

***Oh, where shall joy be found?***

***Where but on heav'nly ground? Where the angels singing With all his saints unite, Sweetest praises bringing In heav'nly joy and light. Oh, that we were there! Oh, that we were there!*** (CW 34:4)

Oh, that we were there! That really sums it up this Christmas morning, doesn't it? I mean, if only we'd been there, with the shepherds, to see the baby in the manger - that would bring us true Christmas joy. Or maybe if we could just be in heaven, where the hassles and struggles of life are over, where there is no sorrow or crying, where God himself wipes away all tears and shares his eternal joy and light...Oh, that we were there!

Oh, and we know that there is joy to be had in our lives. It's just that we think it's either there at the manger or there in heaven, or there amongst those other, happy people...joy seems to be anyplace else but here. In other words—certainly not in a world filled with as much heartache and fear as ours.

But, I suppose, that's the real problem with Christmas - it always seems to be for *some other* setting or for *someone else*. We just get to *dream* about the ideal Christmas, ***just like the ones we used to know. Where treetops glisten and children listen to hear sleigh bells in the snow.*** The sad reality of it is that the Christmas we *dream* about always seems to be better than the one we actually experience.

Perhaps that's why some of us have such a hard time with Christmas. We have such high expectations that maybe this time we'll be able to put it all together—just the right combination of gifts, music, food, and people that will make our holiday merry and bright. But we never quite seem to be able to pull it off that way. And so for many people Christmas can be rather depressing.

But my wish for you today is for you to ***have yourself a merry little Christmas.*** I'd certainly like your yuletide to be bright, and I'd like all your troubles to be out of sight. After all, merriness and brightness do

have their place. But Christmas goes far deeper than that. Christmas is about the ultimate joy, a joy that is not for somebody else, some other place or some other setting. Christmas is about joy for you, whoever you are, right here and right now.

We learn about this Christmas joy from shepherds. It's kind of funny, you know the shepherds play such an important part in our Christmas programs that we tend to think of them as pretty important people. But in actuality they were quite far down the social ladder of their day. Their job wasn't an easy one. It meant constant vigilance, long days, and lonesome nights under the open sky. But it wasn't a fancy job, to be sure. Not many young boys dreamed of growing up one day to be a shepherd.

But these lowly shepherds were recipients of an honor no king or emperor ever had. They alone were given the angel's message: ***I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord*** (Lk 2:10-11). And then for good measure the angel threw in an incentive to go find the child; a manger, he said, would be the clue as to where they could see him.

That was a privilege not to be granted to Herod or Caiaphas or Caesar Augustus, but bestowed instead on the most unlikely of candidates—these meager tenders of sheep, coarse, rough men with tough, weather-beaten skin, whose manners no doubt matched their appearance. These shepherds were down-to-earth, average Joe, ordinary guys. Had it happened today, they could have been sitting among *us*. But then, as Luther said in one of his Christmas sermons, an angel of the Lord came by and changed their career paths, he made them apostles, prophets, and children of God.

And as we look at those shepherds, we realize that *we* have been joined with them. For the shepherds teach us that lasting joy can be found in the calling in which God has placed us. These ordinary people, when they had seen the child, ***They spread the word concerning what had been told them...[and they] returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had***

*heard and seen, which were just as they had been told* (2:17, 20). There was joy for them in that manger. And as they returned to their work and normal routine, they realized that something was different. For they returned to their work and normal routine overflowing to the world around them with Christmas joy.

Today or tomorrow you'll return to your routine, too—husband, wife, son or daughter, executive, homemaker, student, butcher, baker, candlestick maker. But whoever you are, there is joy for you this morning—not in some future aspiration or some other situation, but right here and right now; not in that special white Christmas you remember from your childhood; not in family gathered around the table or good friends and good food and good fun, as precious as they are.

But, rather, there is joy found first on this planet of ours in the face of a newborn in Bethlehem, which was the very face of God. There is joy in this One, Jesus, who bore the sorrows and the burdens of all the world in his own heart, which was the heart of God. There is joy in this One, Jesus, who took all our hurt and guilt into his own body in his death, which was the death of God. And there is joy in this One, Jesus, who lives to give us eternal life, which is the gift of God.

Yes, there is joy for you today, whoever you are, in his Holy Gospel, the Word of God; there's joy in his Holy Supper where he give us to eat and to drink of the very body and blood born first of Mary and then given as the final offering and perfect sacrifice for sin. There is joy today that reaches from a manger to the realms of heaven.

THE JOY OF CHRISTMAS - RIGHT HERE,  
RIGHT NOW,  
GOD WITH US.

That's Good News—that's great joy—...and that's for you! Amen.