

Oh, That We Were There

Luke 2:20

“Where is that place so fair? Oh, nowhere else but there

Where the angel voices With God’s redeemed unite,
Awed that he rejoices To share his joy and light.

Oh, that we were there! Oh, that we were there!”

(LSB 386:4)

Oh, that we were there! That sums it up at Christmas. If we had only been there with the shepherds to see the baby in the manger, that would bring true Christmas joy. Or if we could be in heaven, where the hassles and struggles of life are over, where there is no sorrow or crying, where God himself wipes away all tears and shares his eternal joy and light. Oh, that we were there!

There is joy to be had, we know, but we think it’s either there at the manger or there in heaven . . . anyplace else but here. In other words—certainly not in a world filled with as much heartache and fear as ours.

That’s the real problem with Christmas. It always seems to be for some other setting or for someone else. We’re always dreaming about the ideal Christmas, “just like the ones we used to know. Where treetops glisten and children listen to hear sleigh bells in the snow.” The Christmas we dream about is always better than the one we experience.

Perhaps that’s why some of us have such a hard time with Christmas. We have such high expectations that maybe this time we’ll be able to put it all together—just the right combination of gifts, music, food, and people that will make our holiday merry and bright. But we never quite pull it off that way, and so for many people Christmas is depressing.

I’d like you to have yourself a “merry little Christmas” too. I’d certainly like your yuletide to be bright, and I’d like all your troubles to be out of sight. After all, merriness and brightness have their place, but Christmas goes far deeper than that. Christmas is not for somebody else or someplace else or for some other setting. Christmas is for you, whoever you are, right here and right now.

We have much to learn about Christmas joy from the shepherds. Because the shepherds play such an important part in our Christmas pageants, we tend to think of them as pretty important people.

But in actuality they were quite far down the social ladder of their day. Their job wasn’t an easy one. It meant constant vigilance, long days, and lonesome nights under the open sky. It wasn’t a fancy job, to be sure, and not many young boys dreamed of growing up one day to be a shepherd.

But these lowly shepherds were recipients of an honor no king or emperor ever had. They alone were given the angel’s message, “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord”. And then for good measure the angel threw in an incentive to go find the child: a manger, he said, would be the clue as to where they could see him.

That was a privilege not to be granted to King Herod or Caiaphas the High Priest, but bestowed instead on the most unlikely of candidates—these meager tenders of sheep, coarse, rough men with tough, weather-beaten skin, whose manners no doubt matched their appearance. Down-to-earth, ordinary guys. But then, as Luther said in one of his Christmas sermons, an angel of the Lord came by and made them apostles, prophets, and children of God. So are we.

The shepherds teach us that lasting joy can be found in the calling in which God has placed us. For when they had seen the child, Luke records, “They spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. . . . The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told” (2:17, 20). There was joy for them in the manger. But then they returned, taking their joy with them as they went back to their work and routine.

Tuesday, you’ll return to your routine too—husband, wife, son or daughter, executive, homemaker, student, butcher, baker, candlestick maker.

But whoever you are, there is joy for you today—not in some wild dream of the future or some other situation, but right here and right now; not in that special white Christmas you remember from your childhood; not in family gathered around the table or good friends and good food and good fun, as precious as they are.

But, rather, there is joy found first on this planet of ours in the face of a newborn in Bethlehem, which was the very face of God. There

is joy in this One, Jesus, who bore the sorrows and the burdens of all the world in his own heart, which was the heart of God. There is joy in this One, Jesus, who took all our hurt and guilt into his own body in his death.

And there's joy for you today, whoever you are, in this Good News, which is the Word of God; there's joy in his Holy Supper, where he gives us to eat and to drink of the very body and blood born first of Mary and then given as the final offering and perfect sacrifice for sin.

The joy of Christmas is right here, right now – whenever Jesus comes to us. That's Good News – that's great joy – and it's for YOU!

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December 24, 2017
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