

Kevin Saxton, Brewster Baptist Church

*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 Savior, 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.*

*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. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.<sup>1</sup>*

In the Pixar animated movie, *Finding Nemo*, a young clownfish named Nemo is captured by a diver on the Great Barrier Reef and is taken back to Sydney. The diver is a dentist and he places Nemo in his office aquarium with a handful of other tropical fish who dream of escaping their tank and making into the harbor (and thus the ocean) that lies across the street from the office. Their escape plan revolves around making their tank so dirty that the dentist will be forced to put them in plastic bags of water to clean the tank, and when he does that, they will roll the bags (with themselves inside) out the window, across the street, and into the harbor.

Through a series of events, Nemo's father, Marlin, with help from his new friend Dory, some sea turtles, and a seagull, finds Nemo and Nemo and his father are reunited with help from the aquarium fish and return to their home on the reef. In the closing scene of the movie, the aquarium fish have enacted their plan and we see the last of the fish roll from the pavement into the water. As the plastic bags containing the fish bob in the harbor, the fish cheer at their rescue, then there is a pause, and one of them says, "Now what?"

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:8-20, KJV

It's not an uncommon question in life, is it? Sometimes we ask it when we arrive at a destination or goal. Sometimes we ask it when we receive good news that unexpectedly frees up our time or our resources. Sometimes it gets asked out of confusion as we don't what to do next. Sometimes it is asked out of exasperation as another challenge, another disappointment, another heartache, gets piled on.

For some, the close of the Christmas season brings with it this question. Another Christmas has come and gone. The presents have been wrapped and unwrapped. The food has been prepared and eaten. The decorations have been put up and now we see them start to come down. The gatherings of friends and family are coming to an end, with everyone returning home. The Christmas bills start showing up. Christmas memories bring with them reminders of pain and loss. And as the days roll on into the cold days of January, we might sigh and wonder, "now what?" These sorts of feelings are so common in our culture that we even have a term for it: post-Christmas letdown or post-Christmas depression.

As the Christmas holiday draws to a close and a new year begins, we may be finding ourselves asking "now what?" for one reason or another. The shepherds in our Luke's birth narrative are also faced with the question of "now what?" three times.

The **first** comes when the angels appear to the shepherds and proclaim the good news, that the Messiah, the Redeemer, the promised one, the one that they and their ancestors have been waiting for has been born. And as a result of this dramatic experience, the shepherds are faced with the first "now what?" of the story. It happens so quickly in the text that it might be easy to go right by it. The shepherds encounter the angels and they immediately decide to get up and go to find this baby that has been promised. They don't hear the proclamation of the angels and stay put. The good news that they hear (in a rather amazing way) caused them to get up and go without much hesitation or discussion. They simply react to the news . . . news that is so good, so exciting, that they have to go see this for themselves. And so they get up and go looking for the babe lying in the manger just as the angels have told them.

The text tells us that they find Mary, Joseph, and the babe lying in the manger, and they are overwhelmed by joy and hope as they discover that everything is just as the angel has told them, and then comes the **second** "now what?" What will they do now that they have found the baby Jesus just as the angel had told them? The joy and wonder of the experience leads them to share their experience, to share the wonder, to share the hope and the joy of what they have heard from the angels and what they have witnessed with their own eyes. The text tells us that they "make it known abroad," that tell everyone that they meet what they have seen and heard, the text suggests that they can't stop talking about what their experience, that they are glorifying

and praising God for what He has done, and that everyone they tell is amazed by what the shepherds have to say.

The story concludes with the shepherds returning to their posts and their flocks. Here we find the **third** and final “now what?” What did the shepherds do when they woke up the next day? Did their encounter and experience change anything? Did it mean that they lived their lives differently than they had before they encountered the angel? Were they still glorifying and praising God once they got back into the mundane routine of their shepherding? Were they still amazed and full of hope and joy? Were they still telling people about what they had seen and heard?

The text doesn’t tell us. With the conclusion of verse 20, the shepherds leave the stage of scripture and we have no idea of what their lives are like after that. We have no idea if their experience continued to impact them beyond that first Christmas season, or if they too experienced a “post-Christmas letdown.”

How do we carry with us the joy and hope of Christmas beyond the Christmas season into our everyday lives and routines? How do we avoid exchanging joy and hope for discouragement and negativity in the disappointments both in our lives and in the world around us? How do we avoid losing our joy and hope to boredom in the mundane routines of life?

In each of the “now whats” of life as well as those in the text, there is an **invitation** is given to respond to what God has done and act/live accordingly. The shepherds could have passively encountered the angels and said, “That’s great, but we can’t go, who’s going to watch the sheep?” or “Wow, that was really something wasn’t it?” or simply kept the experience to themselves out of fear of people thinking that they were crazy or that something was wrong with them. But instead, the shepherds respond to the angels and they go to see what the angels have told them.

It is the same with us, in the “now whats” of life, we are continually invited to do something, to live our lives in response to what God has done, what God is doing, and what God has promised to do.

You might remember the story of Larry Walters, a 33-year-old man who decided he wanted to see his neighborhood from a new perspective.

He went down to the local army surplus store one morning and bought 42 used weather balloons. That afternoon he strapped himself into a lawn chair, to which several of his friends tied the now helium-filled balloons. He took along a six-pack of beer, a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, and a BB gun, figuring he could shoot the balloons one at a time when he was ready to land.

Walters, who assumed the balloons would lift him about 100 feet in the air, was caught off guard when the chair soared more than 16,000 feet into the sky--smack into the middle of the air traffic pattern at Los Angeles International Airport. He had just begun shooting the balloons when he lost his grip on his pellet gun, and it dropped from his hands. He stayed airborne for more than two hours.

Soon after he was safely grounded and cited by the police, reporters asked him three questions:

"Were you scared?"

"Yes."

"Would you do it again?"

"No."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because," he said, "you can't just sit there."<sup>2</sup>

Now this may sound a little crazy, but Larry Walters is right. You can't just sit there. God invites us to live in a new reality because he entered into the world as a baby that first Christmas morning. He invites us to experience joy and hope in the midst of the suffering and pain of our lives and the world around us. But you can't just sit there.

If the shepherds had just sat there they would have missed out. Yes, they would have still been able to talk about seeing the angel and the heavenly host, but that would have been it. How would they have answered the question, "so tell me again, why didn't you go see what the angel told you about?"

God invites us to live lives full of peace and joy and hope. Like the shepherds, we can't just sit there passively. It doesn't just happen. We have to act. We have to do something. We have to get up and go.

That something for us is the same as it was for the shepherds, and the answer to the final "now what" of the shepherd's story lies in how well they continued to remember, celebrate, and share their experience that first Christmas night.

Experiencing the joy and hope of Christmas every day begins with **remembering and celebrating the wonder of what God has done**. Take a moment and marvel at what Luke says about the proclamation to the shepherds: *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*

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<sup>2</sup> Gary Gonzales, Elim Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Leadership, Vol. 14, no. 3.

*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.*

God has sent to us a Savior. That God loves us so much that He entered into our world as an infant. That God has not forgotten us, but has acted to save us. That Jesus has come to bring forgiveness of sins and life in abundance and fullness for all eternity. This is the good news of Christmas, which is not intended simply to be seasonal, but rather good news that we live in. If we take this good news to heart, it has the power to change the way we see the world around us, the way we see situations, and ultimately the power to change our lives.

Experiencing the joy and hope of Christmas every day also means that we **share the good news with others**. Just as the shepherds went forth from the manger telling everyone the amazing tale of what they had seen and heard, we too need to go forth from Christmas sharing the good news with those around us. This means that we want to tell others the story of the amazing things that God has done and inviting them to come, see, and experience it for themselves, and it also means that we proclaim this joy and hope not just in what we say, but in the way that we live, that the joy and hope of Christmas is shared in what we do as well as what we say.

Here are just a few suggestions of things that we can keep the experience of Christmas going throughout the year (*borrowed from K. Stone of Life Learning Today*):

**Kindness** - Who says we have to stop wishing each other a happy day just because the holidays are over. There's something to celebrate every day. Seek that out and wish those around you a happy day similar to how you wish them happy holidays at Christmas. Today I rolled down the window of my car to wish a neighbor "Merry Christmas." It made me feel good, and I thought, "Why do I only take the extra 10 seconds to greet neighbors during the holidays? I'm going to try to do this all year."

**Time with Family and Friends** - Why not have a family & friends dinner once a month or once a season? A potluck or a simple dinner is a nice way to keep this element of Christmas in your life all year long. Have some music, get out the cards and board games that never get used, and have some fun.

**You've Got Mail** - How nice is it to get real mail in your mailbox? Why not share that goodness a few more times during the year with other seasonal cards to a select few friends to say that

you are thinking of them. When you print out your Christmas labels, print out a few extra copies so that sending out "thinking of you" cards will be easy. Send a few every other month or so. Who knows, maybe you'll start a new trend amongst your friends.

**Giving** - You can incorporate the spirit of giving throughout the year quite easily. One way is through charity. When you give, make the act more of a ritual by taking a few moments to meditate on a sending a special intention along with your gift as well as feeling gratitude for the good fortune to be able to give to others. Another way to give during the year is when you come across a little something that you know a friend would love, go ahead and get it for them. Imagine how good you and that friend will feel. A third way you can give is with your time. This may be the best gift of all. Think about who could use that gift and then find a way to schedule it into your life.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most important thing in experiencing the joy and hope of Christmas each day, is **remembering that Jesus is with us everyday and everywhere that we go**. In an article from Christian Parenting today, a writer shared the following:

"The boxes of Christmas decorations were carried up from the basement. I had to go to church, so the serious work of Christmas-izing our home would have to wait until I returned. In the meantime, our 5-year-old daughter, Lauren, was content to play with a miniature plastic nativity set we keep in an old Lifesavers tin. When I arrived home, I was greeted by my wife, Wendy, and the inviting aroma of dinner. Stealing a peek at the table, I saw that Lauren had placed pieces of the nativity set at each person's plate. Apparently shepherds, wisemen, cows, and sheep would be joining us for dinner—very sweet.

Just then Lauren raced into the kitchen. "Oh, Daddy, Daddy!" Her voice was panicked. "Jesus is missing! We've looked everywhere and can't find him!" She was right. As I glanced at the supper table, I didn't see baby Jesus anywhere. "We'll find him," I said, sure that he was stuck under the couch cushions or behind a chair somewhere. "Let's look after we eat!"

And look we did. Low and high. High and low. Under the couch. In the plants. In the Barbie playhouse. We scoured Lauren's coloring desk cluttered with stickers, markers, crayons, and a half-full can of pop—everything but Jesus! As my compulsive find-whatever-is-lost-at-any-cost neurosis kicked in to high gear, I zeroed in on Lauren's backpack.

Much like her older sisters, Lauren carries her backpack everywhere she goes. In it she transports her treasures: Hairbows. Hats. Barbies. Her stuffed kitty. Her Polly Pockets. Her

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<sup>3</sup> Written by K. Stone of Life Learning Today, posted on the blog: <http://www.dumblittleman.com/2007/12/10-step-cure-for-post-christmas-letdown.html>

plastic wallet. Gummi Bears. I decided to look in the backpack. There, at the bottom of her treasure trove, was Jesus. "Here he is!" I proudly announced. "Jesus was in your backpack, ready to go with you to preschool tomorrow."

I've often reflected on the search for our MIA Jesus, and I now realize that he wasn't "missing in action" at all. He was in the middle of the action. His place in Lauren's backpack was divinely appropriate. There, in the midst of all the symbols of my daughter's interests and activities, was the Lord of life. And that reality extends beyond 5-year-old girls.

As we face a new year crammed with commitments, each of us can begin the year confident that Jesus is right there in the middle of it all. As much as it drives us crazy not to have the Jesus piece in its proper place in the crèche (or at the dinner table), he belongs in our minivans, briefcases, purses, gym bags, suitcases, and checkbooks. God's uncontainable love for his creation spilled over into a manger, a carpenter's shop, a fishing boat, a tax collector's home, a Roman execution scene, a rich man's grave, and an upper room. The good news of Christmas that catapults us towards Easter (and beyond) is that we are not alone. The one who made us has come to us and remains with us in all that we attempt."<sup>4</sup>

The most important thing for us to remember as we seek to carry with us the hope and joy of Christmas and avoid letdown, is to remember that Jesus isn't supposed to stay in the manger. He is to go with us. The good news is not just that a baby is born, but who that baby is: Christ the Lord. The good news is that God has entered into our world to share his love with us, to give us life, to save his people from their sins, and to change the way we see, live, and experience life and the world around us. And this good news is good news not just in December, but in January, and in February, in the spring, and the rest of the year through.

Each day as you are faced with the "now whats" of life, remember what God did that night in Bethlehem. Remember the proclamation of the angel. Remember the heavenly host. Remember the baby lying in the manger, and remember the joy and hope that the shepherds experienced as they found things to be just as the angel had said. And may you too, go away from the manger proclaiming the good news, and may this good news change you and the way you encounter the "now whats" of your life.

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<sup>4</sup> Greg Asimakoupoulos, "Jesus Is Missing," Christian Parenting Today (November/December 2001)