share some of His Christmas presence". And if you're "feeling lost...follow three Wise Men." (With thanks to BBD & O and the Archdiocese!)

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We find joy, first of all, in the truth that there is a vertical dimension to life. Secondly, in the miracle of grace...freely given...that God loves us all regardless of what we've done.

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But, of course, the greatest joy comes when we open our hearts - as well as our presents - and receive the Christ Child as the Lord of our life.

According to an old legend, when the Magi were following the Star of Bethlehem, they came to the house of a certain woman. They said to her,

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PRAYER

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous
gift is given.
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INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we continue with our Advent journey toward Christmas and the Child who grew to be our King.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

"He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

We come like shepherds, lonely and seeking.
We come like Wise Men, so often looking in the wrong places for Your gifts.
We come because year after year we have heard the angels sing and been reminded of the gift of love.

We remember the HOPE He shared with the discouraged,
the HEALING He brought to the sick.

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

Touch with healing, O God, those whom we mention in our prayers
this hour:

Rebecca Daseler, infant daughter of Kim and Alison
Craig Radney. Marion Busk. Daisy Herrick. Bert
Williams. Ada Kinney. All...

beloved members and friends of this congregation. And let your healing benediction touch each of us at the point of our deepest need.

Answer the unspoken prayers in the deep places of our lives,
now offered to Thee on the altars of our hearts....spoken in the spirit of
Jesus who taught us to say when we pray:

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name.
Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth
as it is in Heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our
trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against
us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us
from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power,
and the Glory, forever. Amen."

ADVENT WREATH / CANDLE AND BANNER

THIRD SUNDAY

Today is the Third Sunday in Advent. Each Sunday during Advent, the boys and girls of our Sunday School are joining us down here...to sing and to lead us in the lighting of the Advent candles.

Today, Jennifer Levin, Bryan Goodwin and Anil Melwani are going to help us with the lighting of the three candles. First, we re-light the candles of hope and of peace, and then we light Candle Number Three - the Candle of Joy!

Our third Advent banner is here on the wall helping to remind us of the joy of this holy season. Jesus always brings hope and peace and joy in to our lives. Before we light the candles, the children are going to sing for us:

"Candle, candle burning bright,
Shining in the cold winter night;
candle, candle burning bright,
Fill our hearts with Christmas light"

PRAYER

"Fill our hearts, O God, with the Christmas lights of hope, and peace and joy.

For these warm and wonderful moments together here in Your house, O God, we thank you.

And we thank you for these children...who are helping all of us to get ready for Christmas and Your coming once again into our world.

Help each of us to listen carefully that we may hear the song of the angels. In the spirit of Christ, we pray".

CAROL

No. 227 "The Friendly Beasts". Two verses.

PASTORAL PRAYER: December 17, 1989

HELP US, O GOD, in these days of Advent, to prepare ourselves so that when the star shines over a stable and the angels sing the Good News, we may be ready to receive it because our hearts are open and our spirits are receptive to Your leading.

FORGIVE our absorption with the glitter and tinsel of life; with things that are superficial, and lift our minds to the hope, the peace and the presence of Your healing touch

IN THIS GLAD AND JOYOUS SEASON when we prepare for the coming of the Christ Church, refresh us anew with a vision of His way.

GIVE US the childlike spirit of trust in Your care.
of joy in Your gifts.
of wonder at the mystery of life.

DRAW THE weak and the lonely into the circle of Your strength and care.

Inspire us to share with others the gifts You have given us.
May each of us know the loving spirit of Christ in the shadows as well as in the radiance of each day.
May this Holy Season be sanctified for us by the simple things that Christ has touched -

The happiness of children.
The care of the aged.
The restoring of friendship.
The lift of goodwill and harmony with others.

SEND YOUR LIGHT into the darkened corners of our city, that fears may be abated, hatreds melted, violence curbed in the name of the Child of Bethlehem.

SEND EACH OF US back to our daily tasks reflecting something of

His love,
His concern,
His singleness of purpose.

GO BEFORE US, O God, drawing us into the future of a new decade that You have prepared for us.

In the name of Christ we pray.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, December 17, 1989

I. VISITORS / GREETING

- A. We welcome the visitors in the congregation and we invite you to have a cup of coffee with us following the service...on the third floor that we may get to know you better.
- B. Fill out a visitor card...sign a guest book...be free in the sharing of your name with us. Worship with us on other Sundays. Work with us, too, in the various outreach concerns...
- C. We minister here in the name of Christ...doing so since 1837. And it is in His loving spirit that we greet you on.....

II. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Listed for you in the bulletin...review them on your own noting the word about the Christmas pageant of the children, and the Adult Fellowship Carolling party for later today.
- B. Our Christmas Eve service will be at eight o'clock next Sunday evening...and if you're here in the city, do come and bring a friend along with you. Ushers and hostesses for that service are needed. Lend a hand? Be in touch.
- C. The canvass is "winding down". It will be on the back burner now for a couple of weeks...still have some distance to go to make the goal of 240 pledges and \$140,000. Pledge cards are available in the narthex. If you're one of the church members who has not yet turned in a pledge, may we invite you to do so today. Be a "giving...contributing" member...not a "taking member". We need you! We count on your support!

III. PAGEANT

- A. A word about the pageant....comes following the last hymn... about 12 minutes in length. And following our coffee hour, do plan to come to the party downstairs...lunch will be available. Santa will be present...sing carols and have a good time together. All are invited - young and old alike...to come!

IV. OFFERING

- A. Jesus said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive". In this spirit, let us worship God with our morning offering - tithes and gifts.