

FINDING JOY AT CHRISTMASTIME

LUKE 2:1-20

HEART OF THE MATTER - A WORD FROM KEN

The angels said it. “Good news of great joy.” (Or did they *sing* it?) Whichever, the words conveyed the full message.

There is perhaps, no other time of year that is so predictably filled with clichés and tired debates and endless statistical reports. (Will the markets think we are spending enough during this critical season for retail sales and reward with a boost on the Dow?) This week, a high level American delegation arrived in the business hub of the nation with the world’s largest population. It is a conference designed to improve economic relations. American corporations will be more eager to invest if the Chinese would be willing make some fundamental changes. One U.S. complaint: the Chinese save too much (average: fifty percent of their paycheck). If the Chinese want more investment capital, leaders need to encourage average folks to save less and spend more. Ah – the American way!

So, this time of year, it’s typical for us Christians to complain about consumerism and paganization and materialism and commercialization. We bemoan excess expectations and overspending and the obscuring of the “reason for the season” and the deflection of “Happy Holidays.” We decry overlooked calendars, oversized trees, outrageous front yards that consume non-renewable resources and set ever more impossible standards in the race toward a neighborhood observable from space. And when it’s done, we feel smugly righteous in our keen and witty critique. As though anyone’s listening.

But an emptiness remains. Something is missing. Where’s the joy?

We can be grateful, I suppose, that movie makers have discovered the “evangelical market.” It wasn’t that long ago. A serious film depicting the first chapter of Matthew and the second chapter of Luke would not possibly make it to the screen; much less be carried along by a multi-million dollar advertising campaign. But times have changed. And in “The Nativity Story,” they got some things right.

Mary is young. Her father arranges her betrothal to Joseph. She receives a message from an angel. That message is life-changing. Life-threatening. The turmoil is real. Joseph does the right thing. He remains constant in his love for Mary and persistent in his determination to protect her through her ordeal. An angel speaks to him, too.

And here is **the heart of the matter**. In the turmoil and the pain and the fear, there is joy. Mary and Joseph find it in their pure and undefiled love for each other. They find it in the journey that takes them far away from home. They find it in a forgotten stable out back behind an Inn filled to capacity. They find it in the frightful moments of delivery; and then they find it in the child

DISCUSSION GUIDE

AUTHENTIC INTERACTION · COMPELLING CONNECTION · IRRESISTIBLE EXPERIENCE
LOVING ACCEPTANCE · EVANGELISTIC INFLUENCE

wrapped up tight in discarded blankets.

They find joy. Deep, satisfying, heart-filling joy.

So out there in the fields where shepherds recoil in a wonder that borders on sheer terror, the angels make a bold and timeless announcement. Good news. Great joy. For all people.

For those of us who look and listen, it’s still there. Great joy.

BACKGROUND – We switch over to the Gospel of Luke. The story never goes out of date. It’s been depicted in every sort of venue; from ancient art to full length murals on cathedral walls to olive-wood carvings to neighborhood mock-ups to flannel graph story-telling and yes, even to full length motion pictures. Hard as we try, we will ever fall short of capturing the miracle of incarnation. God took on human flesh. This moment in time transcends art and language. So every year, we will return. Again and again.

Read Luke 2:1-20

Think it over...

1. Why did Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem?
2. Talk about the challenge Joseph faced when he learned of Mary’s pregnancy. (See Matthew 1:18-25 for more detail.)
3. Describe the scene. Why the stable? Today, we call it “natural child-birth.” Think about the fears and hopes of a long labor and then the joy of delivery. What must Joseph and Mary felt?
4. Why did the shepherds get a special invitation from the heavens? Was it consistent with God’s humble arrival?
5. Put the story in your own words as the shepherds turn from their sheep and head into town. What do they find?
6. Where do you find joy in the story?

Bring it home...

1. Is there a message here for us in responding to the requirements of our government?
2. If you were in on the planning, how would *you* have engineered the incarnation?
3. How would you have handled the news?
 - a. If you are a man, put yourself in Joseph’s place.
 - b. If you are a woman, put yourself in Mary’s place.
 - c. If you are a parent, put yourself in Mary’s parent’s place.
4. In Ephesians, Paul brings us the same news the shepherds got. Good news. Great joy. All people. Explain.
5. What can you do this Christmas season to find this joy?
6. How can you help others find it?

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