

REJOICING IN GOD'S GREATNESS

One thing that marks the Christmas Season is parties. The local restaurants have been booked up all month because people want to get together and share the spirit of the holidays with their friends. Most people participate in these celebrations because of the traditions and few realize the significance of why there is reason to rejoice and be happy. Let us look at several groups of people who found something to celebrate about that first Christmas and we see why they could rejoice.

We know the events surrounding the birth of Jesus were in accordance with Old Testament prophecies. Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth and yet the Scriptures clearly stated that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. I have a suspicion that Mary and Joseph did not know what Micah 5:2 said regarding this matter. They were good people but they were not Bible scholars. So, how would it happen that Mary will be at the right place at the right time? God had a way. It is recorded in Luke's Gospel.

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. Luke 2:1-3

With God nothing is impossible. The mighty Roman Empire with its high and mighty Caesar were used by God to accomplish the purposes of the Kingdom of God. Caesar Augustus thought that he was some kind of god and yet the One True God was coming into the world, not as someone high and mighty, but as a helpless child. You see even the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of man and the weakness of God is stronger than the strength of man. Caesar thought that he had the idea of registering everyone so that he could tax them. Everyone was to go to their ancestral home towns for this registration. Everyone was to include Mary and Joseph.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. Luke 2:4-5

As you give and receive Christmas cards this year, you will likely see scenes of Mary and Joseph on the road to Bethlehem with Mary riding a donkey and Joseph leading the donkey. The gospel accounts do not tell how they traveled, but you can bet that since she was nearly nine months pregnant it was not an easy trip.

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:6-7

We have all see Christmas dramas in which Joseph and Mary are knocking on the door of the inn only to be turned away. Most people think that the innkeeper was rather heartless in turning them away; however, considering that the inns of those days were just large open room with no privacy, it was hardly a place to have a baby.

If we were to see the place where Jesus was born, we would realize that this remarkable person came into the world in the humblest of conditions and yet He has had more influence on the world than all the Caesars put together. I don't know of anyone who celebrates the birthday of any of the Caesars and yet all the people of that day would have told you that Caesar was the most important person on the earth at that time. I wonder today if our perception is any better in our time than those folks had in their time when it comes to realizing what is really important and what has lasting significance.

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. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Luke 2:8-12

People had raised sheep in this Judean hill country for centuries. Young David tended sheep on those hills and learned many lessons about how God cares for His people. He saw God as an ideal shepherd in the 23rd Psalm. During David's day, shepherding was a respected occupation; however, at the time Jesus was born people generally looked down on shepherding as some menial job. Shepherds were not in the upper echelons of society. It amazes me that people then, as well as now, tend to judge the worth of a person by his or her occupation. What a person does to earn a living has nothing to do with the worth of the individual.

The gospel message can be found throughout the Old Testament and we see it personified with an individual that was making His entry onto the scene of history. When the time was right (in the fullness of time) this event happened in the little village of Bethlehem. All the world needed a Savior, but all the world did not realize their need. The kings and emperors, the princes and priests, the governors and rulers, the rich and proud--all these didn't realize their need for a Savior. It is difficult to lead a materially successful and proud person to accept the Lordship of Jesus and to know Him as Savior. God knows our nature. He knew that the message of the birth of the Savior would not be properly received by the so-called successful people of that day. Therefore, He sent His angels to those that knew that they needed help--those that were not puffed up with pride at their own importance.

"Fear not," said the angel, "for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." This message of "fear not" has meaning beyond just not being afraid of the angel. The rest of the message that was given that night is reason for all of us to stop being afraid anymore. Since we have a Savior, we do not have to live our lives in fear -- we can stop being afraid. Fear paralyzes, it causes us to miss out on much of what life is all about. Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would come to "set the captives free." One of the things from which we can be free is fear. Much of human fear is associated with death and the uncertainty of that situation. Many people are literally afraid to die. The fears are rooted in our Old Nature which was subject to the power and penalty of sin. The work of the Savior was such that He redeemed our lives from destruction and gave us new life (a New Nature) that is not subject to the power of sin.

How could the shepherds know that what the angel said was true? Verse 12 anticipated that question. To find a new born baby in a cave where animals were kept and to see Him lying in a manger would be most unusual. This would be proof enough that the angel was right.

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." Luke 2:13-14

Surely, God is to be praised for what He has done. In sending a Savior into the world that had rebelled against Him, He showed the kind of unique love that He has for mankind, His special creation. The praise that the heavenly host gave was simple yet meaningful. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." The highest praise and adoration that we have or can imagine should be offered to this loving Creator, Father God. As we approach life

with this as our highest priority, then we find that we must move self out of the "number one" position. As we do that, we will find that our relationships with others will be greatly improved. If this approach would grow and spread to those around us, then truly there would be PEACE on earth and GOOD WILL toward men.

After such a happening as this, it would be hard to imagine that the shepherds would simply go back to tending their sheep without doing something regarding this joyful news.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.
Luke 2:15-16

The shepherds decided to go check this out. They wanted to see for themselves. They were not disappointed. They found Mary and Joseph and the Child. We are not given the details of the visit to the stable; however, you have to believe that they admired the Child. You know that they told Mary and Joseph about the angel and what they said. This must have encouraged Mary and Joseph who were in less than ideal conditions.

As we see the magnitude of God's love for us as demonstrated in the Incarnation and in the sacrifice that Jesus made for us, we can realize that we surely have reason for rejoicing in all that God has done.