

**LUKE 2:1–14.** (EHV)

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governing Syria. And everyone went to register, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the town of Nazareth, into Judea, to the town of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was from the house and family line of David. He went to be registered with Mary, his wife, who was pledged to him in marriage and was expecting a child. And so it was that while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. There were in the same country shepherds staying out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified! But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. For behold, I bring you good news of great joy, which will be for all people: Today in the town of David, a Savior was born for you. He is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude from the heavenly army, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward mankind.”

“For behold, I bring you good news of great joy, which will be for all the people,” the angel said. We heard our narrator say earlier, “Christmas is a story of joy.” The first word the choir sang was, “Rejoice!” And then they repeated that word sixteen more times, by my count, not including words like *joy*, *mirth*, and *glad*.

So what is the joy of Christmas?

How do you think the average person would answer that question? Families getting together? Seeing humanity at its generous best? The lights, decorations, and Christmas music? That’s where the devil wants us to find the joy of Christmas, because all of those things are only scratching the surface. Why is it that families get together around the celebration of Christ’s birth? Why is it that people are more generous around this festival? Why is it that people take the time to decorate not with dark colors and artifacts related to death, like they do at Halloween, but with lights and greenery and bright colors and flowers and sparkles? Why is it that some of the most beautiful music has been written in connection with this festival?

Let’s first of all make clear what the reason is not. Even from some of the lyrics we have sung tonight and from some of the lyrics we will sing, we could get the misunderstanding that the joy of Christmas comes from the expectation of a new age *here on earth, in this present life*, that Christ came to usher in—“a new and glorious morn,” a time “when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling,” that is, when people will stop fighting and will all get along, and humanity will live in peace and prosperity and everything will be hunky-dory.

Does it sound from this account like Christ came to bring us that kind of joy? “While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” If Christ came as an earthly king to usher in an earthly kingdom of peace, prosperity,

and happiness, do you think this is how he would have been born? His very pregnant mother turned out to a stable for her lodging, while an inn full of guests, which must have included her relatives during this census, looked on with indifference? A childbirth with apparently Joseph the carpenter serving as the midwife, surrounded by dirty animals? No warm room? A bed of straw that had most recently been used as a feedbox for animals? No pillow? Instead of the chief priests and Bible scholars of Jerusalem and the mayor and citizens of Bethlehem giving him a royal welcome and paying their respects on bended knee, being first visited and worshiped by lowly shepherds who had been tending their flocks at night in the fields nearby?

No, when the angel announced to the shepherds that a Savior had been born for them, he clearly did not mean a savior who would bring them out of poverty and keep them from ever sinking back into it, a savior who would heal them and their sheep of all their diseases and never let them get sick again, a savior who would stop all the arguing and fighting and injustice and warring. The circumstances of his birth itself are nothing but injustice!

Christmas is not the promise of a new and glorious morn that we can observe with our senses in this life. Christ's birth shows just how little regard he has for the things that make this life good. That is not the joy of Christmas.

The joy of Christmas—thank God—is something much better and deeper than that. That's why the angel announced to the shepherds that he was bringing them good news of *great* joy. The joy of Christmas is not the joy of getting the toy or the clothing or the accessory you always wanted for Christmas, or the joy of winning the lottery, or the joy of troops finally coming home. That would be good news of joy, but not good news of great joy.

The joy of Christmas is not that mankind has good will toward each other, but that God has good will toward mankind. He has so much good will toward mankind that he has become one of mankind.

Did you ever stop to think about why God the Son would go through the nine months of growing in the womb, and the ordeal of being born, and the helpless years of infancy, and the years of childhood when all you want to do is grow up, and the temptations of the teenage years, and apprenticing under his earthly father as a carpenter, when it seems like his real purpose and goal was to begin his ministry of preaching and teaching, and confirming his message with miracles, around age thirty, and then to die on a cross? If he must become human, why not just appear as a human all grown up?

He experienced humanity from the very beginning, first, to fulfill prophecy. If he had simply appeared as a grown human, he would not have been the seed of the woman whom God promised would crush the devil's head. If he had simply appeared as a grown human, he would not have been the son born to the virgin God had promised who would be called Emmanuel, "God with us."

And he experienced humanity from the very beginning, second, because we needed redeeming from the very beginning. If we were only sinners from a certain age, then he wouldn't have needed to be conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. But as David says in Psalm 51, we sin because we are sinful from our very conception. Genesis 5 says that, after the fall into sin, Adam's sons were conceived and born in his image, not in God's. We needed redeeming from the beginning, so God's Son took on human flesh from the beginning.

And yes, after winning a holy life for us, he then went to the cross to pay the mortal, hellish penalty for all of our sins. There is a reason that *the* symbol of Christianity, the symbol on the side of our church, the symbol on top of and behind the altar, is not a manger, but a cross. Jesus did not ultimately come to be born. He was born so that ultimately he could die, and then rise again, to prove that his death accomplished something—accomplished the forgiveness of all sins, accomplished our salvation, accomplished the winning of God’s good will toward mankind, accomplished the right to inherit heaven, where there *will* be perfect peace, health, and prosperity, an inheritance right given to all who believe in him.

That is truly great joy. Truly great joy is the kind of joy you can have even when you get turned out to a stable to sleep and even to give birth. Great joy is the kind of joy you can have even when you don’t have the health care you would prefer. Great joy is the kind of joy you can have even when you don’t have a bed to sleep in. Great joy is the kind of joy you can have even when your family forsakes you and your friends are few and love grows cold. Great joy is the kind of joy you can have even when you’re stuck with the night shift, like the shepherds were. Great joy is the kind of joy you can have even when wars and rumors of wars increase. Great joy is the kind of joy you can have even when face to face with death.

Great joy, not just any old joy, is the joy of Christmas. It is your joy and mine. It is a gracious gift from God to us. It is the reason believers love to get together at Christmas. It is the reason they love to be generous. It is the reason they decorate and sing. It is the reason they wish each other and everyone a *very merry*, that is, joyful, Christmas. Amen.