

Don't be afraid

Today is THE day! Hallelujah! From your facial expression, although you are at church, you look stressed,



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exhausted and not in a "hallelujah" mood. You have gotten beyond the Thanksgiving family gathering, the Macy's parade, decorating the house, buying the gifts, keeping a schedule of all the school-church-community events, volunteering at the holiday pantry, getting out the Christmas cards and cooking! That sleepy little town of Bethlehem sounds alluring. Merry Christmas! Celebrate! The most incredible event in human history has happened, so where is your joy?

We have all been beaten over the head with the incensed cries of "they've taken Christ out of Christmas"... "it's so commercial"... "depression multiplies over the holidays." If we consider ourselves to be the church this Christmas morning we would do well to ask ourselves this honest question: "What happened to the joy, wonder and love that should fill us up on this day of all days when God reduced himself to flesh and blood so we could understand he really does love us?"

Advent is the beginning of the Christian calendar, when we welcome Jesus into our lives and look forward to sharing his love with our world during the next twelve months. We are studying the favorite New Testament account of Jesus' birth. By this point we have watched with amazement the appearance of an angel telling Mary she will give birth to the promised Savior without the benefit of a human father! Joseph has had a dream telling him what God is doing, and Joseph buys into the plan. Now, because of a government mandated tax recording registration, the couple have traveled to Bethlehem where the prophet foretold the Savior would be born (Micah 5:2). We remember the excitement when Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth, John the Baptizer's mother, and the two women shared their joy and affirmation (Luke 1:39-56). Were the nine months filled with wonder as well as questions, excitement at every movement within Mary's womb, worries for Joseph as he considered his responsibilities and all the unknowns? And, finally, there was the

prospect of the ninety-mile journey to the city of David as the time of birth arrived.

The nativity is saturated with joy. We make much of the "no room at the inn" idea, but, in fact, motels and bed and breakfasts did not exist back then and a little village like Bethlehem was not in a resort area. It is likely that the young family went to the home of distant relatives. Luke actually records there was no room for the couple in the "guest room" or "upper room" (v. 7). They may have been housed in the main room where the animals were bedded at night and the resident family could assist Mary in her birthing if necessary. Another indication of family support is seen in the fact that after Jesus was born they remained in Bethlehem until the angel told Joseph to flee Herod's wrath (Matthew 2:1-15).

The unadorned simplicity of this nativity story presents the humanity and commonality of God's gift of himself in Jesus. Besides the rustic setting, God chooses to send a host of angels to announce his Son's birth, not to rulers or a crowd at the Temple, but to lowly shepherds watching their flocks on the gentle hillsides around Bethlehem. Those shepherds were on the lowest level of society. They may have provided sacrificial lambs for the Temple a few miles away in Jerusalem, but they were not welcome in better society. The angel's announcement is "wonderful, joyous news for all people" (v. 10). In the stunning silence that followed, the shepherds decided to go see for themselves this miracle of God.

Their reaction hints at the kind of active response we should take as we discover God's love and grace through the written word. Does this nativity motivate us to learn more and share the good news? The shepherds found exactly what the angels announced and they shared this good news for all the world.

Mary "committed these things to memory and considered them carefully" (v. 19). She was a peasant girl who could never have been a Pharisee or Sadducee, or even allowed to study the Torah or prophets. But God's angelic messenger had spoken to her and she heard Simeon and Anna's testimony on the day the infant Jesus was dedicated at the Temple (Luke 2:25-38). She nurtured Jesus,

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Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

seeing his unusual hunger to know the Scriptures. She later heard about his teaching and miracles for three years. She witnessed his death on the cross and celebrated his resurrection. Mary knew the awful power of uncertainty, fear and grief, but she also experienced the fullness of God's love, the security of his promises and the power of his grace. Mary did not become the "mother" of the church, but she remains a beautiful and powerful example of what it means to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark 12:30).

As I think about the excitement of those shepherds on what seemed an ordinary night in Bethlehem, I find myself wanting to celebrate the coming of Jesus into my world and my heart. We learn about doctrines, create church programs and go through witness training seminars. But something is missing. What happened to the joy? When did we become so concerned about building an organization, making worship entertaining, and substituting a sales pitch for sharing the hope of Christ outside the church?

Last week I met a man at my barbershop. He was educated, fun to talk with, believed in God...but he is not a Christian. I watched as a friend did the hard sell: "If you don't believe Jesus is God, you're going to hell!" That conversation ended abruptly. But I started a different conversation and for almost an hour we talked about science, religion, God and the Bible. We laughed, debated a bit and when we parted it was as friends. With a hug, he said, "I want to talk some more. You have given me a new perspective on the Christian faith."

Advent is a time for joyous celebration, a time to share God's love, a time to tell all those around us the Savior has come. Can we forgo some of the crazy schedule, get back to the real meaning, rediscover the joy and tell others about this Jesus - God with us, giver of new life? Celebrate! Your Savior is born!

Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.