

THE GIFT OF CHRISTMAS Sermon for December 23, 2018
By Rev Dr. Don Algeo

Micah 5: 2-4

Psalm 80: 1-7

Hebrews 10: 5-10

Luke 1: 39-55

O come, o come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. O come, thou rod of Jesse, free thine own from Satan's tyranny; from depths of hell thy people save and give them victory over the grave. O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by thy advent here; and drive away the shades of night, and pierce the clouds and bring us light! O come, thou key of David, come, and open wide our heavenly home; make safe the way that leads on high, and close the path to misery. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

We express joy in many ways. I have a little dog who literally does leap for joy, elevates clear off the ground. Little children laugh for joy while many adults, in a strange reversal, weep for joy. On Broadway, people sing for joy, and at the end the audience stands up and shouts for joy. The same thing happens in some varieties of worship service.

Those kinds of expressions are like releases, as if joy was a kind of steam that builds and builds and then bursts out. Joy like this involves a lack of

concern about dignity or demeanor, it involves an abandonment of pride, a sort of forgetfulness of self; and it is in that way and to that degree a wonderful thing and a very Christian thing.

But it isn't the joy that Christ brought into the world. That kind of joy was already in the world. The joy that Jesus brought into the world was something new, something unexpected. It was something the world had never seen before.

What was this strange new joy? As always, we have the Bible and the Holy Spirit for our guides. With that in mind, let's turn to our gospel reading this morning.

Luke 1: 39-55

“For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy....”

I'm going to suggest to you this morning that there are three elements of the special joy that the arrival of Jesus the Christ, the arrival of Emmanuel, the arrival of God among us, brought into the world. The three elements I have in mind are the element of hope, the element of homecoming, and the element of humanity.

Before Christ, there was ambition and avarice and social climbing and politics and maneuvering and conquest at a personal all the way up to a national level. There were empires and fearsome battles and mighty cities. There were the epic stories of the killing fields and the romances of fading and lost love. There was fame and glory and visions and dreams and successes and failures of an endless variety, a variety as manifold as humanity itself. But one thing was lacking: before Christ, there was no hope.

Reckon history in the thousands of years if that's your concern, or reckon it in the billions of years if that's your direction of thought - but here's something we all believe and know and celebrate.

While shepherds kept their watching o'er silent flocks by night, behold, throughout the heavens there shone a holy light. The shepherds feared

and trembled when lo!~ above the earth rang out the angel chorus that hailed our savior's birth. Down in a lonely manger our humble Christ was born, and God sent us salvation that blessed Christmas morn.

Go tell it on the mountains, over the hills and everywhere. Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born. Above all things, the birth of the baby Jesus in the little town of Bethlehem is the arrival among us of joyous hope.

What hope did Christ bring us? Eternal life, is the answer that would spring into many people's minds. Endless, eternal existence.

But its endlessness alone is not the hope that Christ brought into the world.

What Jesus brought into the world was life, lived in a different way, a way that merited being endless, life that we would desire to live endlessly, as children of God being conformed to the image of Christ.

Before Christ, hope was directed towards the world, and the world is a place of uncertainty and disappointment and inevitable decline. "All flesh is like grass," Peter tells us, quoting a Psalmist, "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower falls..." (1 Peter 1: 24)

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, having sketched out for those who have ears to hear the general shape of the life of Christian hope, Jesus provides an image that perfectly captures the difference between the old and the new, between the before and the after, between earthly and heavenly hope.

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock."

Those whose lives are founded on that rock have a basis for hope, the only basis, the only firm foundation. Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere.

I think there's another element of the joy of Christ's arrival that's worth thinking about a little. Let's call it homecoming, and it's suggested by the little story that's at the center of our Gospel reading this morning, and that's especially appropriate for this time of year.

In the story we're told that the young Mary goes to visit her elderly cousin Elizabeth in what is called 'the hill country of Judah.' That would have been a distance of seventy miles or so from Nazareth, a journey no young girl could possibly have taken alone. So although the story only gives us the minimum of detail about the visit, I think it's safe to assume that Mary's visit was in the company of her family and probably even a larger body of travelers.

And isn't that a pleasant way to read our story, the story of the first Christmas visit? For Christmas is first and foremost a family celebration, a time of giving and receiving within the family, and time for reliving old memories and creating new ones within the family.

When Mary and Elizabeth renewed their relationship, Elizabeth's unborn son responded with joy, for out of that welcome family visit of one small household to another small household would develop a family that would stretch to the ends of creation, uniting every person everywhere into one great family, a family united not by the accidents of class or geography or genetics, but by the everlasting and unbreakable bond of brotherhood with God incarnate, Emmanuel, God among us.

God rest you merry gentlefolk, let nothing you dismay; remember Christ our Saviour was born on Christmas Day; to save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray. Now to the Lord sing praises, all you within this place; and with true love and brotherhood each other now embrace; this holy tide of Christmas all others doth deface.

The brotherhood and sisterhood of all humankind. What greater joy, what deeper peace, what richer comfort could the world offer. You know how relaxed you can be around your sisters and brothers, your parents and children. You know how the masks come off and the words come easily, how the memories are shared and, through sharing, become real again, you know how even the food tastes better? That's the joyful promise Christ brought to us all.

O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy. O tidings of comfort and joy.

And yet there was even more to the joy the baby Jesus introduced into the world. Mary experienced it, and gave expression to it in the first words that burst from her lips:

My soul magnifies the Lord!

Think about what she's saying. The Greek word translated 'magnifies' here means 'to make larger' to increase, to make conspicuous. Mary is saying, My soul makes the Lord larger!

Why are we here? What is the point of it all? What is the meaning of life.

The joy that Jesus brought into the world is the joy of knowing the answer, the joy of knowing what it's all about. Making God larger. How can that be, how can the infinite God be made larger? Christ brought us, brings us, the answer. The same way you make your parents larger, and your children make you larger. God wants children to spread His light. Our souls magnify the Lord.

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, join the triumph of the skies. With the angelic host proclaim, Christ is born in Bethlehem...Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see; hale the incarnate Deity. Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel! Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness. Light and life to all he brings...Born that man no more may die. Born to raise the children of earth, Born to give them second birth. Hark the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King."

Christianity is not a religion, it's an opportunity. It's not a set of dos and don'ts, it's an illuminated path through a fallen world. It's not a system of hierarchical authority; it's a gift, the most wondrous gift ever given.

And Jesus brought not just the knowledge of the Way, he brought the Way itself, so that we can choose to follow it. That's why he said, I am the Way, and not just I'll show you the way. In following Christ, choice comes first, knowledge - true knowledge - comes later. In the first stage of his

ministry according to John, when he was gathering his first disciples, two of them asked Jesus where he was staying, and Jesus answered, “Come and see.”

That’s always the order in the Christian life. Come, first, then see. The world’s way is: see first, then come. Christ’s way is, “Come and see.”

The joy Christ brought into the world was the joy of faith. Faith in hope, faith in homecoming, faith in humanity. Not blind faith, because Jesus opened the eyes of the blind. It is faith that finally has the ability to see, because the light is here, the light is driving back the darkness, and the light will last forever. That’s the true faith, that’s the faith that rests on a rock. That’s the gift of joy at Christmas.

And so, Father, we pray in Christ’s name that during this blessed season You open up to each one of us the treasures of His wondrous and unfathomable gift. Amen.