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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“JOY FOR ALL THE PEOPLE”
LUKE 1:46-55**

- **And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks 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. 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 2:8-11).**

☑ Not measured joy, not moderate joy – **“great joy”!** Extravagant, out-of-control joy, like Ebenezer **Scrooge** experiences at the end of **A Christmas Carol**.

Scrooge is a stingy, cold-hearted materialist who hates humanity. On Christmas Eve four spirits haunt the miser with a terrifying message: by his self-absorption and greed he is condemning himself to eternal torment. Their warning hits home: Ebenezer is transformed; he becomes a new man.

Intoxicated with joy, he cries: **“I don’t know what to do! I am as light as a feather. I am as happy as an angel. I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to everybody! A happy New Year to all the world.”**

As well as I enjoy **A Christmas Carol** (and I do), it has about as much to do with Christmas as the Easter

Bunny does with Resurrection Sunday. But Dickens got this part right: Christmas is a merry occasion.

“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” Joy is tightly woven into every strand of Christ’s birth narrative.

- At least 700 years before the first Christmas, Isaiah {Is 35:4; 29:18; 35:6; 29:19; 35:10} prophesies that

“Your God will come... to save you.” In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.... everlasting joy will crown their heads. Once more the humble will rejoice in the LORD; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

This is **“good news of great joy,”** is it not?

- About 15 months before the first Christmas the angel Gabriel appears to the priest Zechariah who is married to Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth. Gabriel says, **“Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth..., for he will be great in the sight of the Lord”** (Luke 1:12-14).

Zechariah and Elizabeth are old and childless, and in turn-of-the-century Palestine that is both a personal grief and a public disgrace. John's miraculous conception and birth is the happy ending they have always wanted.

But there is more at stake than the personal happiness of one old couple: John **"will be"** (Luke 1:14) **"great in the sight of the Lord."** Verses 16-17: **"He will bring"** many in Israel **"back to the Lord their God."** **"He will go... before the [Messiah] ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."**

Elizabeth's conception of John the Baptizer is more **"good news of great joy"**!

- Nine months before the first Christmas, the Virgin Mary learns that she will soon be with child, {Lk 1:28-37} **"the Son of the Most High."** In Luke 1:39-45 she rushes off to visit her cousin.

When Elizabeth [hears] her greeting, the baby [leaps] in her womb, and Elizabeth [is] filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she [exclaims]: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy."

Even Christ's presence *in utero* is **"good news of great joy"**!

- Mary answers Elizabeth's blessing with the Magnificat. She begins in Luke 1:46-47 by saying, **"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."**

We tend to take this for granted. After all, the child she carries will forgive our sins, grant us eternal life, and establish his Father's Kingdom. Any woman in her situation would **"rejoice in God,"** wouldn't she?

Or would she? Mary has God-fearing parents who honor and obey the Mosaic law. Mary lives in a tiny village, where everyone makes it their business to know everyone else's business.

Now Mary is pregnant. How many of her neighbors will believe she is a virgin? How many will accept her claim that {Lk 1:35} **"The Holy Spirit [has] come upon [her], and"** that **"the power of the Most High [has overshadowed her]"**?

It would be bad enough if Mary were simply unwed; but she is betrothed, and that is as binding as marriage. Mary's parents have already presented the dowry to Joseph, and they have vowed to remain chaste until the wedding.

The gossips will assume that either the couple has sinned together, exposing themselves to deep shame – or that Mary has committed adultery. In which case Joseph will surely initiate divorce proceedings, and he will even be within his rights to her put to death by stoning {Lev 20:10}.

Mary is fully aware of the potential consequences, and *still* she declares: **"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."**

It is a testament to Mary's courage and faith that in her eyes the afflictions of being misunderstood, judged, and rejected are far less weighty than the

glories of giving birth to God's Son, mothering the Messiah, and raising the Redeemer. The Savior's advent is "**good news of great joy**" despite the high cost that she will pay!

○ That brings us to Christmas night and Luke 2:16-20. After the angels leave, the shepherds "[hurry] **off and** [find] **the baby.**" "**When they [have] seen him, they spread the word concerning what [has] been told them about this child.**" Then they return to their fields and their flocks, "**glorifying and praising God for all the things they [have] heard and seen.**"

After the fear and shock wear off the shepherds are ecstatic at the angels' appearance and "**good news of great joy.**" They are elated that Holy God has allowed them to behold "**Christ the Lord.**"

○ As long as two years after the first Christmas, Magi come to Jerusalem in Matthew 2:1-12 asking, "**Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?**" Bible experts direct them to Bethlehem. The Magi go "**on their way, and the star... [goes] ahead of them until it [stops] over the place where the child [is]. When they [see] the star, they [are] overjoyed.**" (The original text literally reads, "**they rejoiced with an exceedingly great joy**").

The advent of Christ is "**good news of great joy**" – not measured, not moderate – "**great joy**"!

I don't know about you, but I want some of that! How can we be "**overtaken with gladness and joy**" at Christ's birth? How can we respond like the men and women of old?

1st, we can follow their example by centering our Christmas on Christ.

Dec. 25th is not *gift-mas* or a generic *Happy Holiday* – it is Christmas. Decorations and treats and music and gifts and parties make a terrific icing, but a lousy cake. The joy they bring is fleeting and shallow.

But we have an even bigger problem within the Church than secularism and commercialism: the infantilization of Jesus. Many Christians fixate over the sweet baby in the manger, {Robert Parham} "**yet [the Bible] moves quickly from the manger to the man who makes moral claims on people of faith**": {Mt 5:39} turn the other cheek; {Mt 5:44} "**Love your enemies**"; {Mt 6:19-20} "**Do not store up treasures on earth, but in heaven**"; {Mt 20:26} "**whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant**"; and so forth.

Elizabeth, Mary, the angels, the shepherds and the Magi do not try to keep the Messiah in the manger. They look forward to his mighty deeds. We will share in their great joy if we honor Christmas instead of "*Baby Jesus-mas*".

2nd, we can follow their example by collaborating with Christ in his Christmas mission.

In the words of Mary his mission is to {Lk 1:51-55} scatter "**those who are proud,**" bring "**down rulers,**" lift "**up the humble,**" "[fill] **the hungry with good things**" as he sends "**the rich away empty,**" and "[help] **Israel.**"

In the words of Zechariah it is to {Lk 1:68-79} "[redeem us]," "**to rescue us from our enemies,**" "**to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness,**" and "**to guide our feet into the path of peace.**"

In the words of Simeon it is to be {Lk 2:31-32} **“a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to... Israel.”**

Each of these seeks the Messiah, worship the Messiah, obey the Messiah, and testify of the Messiah’s goodness to the world. We will share in their great joy if we collaborate with Christ in his mission.

3rd, (and most importantly) we can follow their example by cultivating our need for the Christ of Christmas.

The joy we receive from the **“good news”** is in proportion to our felt need for the Savior whose birth it announces. Those who feel they need a little Jesus, or a little of his salvation to fill up their little need, receive a little joy. But those who know that *they need Jesus* and his salvation like Scrooge needed to be saved from the chains he had forged for himself – they receive an abundance of joy. It **“[crowns] their heads. Gladness and joy... overtake them.”**

Elizabeth *needs* the Messiah. She longs for his coming, so **“the good news”** brings her **“great joy.”**

Mary needs the Messiah. She is eager for his advent, and **“the good news”** brings her **“great joy.”**

The shepherds know they need that they really need the Messiah. That is why they are filled with **“great joy”** at **“the good news”** of his birth.

The Magi are so aware of their need for this new king, this Messiah, that they undertake a long and arduous journey to find him. As they draw close **“they [rejoice] with an exceedingly great joy.”**

Today, even now, the Lord God is inviting us to experience the **“great joy”** of his **“good news”** – not

measured joy, not moderate joy – extravagant joy, out-of-control joy! Let us do so.