

Discover The Joy Of Christmas

Luke 2:1-20

Can you believe it? We've still have leftover Halloween Candy and wasn't yesterday Thanksgiving? Time screams by this time of year. It is a hectic time of year. That's why paying attention to the signs of Christmas and getting our hearts and souls ready is so important. If we don't, we might miss it.

A few years ago, I read an Ad in the Thrifty Nickel which read: "We cater to Clutter. Dependable house, apartment or business cleaning." And then there were a couple of phone numbers so you could contact the folks.

What struck me is that ad could be the motto for any Church. "We Cater To Clutter."

That's the unique mission of the Church We don't cater to the perfect. We don't cater to those who have already made it. We don't cater to those who don't need help. We cater to those who need to be perfected. That's our whole purpose in being. Of course, we have to do our part, too. We can't just lay back and say, "Well, lay it on me Lord." No, a lot of times it takes lots of hard work to be perfected by God.

God takes us, the outcast, the imperfect, the unfaithful, the tax collectors and sinners as the New Testament calls us and through God's divine love and grace, God perfects us. God transforms us and gives new meaning, purpose, and direction to our lives. God helps us clean up our acts and become more like Christ every day. And the more we become like Christ, the more Joy there is in our lives. That's why Christ came. That's why Christmas is the season of Joy.

That was God's message to the Shepherds. Something new and Joyous was taking place. Something everyone had forgotten about in all the mess of daily living. It was time to make a change, to clean house, the sweep out the cobwebs of our hearts and souls.

We kept trying to do it ourselves through sacrifices and prayers and fasting but none of it seemed to work. We kept getting it wrong or simply forgetting it, so God had to come up with another way. God had come to clean up the spiritual clutter in our lives. It started in the manger but the first group to hear this message of Hope and Joy was one of the least likely group of people ever chosen, the Shepherds, who were only slightly higher than the Lepers in the social pecking order of the day.

This baby the angel told them about, this child wrapped in swaddling clothes was the one some of these shepherds had talked about for years, the Messiah foretold by the prophets. This Messiah had been speculated about for generations; but coming in the form of a baby; now that was new. That meant they had to clean out all those old perceptions of God. They had to rethink their beliefs and most of us don't like to do that.

We get spiritually lazy and want things to remain the same, but they don't. They never have and they never will, especially when it comes to God's revelation of Godself. God continues to break in upon us in unexpected and exciting ways, through unexpected people in unexpected places.

It's when God breaks in, it's when we bend in front of the manger to look in and see the baby lying there and feel the full impact of the song of the angels and the worship of the shepherds. That's when it hits us. That's when the Joy of the Season, the Joy of this birth we celebrate every year fills our hearts and gives us that glow and we radiate the Joy of Christmas. And it's usually when we least expect it.

But we need to look forward to it. We need to clean up the spiritual clutter in your life. Our lives this time of year are so much like the 12 Crazy Days of Christmas. Somehow, during all the craziness we must stay focused because we don't miss it. Let me tell you a story.

A. Tom and Linda had moved into their new house three months ago. They didn't have it completely furnished yet but there was enough furniture to entertain, and this year Linda had invited both her family and Tom's

family for Christmas dinner. They were both so excited about celebrating their first Christmas in the new home with the entire family.

December first rolled around, and they started decorating. The very first thing to be set up was the Nativity Set. It was rich with family history. Her Great Grandfather had carved all the characters, the manger and the animals.

Her Great Grandfather had been a shepherd before coming to America and he carried his staff from the old country with him. When he discovered that sheep weren't in much demand over here, he took up a different trade and set his shepherding aside. When he ventured out in his own business, he displayed the staff so he would remember his humble beginnings.

When he retired as a small independent grocery store owner, he took up carving as a hobby. A devout Christian, one day he was inspired to carve a nativity set to give to his son. But the only wood around was the old shepherd's staff. What could be better. So, he took it and began carving each of the figures.

Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus were the first to be carved, then the manger, the wise men and shepherds. It was amazing how much he got out of that one shepherd's staff. There was even enough wood to carve four sheep, two camels, a cow, and a donkey. Some of the larger animals had to be pieced and glued together but they all came from his shepherd's staff. It was truly a work of art which shone with his love for God.

After receiving it, Linda's Grandfather had displayed it proudly. But he always thought there was something missing. So, he in turn built and decorated a stable. It too, was a gorgeous work of art filled with some of the tiniest detail. You could count the pieces of straw on the floor of the stable.

When it was passed on to Linda's father, he added his own work as well. He created a beautiful landscape base with rocks and hills and grass that brought it all together. It was the family heirloom which had been passed down from generation to generation through the oldest child.

Linda lovingly placed each piece in its spot and lovingly explained to Tom the significance of each piece and the history of the nativity set. It was placed in the entryway of their new home, so everyone's eye would be drawn to it first. Tom and Linda admired the nativity for a while and then began decorating the rest of the house.

Every day as they passed the nativity it reminded them of the meaning of Christmas. But like so many things that we have, after a few days it just became a fixture to Tom and Linda. It's not that they didn't notice it, they did but there were so many other things to do to get ready for their first Christmas gathering in their new home. The hustle and bustle just seemed to never end. Decorating, cooking, cleaning, buying, and wrapping the perfect gifts for everyone so that this could be the most perfect Christmas ever.

It seemed like there was always one more thing to do, one more thing to clean up, put away or put together. And after a while, Tom and Linda were so busy that they didn't feel any of the joy of the season. The nativity set just sat there, being ignored. Oh, when someone came into their home and saw it, they remarked on its beauty, but it was soon forgotten in all the rush of Christmas preparations and parties.

Then came Christmas Day. It was a glorious success. The house was spotless. The tree was beautiful. All the presents perfectly matched the person for whom they were purchased. The meal was perfect. Everything went so smooth that Tom and Linda could hardly believe it. At one point Linda saw her Father and her Grandfather looking at the nativity and was compelled to go stand with them but then someone asked for something and as the good hostess she went to oblige and forgot all about the nativity, again.

When the day was done and everyone had left. Tom and Linda were in the kitchen cleaning up and talking about how perfect the day went. Tom thought Linda would be exceedingly happy but instead she seemed to be a

little down. When asked, Linda said, "Oh, I don't know. Everything went great. Everything was perfect. And yet, somehow, I feel like something is missing. I just didn't feel Christmas this year. Here it is Christmas Day, and it doesn't feel like Christmas."

Trying to console her, Tom said, "Well, we were pretty busy."

"Yeah, I guess," Linda said with a sigh. Then she headed into the living room to pick up the last few glasses. For some reason, she decided to walk by the nativity. And when she did, she let out a loud gasp and called, "Tom, Tom."

Tom came running and Linda said, "The baby Jesus is gone."

The two of them started looking and looking but they couldn't find the figurine anywhere. Could someone have taken it home? No, everyone in the families knew the story and history and wouldn't think of doing anything like that. They began to search more diligently. Still, no Baby Jesus.

Then, at almost the exact same moment, both Tom and Linda saw the same thing. It was a tiny carved foot sticking out from under the hutch in the dining room. They both rushed over at the same time. They had no idea how it had gotten there but they were both extremely relieved.

Linda knelt and picked up the Baby Jesus figurine and with a sigh of relief said, "There you are."

And at that moment, she, and Tom both realized what it was that was missing from their Christmas, the Christ Child. They had gotten so caught up in all the hoopla and hype of Christmas preparations that they'd forgotten the true meaning and focus of this season. They'd been so busy shopping and decorating and wrapping and getting ready for Christmas Day that they hadn't even gone to Church.

They'd even missed the Christmas Eve Candlelight Communion Service. They never did that. They had attended the Christmas Eve service since they started going together as Seniors in High School.

Taking the small carved Christ Child and placing it back in the manger, Tom and Linda both knelt in front of the Nativity. Holding hands, they asked God for forgiveness for being so busy. And though it was a little late in coming, the spirit of Christmas flooded their hearts with the joy they had been missing. They gave thanks to God for helping them find their way back. And they rededicated themselves to Christ who came, not for the gifts, not for the trapping of Christmas but TO BE the greatest gift of all.

Like Tom and Linda, in order for us to experience the true joy of Christmas and all that this season holds, we have to make sure the Christ Child isn't missing from our Christmas. We must make sure we don't get so distracted by the celebration that we forget Why and Who we are celebrating. We must clean out the spiritual clutter in our lives. But the thing is, we can't do that on our own.

We cater to clutter. We're offered a clean heart and a clean soul through Christ and the Joy He brings. So, don't miss it. Don't forget the most important character of the Season. You're the reason Christ came, you know that don't you. You're the reason this baby was born. Don't miss it.