

The Gift of Joy

Text: “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” Luke 2:10 KJV

Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen is considered by some to be the greatest playwright since Shakespeare. Of his many plays, he considered Emperor and Galilean to be his Magnum Opus—his greatest work. Written in 1873, the play depicts the life of Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate, who ruled the Roman Empire from 361-363 AD. Julian is called The Apostate because he tried to replace the newly established state religion of Christianity with the old, pagan worship of the Greek and Roman gods. In this 10-act, two-part, 8-hour play, (no wonder it never gets produced!) Ibsen tracks the emperor’s degeneration from a young Christian to a pagan Caesar.

At one point in the play Julian says, “Have you looked at these Christians closely? ... They brood their lives away; unspurred by ambition; the sun shines for them but they do not see it; the earth offers them its fullness, but they desire it not; all their desire is to renounce and suffer, that they may come to die” (Quoted in English in William Barclay, *In the Hands of God*. New York: Harper & Row, 1966, p. 66).

Today, critics of the Christian church frequently point to our lack of joy. They might have a point! For example, most of the portraits you see of Jesus in Christian art depict Him as a serious looking guy. One lady described her pastor as, “so solemn he looks like he just stepped out a Nyquil commercial.” One of the You might be a Lutheran jokes, goes like this: You might be a Lutheran if you think putting peas in your casserole adds too much color.

It's unfortunate that to some even at Christmas we Christians may look more like Ebenezer Scrooge than an angel with "good news of great joy." Though we have the gift of life and forgiveness in Christ Jesus, we often don't act like it! No wonder the New Testament calls on believers to "rejoice" no less than 73 times. We need to be reminded that life—even with its ups and downs—is a gift from God!

However, some of us might say that we Christians have a right to be miserable—well, maybe not miserable, but perhaps melancholy. We're melancholy because the Holy Spirit has taken away our rose-colored glasses of ignorance and unbelief—and given us 20-20 vision regarding sin and its consequences. Like cops on the beat, we often see the worst that society has to offer.

Furthermore, we dare not turn a blind eye to all the suffering in the world, for we are called not to be oblivious to the reality of sin—where joy becomes some kind of escapism—but to be of service to our neighbor in need in the name of Christ.

Nevertheless, we do see sin all around us. We see people making bad decisions. We hear of children starving and Christians suffering persecution. We watch as God and His Word are blasphemed and distorted. We lament as families disintegrate. We shudder as those in power protect evil and condemn the good.

But rather than standing on our pious hill and shaking our finger at the world, we, like king David, see our own sins as well, and lament, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you and you only have I sinned, O Lord" (Psa. 51:3–4). If Christians don't lament all of this darkness, who will? If we won't carry the world's heavy burden of sin, who will?

Well, if Satan can't get you to rejoice in sin—and rob you of faith, he uses sin to make you miserable—so he can rob you of hope and joy. It's hard to rejoice when you bear this heavy burden of sin.

But right in the midst of all this bad news, a Christmas angel comes with good news: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). This was no ordinary birth announcement that first Christmas. This was a sin-crushing—death-defeating—satan's head goes splat—world-wide broadcast. That little baby resting in the manger was born to carry the full consequences of our sin, dying in our place. There in the manger is the light and life of the World!

This is good news of great joy: Jesus has come to give life to a dying world. Jesus has come to be the sin bearer. Jesus has come to empty our hearts of the joylessness of sin and to fill them with the joy of salvation. He is the One who makes it possible for us to say with repentant king David to say, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit” (Ps. 51:10–12).

The joy of salvation is the gift of Jesus! And this joy was so wonderful, so contagious that the shepherds, like brand new grandparents, had to tell everyone they met the good news—joy was bursting forth from them.

There was this couple who recently won a huge jackpot in the lottery. Hoping to keep it a secret until they made the necessary plans, they told no one about their good fortune. Those close to them, though, couldn't help but notice that they were different! Something had happened—

they were always smiling—they had a little bounce in their step. They just couldn't contain their joy. Finally, a neighbor asked, "What in the world is going on with two of you?" Then the news spilled out. They could no longer contain their joy!

That first Christmas, the joy was so contagious that the shepherds couldn't keep silent—they had to tell everyone they met the good news. The shepherds' joy is the inspiration for this favorite Christmas Hymn: "Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong? What the gladsome tidings be which inspire your heav'nly song? Come to Bethlehem and see Him whose birth the angels sing; Come adore on bended knee Christ the Lord, the newborn King." Just try to sing, "Angels We Have Heard on High," in a somber tone—you can't!

It bears mentioning lot of lottery winners have discovered that the money they won didn't bring lasting joy or happiness—instead, it brought them heartache. For many this evening or tomorrow, the Christmas presents they unwarp with bring them joy—but such earthly joy is only temporary—as resilient as wrapping paper.

But the joy God gives in the birth of the Christ-Child is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22). This joy is a gift from God—this is forever joy—this is enduring joy—this is joy that rejoices even in bad times. This joy sings from our lips even when they are pursed with pain. This joy flies in the face of Ibsen's Julian who saw Christians as a brooding, sorry lot. We proclaim this joy in the notes we write on Christmas cards—and every time we say, "Merry Christmas!" The greatest music in history has been written because of this joy. Joy to the World, the Lord has come to save us from our sins.

Last I looked, even on Christmas, the world is still falling apart—and sin is still sin—and

the devil continues to pile on the misery. But in the joylessness of sin and suffering, the angel announces: “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” Jesus is here! He takes your burden of sin and replaces it with His gift of joy—joy at sins forgiven—joy at God’s love revealed—joy at heaven’s gates opened—joy that God and man are reconciled! And so we sing with Martin Luther, “My heart for very joy must leap;/My lips no more can silence keep./I, too, must sing with joyful tongue/That sweetest ancient cradlesong:—Glory to God in highest heav’n,/Who unto us His Son has giv’n!/While angels sing with pious mirth/A glad new year to all the earth.”

In Jesus’ Name. Amen.