

Our culture loves Christmas, but it struggles mightily to explain it. All of America loves the good feelings and expectations Christmas offers, but it can't offer any coherent explanation for those attitudes. We know it's a time for joy and goodness and hope, but we can't explain why. Of course, that doesn't stop our pop culture storytellers from trying:

- Some say the secret is inside us. For example, *Miracle on 34th Street* (1994, Richard Attenborough). Kris Kringle: "I'm not just a whimsical figure who wears a charming suit and affects a jolly demeanor. I'm a symbol. I'm a symbol of the human ability to be able to suppress the selfish and hateful tendencies that rule the major part of our lives." In other words, Christmas has the special ability to bring out our best selves.
- One popular notion says that the magic of Christmas is in the power of sheer belief. Several movies develop this theme: *The Santa Clause*, *The Polar Express*—kids tend to believe and that's why they enjoy Christmas so much; adults lose their childlike faith and miss the magic. There's a scene in *Elf* where Santa complains about the lack of "Christmas spirit," but when someone suggests he go on the news and show himself to the world, he replies: "Christmas spirit is about believing, not seeing. If the whole world saw me, all would be lost." Of course, these movies aren't serious. They know the audience is in on the joke; but beneath the whole wink and nod routine is the implicit claim that if Christmas means anything to you, you're going to have to make it up on your own.
- And then there's the "Andy Williams" explanation: It's the "Most Wonderful Time of the Year" because we do wonderful things—host parties, toast marshmallows, kids jingle-belling and everyone telling you be of good cheer. Why do we do wonderful things? Because it's Christmas. What is Christmas? A time we do wonderful things. In this view, there's no real reason for Christmas. It's essentially an escape from the real world and the mundane, gloomy life we know awaits us out there.

How do you explain the joy and hope of the season? We work so hard to experience the magic of Christmas in the parties, gifts, decorations, and celebrations of the season. But if these are your only reason for joy, your Christmas spirit will be fragile indeed. If the gifts aren't your size or

style, if the party goes wrong, if the family fights on Christmas Day, the joy you expect to find at Christmas will evade you. But if you could root your understanding of Christmas in something greater and truer than these, your joy and peace and hope will be deep and strong and real.

What God gave us at Christmas was not just His Son; He also gave us truth—truth that will change your life if you will take it in. God has you here this morning for a reason, hearing the Bible, confronted with His view of Christmas. He has something to say to you from His word—His explanation for the JOY, PEACE, and HOPE of Christmas.

Joy

You know the story... It's the night of Jesus' birth (vv1-7). Shepherds in a field outside of Bethlehem, watching their flocks (v8). It's dark, quiet. Suddenly, the night sky explodes and an angel appears in a blaze of light (v9) with an announcement from heaven.

You know, right here we get an important hint regarding what Christianity is all about. It's not a philosophy for life. It's not a code of behavior. It's not even a system of beliefs. It's about things God did in history. God broke in on humanity and did things we could never do for ourselves. Here in this story, ordinary shepherds were watching their flocks, and God showed up. An angel appeared. If you feel like your life needs more than religion, more than nice thoughts, more than what you can do for yourself, stay tuned. ***Christmas is about God breaking into the lives of ordinary people and bringing a miracle.***

The shepherds are terrified, but the angel quickly speaks:

vv10-12 *The angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."*

The angel anticipates that their great fear will be replaced with great joy. Why? Because of his good news. You cannot move from great fear to great joy without the good news.

Wouldn't it be great to get some good news once in a while instead of

all the bad news, the awful news that seems to come our way? This angel has some. Apparently, he has some kind of *incredible* news because he says it will bring “GREAT joy” (not just everyday joy) “to ALL people” (not just a few). What is it?

vv11 *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

Sometimes when you hear a news story, things don't quite make sense until you get all the details.

ILLUS: I remember reading a story in the *Denver Post* several years ago about a woman who went to jail because her husband lifted the paper on one of his Christmas gifts to get an early peek at what she got him. It didn't make much sense until I learned the rest of the details—he opened the gift, she caught him, they started arguing, she accused him of having an affair, and then she stabbed him in the chest with a knife. That news story still doesn't make much sense! But let it be a lesson to you, adults and kids alike: no peaking!

Let's look more closely at the details of the angel's “good news.”

If He is “the Lord,” this child was somehow supreme over all, their King, their Sovereign. Not Caesar, not Herod, but Jesus. The meaning of Christmas includes this: Christ is Lord.

“Christ” is more a title than a name, like President or Doctor. It means “Messiah,” God's anointed, the long-awaited one who would fulfill all the OT prophecies. In Jesus, prophecies and promises come true that are hundreds and thousands of years old. “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” Why? “For Christ is born of Mary.” If He's all that, don't you think His claims deserve honest investigation?

“Savior” means deliverer, rescuer. Every human being longs for a savior of some type. We look for someone or something that will solve our problems, ease our pain, or grant us happiness. We might try success in business, the discovery of a perfect friend, a new gadget, a bit of long-awaited news. But none of these can possibly deliver. But here, in the burst of light flooding the fields of Bethlehem, we hear good news of a Savior who is finally able to do the task.

The little word “born” implies something very important about this Messianic Lord and Savior: he was a normal human being. Christmas is

not about a religious experience or an abstract idea. It's about a living, breathing baby boy. Why did He come as a baby? His chosen form says everything about His mission. He came to meet our greatest need.

- If ignorance were our greatest problem, he would have come as an educator, loaded with books and ready with teaching techniques.
- If poverty were our deepest need, he could have appeared with bags of money from heaven, extra road material from the city where streets are paved with gold.
- If oppression were our biggest challenge, he might have ridden in on a great white horse with all of heaven's armies to overthrow their Roman overlords (or whatever tyrant keeps you down).

The form He took says everything about His mission. He came as a baby, one of us, because the real problem is *with us* not outside us. He came to rescue us from our sin, and for that we need a whole new start.

And finally, “unto you.” This Savior comes... for you! It's a personal offer, and it must be received personally. Martin Luther said this is the hardest part of Christmas for us to believe—that He comes... to you.

Luther wrote: “This is for us the hardest point, not so much to believe that he is the son of the virgin and God himself, as to believe that this Son of God is ours. This is where we wilt, but he who does feel it has become another man.” (quoted in N. Guthrie, *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus*, p27)

Here and here alone, in this announcement from the very first Christmas, is good news of great joy.

Peace

There might not be much notice on earth when the Savior is born, but it's glorious in heaven. They sent a whole delegation!

vv13-14 *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”*

What is this “peace on earth” the angels sing about?

It is NOT no more war or human conflict, which is what most of us think when we hear these words. Jesus Himself predicted an increase of conflict *precisely because* of His coming (Mt 10:34-37). If that was the angels' message, Christianity is a downright failure. We've had 2000

years to get peace on earth, and there's war everywhere. "No more war" is a part of the Christian message, but it comes as part of Jesus' *second coming*, when He sets up His kingdom on earth in its fullness. Only then will the lion lie down with the lamb, and the nations will beat their swords into plows.

This is **peace with God**, peace of heart, the peace we long for even more than outward peace. Three quick observations about this peace:

First, peace with God must be offered by God. It doesn't exist naturally. Hostility is the normal state of things—humans toward God, God toward rebellious humans.

Some of you know you're hostile to God. All you want from Him is to leave you alone. But others of you might think, "I'm not hostile toward God. I'm very religious. I'm a good person. I try to obey God." Can I ask you a couple questions about that? What happens when life goes wrong and your religious devotion doesn't do anything to protect you? What's your attitude toward God when you realize He doesn't owe you a nice comfortable life in exchange for all your good deeds? Do you still say you're not hostile toward God after you realize you have no claim on Him whatsoever? See, friends, religion is motivated by a desire to control God and put Him in our debt; but Christianity teaches that God owes us nothing and everything He gives comes only by His sheer grace.

And grace is exactly what God loves to give! Christmas is about God coming to earth in the form of a baby. No kingdom has ever had a more benevolent ruler. He governs by sweetly and powerfully winning people's hearts by His grace. Who can resist a baby? This is Christianity: weakness overwhelming power and foolishness outwitting wisdom. To God, a little infant is the secret to peace.

Second, peace with God is not achieved by us. We can't just try a little harder, show God how good we are, and bring peace to our relationship. Again, that's religion, not Christianity. **How can you tell which you have? Take an honest look at your own joy.** Religious people are usually the most gloomy people around. Why? Because they are busy trying their best to create peace with God. Unquenchable joy comes when you realize that God has made peace with you, and all you

need to do is embrace His gift of Jesus by faith.

Third, peace with God is established by Jesus and Him alone, through His blood on the cross. Yes, God has good reason to be hostile toward you. But Jesus is the Savior who died to bear the penalty for all of that. God is satisfied, and there's nothing you can do or need to do to get Him happy with you. Notice again the angels' song:

v14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

"Peace among those with whom He is pleased." Who is that? Just look at this story. God came to shepherds—outcasts, nonreligious nobodies. Why? Because He comes to those willing to receive Him, not to those who appear most to deserve Him. Those who receive Jesus are the people which whom He is pleased.

Hope

Christmas hope isn't wishful thinking, the way we usually use the word "hope." It's a settled confidence of the truth. This story doesn't use the word "hope," but the idea is right there in the narrative. After they hear the angel's message, the shepherds immediately investigate (vv15-20). They go look for a child wrapped in linen cloths and lying in a manger.

What did the shepherds find when they ran from the fields and burst in on the scene the angel told them about? A real baby. Not an idea or a religious experience. A newborn infant who cried and made noises and got hungry. By all appearances, an ordinary human baby. Christianity is not a feeling, a philosophy, a moral code, an experience. It's a real work God has done in history.

Friends, all your feelings of joy and peace will be short-lived unless they are based in something real—solid hope that your world really will turn out the way the story promises. This baby in the manger—and that Man on the cross—proves it will.

"Do not be afraid. The Savior is born!" THAT, and nothing less, is why Christmas is a season of Hope, Peace, and Joy.

© Copyright 2017 by Joshua Waltz