

Christmas Eve
Immanuel Lutheran Church
Neal Collins, Pastor

Some of you are here this evening for many different reasons. Some of you came with family or friends, some of you are here out of tradition, the music and carols, some of you may be here against your will to make someone happy, some of you may be here for the first time, hopefully not the last. My prayer for all of you, whatever brought you here this night, is that you will leave here stirred by the power of God, the Holy Spirit. Stirred to see that there is more. There is more to life than you may be presently experiencing. That more is Joy.

The message for Christmas Eve is profoundly simple. God became flesh and blood so flesh and blood people can rejoice in the God who made them. To know the joy of God's presence and love in their lives.

Joy is the center of the Christmas story. The joy the angels experienced in proclaiming the birth of the Christ child...the host of heaven is joyous...the shepherds hear the words from the angel who stood before them saying "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." Great Joy...

When and where in your life do you experience great joy? Who is the most joyous person you know? What makes them joyous? Joy is different than happiness and pleasure. The angel didn't say I bring you great pleasure. Most of us this evening are probably more tuned into pleasure than joy. Our culture conditions us to think in terms of what pleasure we will get from someone or something. Pleasure seems to be short term. Don't get me wrong. I am not anti-pleasure. I like my flat screen television, blackberry, Ford Focus, and espresso's... they give me

great pleasure and I would be disappointed not having them in my life. We are all in pursuit of pleasure in one form or another. We go the mall and online to shop, we go on vacations; we buy this and that in the pursuit. But JOY is missing. You know what I am talking about. There is a surplus of pleasure, but a shortage of Joy. It doesn't have to be this way.

Some of you will leave here tonight feeling as empty as when you came in... A lady this week told me for years she would go to church and time after time she would leave feeling a little more empty. If you are looking for the trappings, the music, the words to fill the hole in your soul and find joy you will be disappointed. "You can no more be a Christian by sitting in a church than you can become a car by sitting in a garage" (source unknown).

Seeing JOY as something we can GET is an illusion. True JOY is not a product, goal, or accomplishment but as

someone once said – a byproduct, a response to what happens to us. Joy is a response. The other day I said to someone, "I am going to the CO-OP for some sardines. Do you want me to pick up anything for you?" The person said, "*You* want to get something for *me*?"

Byproduct.... At the same time, when you get the result back from your test and are told it is negative, you experience joy. You can also know JOY when the Doctor says, "There is nothing more we can do."

Joy can be experienced regardless of the situations we find ourselves in, when we separate it from pleasure. You might be thinking, "What do you know Pastor???" My situation is far worst than you can ever know, experience, or imagine." You might be right. But real Joy is not restricted by the situations of life. The birth of the Christ Child happened in the midst of political and economic oppression. It was when "Emperor Augustus" was on

the throne and Quirinius was the governor of Syria that a baby was born in Bethlehem. This same story can be portrayed anywhere and in any life... Augustus can be your boss, your mother in law, or anyone jerking you around and giving you the shaft... Do you have to be deprived of real and true joy because you have toxic people in your life? NO!!!! Joy is not predicated on situations. This is the pain/pleasure driven principle we get from Freud.

If you are not experiencing the Joy this evening, remember God didn't send Jesus into a world of Prince Charming and Cinderella, riding into the sunset with John Wayne. God sent Jesus into a world of darkness as the light the darkness cannot overcome. (John 1) Into a world of loss, poverty, depression, death, pain, and suffering. If Jesus is not God's response to these situations, then this night is superficial, shallow, and a sham. If Jesus is not the source of Joy for our lives then we need to stop

pretending and playing the Christmas charade with the carols and the candles, and throw the baby out with the bath water, if we expect nothing else this night, this Holy Night. If Jesus isn't the good news of great Joy, then we are locked into the pleasure principle.

You are here tonight because you know or hope this Jesus is the Light of the Word who has overcome the darkness. But you may not be certain how this applies to your life, and how you can know true JOY. Back to square one. Joy is a byproduct, our response, not what we do and acquire. Mary started singing, the Shepherds danced to Bethlehem, and the wise men from the East brought gifts... this is a response and a byproduct to what God is doing.

Your soul is connected to God. I there anyone who doesn't believe this tonight? When you are in a soulful place, in the presence of God, no situation can deprive you

of the JOY. Many of us are not at home in and with our soul. We traded it for the life situations, believing if the situations were different, we would be joyful.

So, tonight is about going to Bethlehem to see this thing that is taking place.

Bethlehem is no longer “out there” but “in here”, the place where Jesus said, “The Father and I will come and make our home in you” (John) A Christmas card written in 1513 by Fra Giovanni went along the lines of “I salute you, and there is nothing I can give which you have not, but there is much while I cannot give it, you may take it. No heaven can come to us unless we find it in our hearts today. So take heaven. No joy can come to us, unless it comes to us in this present moment. Take joy. No peace can come to us unless we find it right now. Take peace.”

So, this Christmas night, this Holy Night, I pray you discover and experience the Bethlehem in your soul and

know the Joy of Father and Son who make their home in your inn... Merry Christmas!