

Christmas Eve 2007

Christmas Eve sermons have always been the hardest ones for me to write.
Each year when the time rolls around for me to write
a Christmas Eve sermon I think to myself:

“Well, of course they’re hard to write.
You didn’t *grow up* with Christmas.
Christmas is not a part of my memory bank.

Never went with the family to pick out just the right Christmas tree.
Never went to church on Christmas Eve, held a candle,
and sang *Silent Night*.
Never woke up on Christmas morning as a kid and rushed down
the stairs to see what Santa left with my name on it
under the Christmas tree.

The Christmas section of my internal VHS tape from childhood was blank.

But, I’ve been a Christian now for sixteen years.
And during the past sixteen years,

I *have* gone to pick out just the right tree with my family.
I’ve spent more than a few Christmas Eves in church –
(in ways I never thought I would!)
And I *have* woken up on Christmas mornings and seen the joy
of Christmas in the eyes of my children
as they unwrapped their gifts with their names on them
under the Christmas tree.

I woke up at 4:00 am this past Friday morning and I knew there would be
no more sleep that day.

I had put off writing my Christmas Eve sermon as long as I could.
God said, “It’s time to get up and get ‘er done.”

Standing in the kitchen, waiting for the water to boil for a cup of tea,
I asked myself an honest question.

More likely, the Holy Spirit planted a question in my brain:

“It’s been *sixteen* years, bucko.
Why is it on this most special of days that comes only once a year,
when you come to remember, to worship, to praise God
for the birth of his Son,
 who saved you and gave you new life,
 and has fulfilled the desires of your heart
 beyond your imagination,
why is it *really* so hard to write this particular sermon each year?”

Then I asked myself another question,
(You can have great conversations with yourself at four in the morning!)

“What is the essence of Christmas?”

If there were no Christmas trees, no Christmas Eve services
 what would be left at the core
if every tradition *about* Christmas
 were peeled away.

Or to put it another way, what is the foundation, the common link,
 that gives life and real meaning to all the traditions
 that *represent* Christmas
from Christmas lights to caroling?

And then, God answered me as God can.

I looked over at the kitchen table and there was a book laying there
 that a friend left by our front door the day before
 as a Christmas gift.

The classic devotional book My Utmost for His Highest,
 by Oswald Chambers.

Again, either a thought just came to me or the Holy Spirit
 planted a thought in my brain.

I thought of the first words of the hymn: *Joy to the World*.
“Joy to the world, the Lord has come.”

The key word in God's message to me was joy.
I opened up the book to a passage on "Joy".

"Joy, he wrote, "means the perfect fulfillment of that for which
I was created and reborn,
not the successful doing of a thing" (repeat).

In that moment my understanding of the meaning of Christmas
made the longest journey on earth, from here to here (head to heart)

The successful doing of a thing may bring us a feeling of satisfaction
and may win us the admiration of others.
But 'Joy' is a much deeper and wider.

Joy is a gift given and received,
not a thing that can be manufactured or manipulated.

Joy to the world, the Lord has come.

Joy to me. Joy to you.
Joy to anyone who receives Jesus, the Messiah as their Lord and Savior.

The Son of God came into the world as a child.
There is nothing on this earth that brings more spontaneous,
deep joy than the gift of the birth of a child.

When Jesus was born 'Joy' was heralded by an angel from heaven.

"Do not be afraid, he said. I bring you good news of *great joy*
for everyone! The Savior, the Messiah, has been born tonight
in Bethlehem, the city of David. "

A newborn baby wrapped in a blanket
bringing the joy of heaven to earth.

Before his death Jesus told his disciples
that Joy would be the juice
of the fruit they would bear if they remained in him.

“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit...I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love...I have told you this so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow.”

The baby grew up to be a man,
crucified in the darkness, yet promising his joy
for those who wait and believe.

After his resurrection from the dead and immediately before Jesus ascended into heaven, Jesus blessed his disciples.

“Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem filled with great joy (Luke 24:52). Weeping may go on all night, but joy comes with the morning (Psalm 30:5).”

An overcoming joy that defeated even the powers of sin and death.

God’s gift of joy in and with and through Jesus Christ
encompasses birth, death, new life and eternity.
Alpha and Omega: from the womb to the cradle
from the cross to the grave
from the grave to the ascension.

To live a joyful life is a challenge.
If you are thankful, people will admire you for your humility.
If you give to others, people will admire you for your generosity.
If you are prayerful, people will admire you for your spirituality.

If you are overly joyful, people may think you are naïve about the way
the world really operates, the way things really are,
or even are uncaring towards a hurting world.
Endearing like Forest Gump, but not the sharpest pencil in the drawer.

Don’t let the joy robbers steal your joy anymore than you would
let someone walk into your home and steal your
money or diamonds or family heirlooms.

Joy is Jesus’ personal gift to you.
Ask for it, receive it, treasure it, live it.

The longer I walk this Christian journey of faith,
the more I am convinced that:
“Joy is the surest sign of the presence of God” (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin).

“Joy means the perfect fulfillment of that for which we were created
and reborn, not the successful doing of a thing” (repeat).

Jesus was the perfect fulfillment of that for which he came into the world:
To glorify God.

To open the way back to God for the world.
To be the way for us to live into the perfect fulfillment
of that for which *we* were created and reborn.
To glorify God.

Allow him and the Father to make a home with you in every room
in the house within you.
Invite him in to clean out the closets and spend leisurely time
in the sitting room getting to know each other.

The fullness of the joy of God manifested in him
and given through him
will be his great gift to you.
Not just one morning a year, but every day of your life.

This sermon wasn't all that hard to write, once I understood:

Joy to the world, the Lord has come.