

# Sermon

## Sunday, December 24, 2016

Charleston, SC

Year A ~ 8:00 pm, 11:00 pm, Sermon Isaiah 52:7-10, Luke 2: 1-20

*Do you have a Mary Heart or a Joseph Heart?*

The Rev. Alfred T. K. Zadig, Jr., Rector

On this Christmas Eve night, I want to take you into the locker room of the Chicago Bears during a Christmas Eve Day game some years ago. Before the game, teammates are getting ready, casually talking about God and the story of Christmas. Coach Mike Ditka overhears their conversation, and says, "Okay, after my pep talk, and in honor of Christmas, I'm going to ask William "the Refrigerator" Perry to finish with the Lord's Prayer. Ditka, by the way knew that Perry was a South Carolina native and *therefore must* know the Lord's Prayer. But the rest of the players whisper to each other. "Perry doesn't even know the Lord's prayer." Quarterback Jim McMahon is so sure of this he places a fifty dollar bet with a teammate that Perry gets the prayer wrong. So, Coach Ditka finishes his pep-talk, and asks the players to remove their hats while Perry leads the Lord's Prayer. After a brief silence, Perry nervously prays "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." Jim McMahon is in disbelief. He grabs the teammate in which he placed the bet and says, "Here's your fifty bucks, I had no idea Perry knew the Lord's Prayer!"

Christmas has become a bit like that hasn't it? Forgetting the essence of Christmas! This year, Americans will use: 28 million, 497 thousand, 464 rolls and sheets of wrapping paper; 16,826,000 packages of tags and bows; 372,000,000 greeting cards, and 35,000,000 million Christmas trees! Yet the essence of "why" has been forgotten! C-S Lewis in "*Letters to An American Lady*" writes: Over Christmas this year, my brother was on a bus that passed by a church with a manger scene out front, and he overheard a woman on the bus say: "Lord, they are bringing religion into everything; look, they're even dragging Jesus into Christmas now!"

The essence of Christmas, the reason for Christmas is: Deepest Joy rooted in Jesus. Deepest Joy! Joy defined is: Hope, Delight, Elation, Euphoria, and Bliss. But here's the key: Joy is very different from happiness. Happiness depends on every circumstance going your way; happiness depends on happenstance. Joy is different! Joy is a deep inner rejoicing, despite every painful or difficult circumstance. Joy is not dependent on the conditions of the world and is only possible when Jesus, the one born tonight, is born again right in here.

For some of you here tonight, you are a walking poster child of joy. You live it; you radiate it; you define it! For others, perhaps your joy has been stolen, taken, robbed, as you are reminded of who isn't with you this year. Living with the pressure of gift giving and the underlying financial anxieties, or illness. I think of parishioner Greg Miller who just days ago, fell 8 feet off his ladder and shattered his heel and faces surgery!

World news can steal our joy: a Christmas truck attack in Berlin; a Russian Ambassador taken for all the world to see; a Mexican Fireworks blast ruining generations of families. However, you know, the world wasn't that much different on that first Christmas night.

A joyless fear swept across the land on that first Christmas: The Romans feared rebellion; the Jews feared the Romans; the Romans in some ways feared the Jews; the Sadducees feared the Pharisees. However, chief among the joy-less were the shepherds. They were the least respected, most despised. Shepherding was one of those jobs everyone needed but no one wanted to be one. Shepherds: smelled all the time; were the least educated; no manners, no money and of no earthly use to anyone. They lived in constant danger from lions and bears; always dealing with wandering lambs; and did I say, smelled really badly? In short, they were: the least, the last and the lost. Now here is the crazy thing about all this. Of all the people in the world, God chooses to tell the joy-less shepherds, through an angel something that would change the world, and forever change the way we look at the word JOY.

The Angel says to the Shepherds these unforgettable words: "Do not Fear! I bring you good news of Great JOY for all the people! Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. This this is your sign: you will find him wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. For all the joy that has been lost, there is a new JOY coming into the world!

The best way to translate the words of the Angel is like this: some years ago, a wife lost her husband shortly after she gave birth to their only child. As the boy grows, and to help him keep the image of his father in his mind the widow mother mounts a picture of her former husband over the fireplace.

Often the mother would take her young son into the library and gaze at this beautiful portrait. One day the young boy looks up and wistfully says to his mother: Momma, wouldn't it be wonderful if Daddy could just step down out of that frame? This my friends is what Christmas night is. It is Jesus stepping out of the frame of time and eternity; to reconnect, to reconcile us to the Father, as the hymn says: "Hark the Herald Angels Sing; Glory to the Newborn King; Peace on earth and mercy mild; God and sinners reconciled; Joyful all ye nations rise." Joy is the result of the reconciling!

Jesus came to reconcile us to the father, to deal with our harbored sin, shame and regret, and that produces Joy! C-S Lewis, in a letter to his friend Arthur Greeves, describes this scene with the shepherd and angel when he writes: "I know quite well that feeling of something strange and wonderful, the change into a world of Terreauty."

Lewis says: That's the perfect word for Christmas night. Terreauty (a word invented by Lewis) means both terror and beauty. It was a night of terror; God reaching his reconciling hand down to earth; and a night of beauty. Imagine, what that voice would have sounded like that said: "Do not Fear! I bring you good news of Great JOY that will be for all people."

Then, just the sheer volume of the company of the millions of angels praising God saying: Glory to God in the Highest and on earth peace and good will to men! God's love pouring out; terror and beauty in one; The Terr-eauty is inescapable: As Heaven came to Earth, and Earth to heaven. It is kind of like heaven pushing back the curtains revealing a world behind the scenes. Jesus steps out of the frame to take our sin, joy-lessness; our shame; losses; guilt; and regret onto Himself.

Now, just stop again for a minute and think what we might be like without all that? Jesus being birthed to take our sins, failures, pain and heartbreak to Himself, so we could live the unconditional Joy he brought, and thirty three years later: DIE to give us!

My friends, let's not be confused: Our only source of Joy come when the one born tonight on earth, is

born again into our heart! And that is the greatest gift you could ever give Jesus on His birthday!

Now I know that joy is one of those mushy gooey words that can be hard to define. But, it is also one of those words that can be defined more deeply by its own letters. Joy happens when we invite Jesus out of the frame and into our lives, when we say Jesus as you were birthed that Christmas night, be birthed again right here.

Joy begins with Jesus, and goes deeper when we hit "O" for offering our Sins, our regrets, and our sorrows. Saying Jesus I offer you my failures, in fact tonight I am going to leave them on the altar for you to remove from me. I invite you to take joy deeper tonight and say Jesus: I offer forgiveness to that member of my family that has hurt me deeply; I will offer repentance to that friend that betrayed me.

What would it be like if through Jesus you reconciled with that family member you are trying to avoid later tonight, or tomorrow? There will be no true joy in your life until you do. Which means joy is made complete with the "Y." Saying yes to spreading Jesus to the world.

Back to the Shepherds, the Angel tells the shepherds to go to Jerusalem, and there they would see the baby. So, the Shepherds say to one another, "Yes let's go to Bethlehem and see what's happened!" They go and find Mary, Joseph and the baby. What do the shepherds do after that? They say "Yes" again and spread the word of what they saw and experienced! That resulted in the Bible saying: All the shepherds glorified and praised God for what they had heard and seen! If they had kept it all in their hearts, it would have just been information. But they exercised the joy, they said "yes" to the angel and in their "yes" came deeper joy!

For us, it might mean saying yes to serving other believers, bringing Christ to the world. Making a visit to the nursing home, the hospital, even sitting down with a family member and telling them of the hope that is in you in Jesus!

Thirty three years after His birth; Jesus died offering His own life on the cross that we might be reconciled with the world! Jesus Himself said "yes" to His Father to give His life for our deepest joy. My friends, if we are taking our cues and moods from the world, we will never have joy. If we take our cues and moods from God through Jesus born tonight, we will live a deepest joy where others will say, I want what you have! This joy is for you, for all of us! It is for the down and out shepherds. It is for the up and out wise men, the rich those who have everything but Jesus!

But you know: It is possible to Invite Jesus, say yes to absorbing the message, yet never offering our hearts. It is possible to Invite Jesus in offering our hearts, and not say yes to communicate that message to others. Combustible Joy happens when all three combine! Joy does not come naturally. It comes supernaturally through Jesus. This is why Jesus in his adulthood would say in John 15: Remain

in my love, so that my joy may be in you and your joy made complete! John 16: until now you have not asked for anything in my name; ask and you shall receive and your joy will be made complete! Galatians 5: The fruit of the Spirit is Love, Joy, Peace, Patience and the rest. God so loved the world that Tonight, He Gave His only Son, that all who believe in Him will never die but live forever. How could there be greater joy than that?

Tonight I want to give you a real life glimpse into how this Christmas Joy works. In May of 2014, a family here at St. Michael's had to endure the biggest joy stealing event possible on earth, the death of a son due to a tragic accident. There simply is no greater thief of joy than that kind of pain. Every Christmas serves as a joy-less reminder.

Now, I only want to speak from the mother's perspective, because the mother I'm talking about it is our staff member Meredith Buyck. Because I work with Meredith every day, she has taught me so much about Grief, about healing, about joy. Since her son little Hugh's death, there have been no Christmas parties. The first Christmas as you can imagine, the family just left the country for a while.

Yet, I've also witnessed the one born tonight, Jesus. The Joy of Jesus slowly ever so slowly sometimes agonizingly slowly making His way, taking back territory in the heart of this family. Jesus, stepping out of that frame, knitting hearts back together, healing, restoring one step at a time so that the impossible could become possible, the return of authentic joy.

Supernatural Joy is possible, even after the loss of a child. I am humbled to tell you that tonight, tonight out of that slow and gradual joy, there will be a Christmas party in the family home for the first time since Hugh's death. There will be authentic joy in the home on Little Palm Loop in Mt. Pleasant.

My friends, Jesus, born tonight wants to restore your joy, and burst whatever is holding you back. Sadness, hurt, bitterness, anger, sin, regret. Offer it to him tonight, so that the joy of the Lord may be in you, and together, saying "yes" GO! Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born and that your joy may be made complete!  
Amen.