

12.24.08 Christmas Eve The God We are Waiting for Is a God of Joy

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**Luke 2:1-16 (King James Version)**

“**And** it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.

(**And** this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

**And** all went to be taxed, everyone into his own city.

**And** Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

**And** so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

**And** she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

**And** there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

**And**, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

**And** the angel said unto them, “*Fear not;*

*for behold I bring you **good tidings of great joy**, which shall be to all people.*

*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.*

**And** *this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”*

**And** suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, “**Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.**”

15 **And** it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. 16

**And** they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.”

The first 8 verses of Luke 2 describe common, mundane, events.

New taxes or a government census are always in the news, but they are hardly information one would hand down for centuries. A weary couple traveling far from home

because of government regulations, a pregnant girl without a proper place to sleep – none of this is earth changing news. The birth of a child, bundling him up, placing him in very humble conditions – this has been going on since the beginning of time. Shepherds working the late shift, out in all kinds of weather, another day another shekel – ho hum. Taxes, government regulations, birth, the need to work and make a living – these things have all existed as long as humanity and they will last as long as people do, if not longer!

What changes everything is in verse 9 when the angels show up with earth-altering, life changing news. **“Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.”** It is very important to note the good news of great joy is for all people. The passage we heard from Isaiah tells us the promises of God are for *us*. The child is born **“for us,”** a son is given **“to us.”** The child is not for “me,” the child is not “mine.”

The promises of God are **for us. The good news of great joy is for all.**

All the Christmas stories, TV shows, and movies that we like so much invariably end with good news and joy that touch many lives. Charlie Brown’s Christmas tree isn’t so bad after all. The Who’s down in Whoville still stand heart to heart and hand in hand even without presents or boxes or bows. George Bayley’s friends and family make him the richest man in town in every sense of the word. Ebenezer Scrooge finally discovers the true meaning of Christmas and becomes generous and knows joy for the first time in his life.

We love stories of joy and hope at Christmas because they connect us with the first Christmas story which is about the joy of Jesus’ birth and the gift of love and relationship that God offers us all. Most of us associate gifts with Christmas, but we may not think of ourselves as a gift. We are a gift to God, to Jesus, and we are to be a gift to all of God’s people on earth beginning with those closest to us. When we live to be a gift for others – we are a blessing and we end up receiving more than we give.

I really liked reading the following story that Kevin shared with me. “They played the oddest game in high school football history last month down in Grapevine, Texas. It was Grapevine Faith (a Christian school) vs. Gainesville State School and everything about it was upside down. For instance, when Gainesville came out to take the field, the Faith fans made a 40-yard spirit line for them to run through. Did you hear that? The other team's fans? They even made a banner for players to crash through at the end. It said, *“Go Tornadoes!”* Which is also weird, because Faith is the Lions.

It was rivers running uphill and cats petting dogs. More than 200 Faith fans sat on the Gainesville side and kept cheering the Gainesville players on—by name.

*"I never in my life thought I'd hear people cheering for us to hit their kids,"* recalls Gainesville's QB and middle linebacker, Isaiah.

And even though Faith walloped them 33-14, the Gainesville kids were so happy that after the game they gave head coach Mark Williams a sideline squirt-bottle shower like he'd just won state. Gotta be the first Gatorade bath in history for an 0-9 coach.

But then you saw the 12 uniformed officers escorting the 14 Gainesville players off the field and two and two started to make four. They lined the players up in groups—handcuffs ready in their back pockets—and marched them to the team bus. That's because Gainesville is a maximum-security correctional facility 75 miles north of Dallas. Every game it plays is on the road.

This all started when Faith's head coach, Kris Hogan, wanted to do something kind for the Gainesville team. Faith had never played Gainesville, but he already knew the score. After all, Faith was 7-2 going into the game, Gainesville 0-8 with 2 TDs all year. Faith has 70 kids, 11 coaches, the latest equipment and involved parents. Gainesville has a lot of kids with convictions for drugs, assault and robbery—many of whose families had disowned them—wearing seven-year-old shoulder pads and ancient helmets.

So Hogan had this idea. What if half of our fans—for one night only—cheered for the other team? He sent out an email asking the Faithful to do just that. ***"Here's the message I want you to send:" Hogan wrote. "You are just as valuable as any other person on planet Earth."***

Some people were naturally confused. One Faith player walked into Hogan's office and asked, *"Coach, why are we doing this?"*

And Hogan said, *"Imagine if you didn't have a home life. Imagine if everybody had pretty much given up on you. Now imagine what it would mean for hundreds of people to suddenly believe in you."*

Next thing you know, the Gainesville Tornadoes were turning around on their bench to see something they never had before. Hundreds of fans. And actual cheerleaders!

*"I thought maybe they were confused,"* said Alex, a Gainesville lineman (only first names are released by the prison). *"They started yelling 'DEE-fense!' when their team had the ball. I said, 'What? Why they cheerin' for us?'"*

It was a strange experience for boys who most people cross the street to avoid. *"We can tell people are a little afraid of us when we come to the games,"* says Gerald, a lineman who will wind up doing more than three years. *"You can see it in their eyes. They're lookin' at us like we're criminals. But these people, they were yellin' for us! By our names!"*

Maybe it figures that Gainesville played better than it had all season, scoring the game's last two touchdowns. Of course, this might be because Hogan put his third-string nose guard at safety and his third-string cornerback at defensive end. Still.

After the game, both teams gathered in the middle of the field to pray and that's when **Isaiah** surprised everybody by asking to lead. *"We had no idea what the kid was going to say,"* remembers Coach Hogan. But Isaiah said this: *"Lord, I don't know how this happened, so I don't know how to say thank You, but I never would've known there was so many people in the world that cared about us."*

And it was a good thing everybody's heads were bowed because they might've seen Hogan wiping away tears.

As the Tornadoes walked back to their bus under guard, they each were handed a bag for the ride home—a burger, some fries, a soda, some candy, **a Bible and an encouraging letter from a Faith player.**

The Gainesville coach saw Hogan, grabbed him hard by the shoulders and said, *"You'll never know what your people did for these kids tonight. You'll never, ever know."*

And as the bus pulled away, all the Gainesville players crammed to one side and pressed their hands to the window, staring at these people they'd never met before, watching their waves and smiles disappearing into the night.

Anyway, with the economy six feet under and Christmas running on about three and a half reindeer, it's nice to know that one of the best presents you can give is still absolutely free. Hope."<sup>1</sup> One of the best gifts we can give at Christmas or any time is the present of ourselves.

**The message God sends to us at Christmas is that each of us is just as valuable as any other person on planet Earth.** Christmas is a time of good news and great joy for all people as we remember that God's love has come to us and found us no matter who we are or what we have done. At Christmas, Jesus comes knocking on our door, and if we open the door and let him in, there is joy on earth and in heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> Rick Reilly, ESPN.com, December 23, 2008.

The first Christmas we hear about in Luke reminds us to look for meaning, mystery, and miracle in the common problems, pains, and potential of everyday moments – work, birth, coping with the mess of our everyday lives with all the imperfections and problems we face. In the current economic climate and the hardship some are experiencing, perhaps we more closely resemble the holy family's situation in Luke's gospel than we usually do.

I am more convinced than ever that people need Christmas.

Christmas inspires us to

Love in a time of hate;

Hope in a time of despair;

Light in a time of darkness;

Faith in a time of doubt;

Contentment in a time of uncertainty;

Joy in a time of sadness;

Peace in a time of terror;

Trust in a time of fear.

Through Jesus God offers us forgiveness for our past, peace of mind in the present, and hope and joy for the future.

Charles Dickens wrote, *"It is good to be a child sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when its mighty Founder was a child himself."*

Last night 25 of us from young children to grown ups, went caroling to some of our BBC people's homes and over at Epoch of Brewster. It is for some of us what Christmas is all about, sharing the joy of Christmas in song with others, trying to bring a little cheer. It means so much to people. We finished on a floor with people who are suffering from Alzheimer's disease that robs people of their memories. Yet as we sang and Nathan and Greg played their trombone and trumpet, people came out of their rooms, into the hall and with no song book, they sang the words to Joy to the World and Silent Night and the old familiar carols that tell us all no matter who we are or what our situation is that God knows us and loves us very much. And that is still good news of great joy and it is for all of us.

## **Prayer**

God of angels and shepherds, God of stars and stables,

We celebrate your name for the gift of Jesus.

We sing your praises for your humble living among the women and men of the world.

Give us hearts filled with your presence, that we may truly be children of the light and not children of darkness.

Teach us to speak of your greatness and enable all our households to reflect your glory.

Bring hope and love and joy into our midst, that we may share with the world the faith that believes nothing shall be impossible with you and the belief that banishes sorrow.

Anoint our sick with the confidence of Paul who said, *"Whether I live or whether I die, I am the Lord's."*

Surround our children with care and protection; that they may grow in grace and goodness. Show us how to live in peace and mutual encouragement, sharing what we have with the poor and humble.

Enable us to give as you did, without assessing the worthiness of the receiver, and to love as you did without counting the cost.

Amidst all the holly and candles and the smell of pine, let us give thanks with all our hearts for the real message of Christmas - that you have come among us that we may live with you forever, through the one who was born at Bethlehem, Jesus our Redeemer.

Amen

**Blessing:** May God who gave us his Son in the stable of Bethlehem, continue to show us his mercy in the love and graciousness of Christmas, and may the Christ child whose glory filled the sky dwell in each of us tonight and throughout the year as we seek to be his gifts to each other and to the world. Amen.

### **Before O Little Town of Bethlehem**

Madeleine L'Engle wrote a poem called, *A Time Like This*,  
"It was a time like this  
War and tumult of war, a horror in the air.  
Hungry yawned the abyss – and yet there came the star and the child most wonderfully  
there.  
It was a time like this of fear and lust for power, license and greed and blight – and yet  
the prince of bliss came in the darkest hour in quiet and silent night.  
And in a time like this  
How celebrate his birth when all things fall apart?  
Ah! Wonderful it is  
With no room on the earth the stable is our heart."