

Joy to the World – Psalm 98:4

Introduction: This passage of Scripture was the inspiration for Isaac Watts when he wrote “Joy to the World” in 1719. Quoting Robert Joseph in “The Christmas Book” he said, *“Of all the sacred carols, ‘Joy (to the World)’ is perhaps the most positive and uplifting declaration of the message of Christmas.”* The coming of the Lord to the earth as both God and man is certainly cause enough for *“heaven and nature”* to sing, and for men to *“repeat the sounding joy,”* and to *“make the nations prove the glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love.”* Jesus’ birth was without a doubt, the most awe inspiring and world-changing event in human history.

The only other modern event that might possibly remotely come close to the birth of Christ in terms of being awe inspiring and world-changing occurred on July 20, 1969. Certainly, no other event in American history captivated everyone’s attention and sense of awe as when man first walked on the moon on that night. I remember sitting at home that night as a 15 year old, glued to the TV set, watching the events unfold, and thinking to myself, *“This is awesome!”* But just three years and six moon landings later, the excitement and sense of awe of men walking on the moon had waned for many Americans.

Jack Needleman was a reporter covering the launch of Apollo 17 in December of 1972. He told his story in Bill Moyer’s book “A World of Ideas.” It was a night launch. The reporters were much fewer in number by this time as rocket launches were becoming routine. Needleman said that the reporters covering this event were cracking jokes, spouting sarcasm and being very cynical as they waited for the launch.

But he said that when that rocket ignited, everyone was almost blinded by the light, which was just at the limit of what one can bear to look at. He said that for a few seconds, there was a deafening silence until the sound came across. And then that sonic boom hit them with full force and they felt a tremendous vibration that rattled their bones.

Needleman said that at that point, he looked and all the reporter’s mouths flew open in amazement. As the rocket disappeared into space, there were no more wisecracks, no more sarcasm or cynicism – just silence. Everyone’s eyes were filled with light and their faces were glowing with sheer wonder. These cynical reporters

were visibly changed by the experience. He said it was as if in a moment in time, a sense of awe and wonder had overcome their being.

I wonder; have we become like those reporters before their Apollo 17 experience? Have the times in which we live in today caused us to become sarcastic and cynical? Has our sense of wonder faded because we have grown accustomed to living in a world of spaceships, the Internet, microchips, smart bombs, and laser surgery? You know, these are all wonders that our grandparents could not have even imagined. Yet we seem to have taken it all for granted. We've lost something. We've lost the sense of wonder, yet wonders are all around us.

I think this is what has happened for many folks at Christmas. They've become obsessed and too stressed over shopping and deadlines, and crowds, and parties that they've just written Jesus out of the story and therefore missed the joy and the wonder of Christmas. This holy day has been secularized to the point that someone who has never heard of Christ or Christmas couldn't see the real meaning even if they tried. No wonder you hear it more and more, *"You know; it just doesn't seem like Christmas."*

Is it because the obligations and responsibilities of the commercial side of Christmas have taken the place of the newness and freshness and joy of Christmas? Is that the reason the lights have dimmed and the music has just become little more than background noise?

Well, if that is the case for you, then I invite you to rediscover the joy and wonder of Christmas this year. I challenge you to look at Christmas again, as though you are seeing it for the first time. Let's take a fresh look at the real meaning of Christmas and see if it can cause us to once again, *"Shout for joy to the Lord."* And *"burst into jubilant song with music."*

1. The Joy and Wonder of the First Christmas

That first Christmas was filled with the joy and the wonder of the extraordinary. It was full of surprises and unexpected twists and turns. Let's look at the astonishing events that unfolded.

You have a teenager, Joseph, who has heard the devastating news that his teenage fiancé is pregnant with a child that is not his. Furthermore she claims to still be a virgin. Would you believe her? Who would have faulted him, if he had dumped her? But he chose to stay with her. You also have Mary with a child in her womb but she had never known a man. Fascinating! Doesn't that fill you with wonder?

Another wonder of that first Christmas is that Mary gave birth to a child. There is nothing more wonder-filled than birth. I've never had the opportunity to witness a birth first hand, but many of you have. And I've heard and believe that it's enough to make a grown man cry. Some even pass out! Extraordinary!

Then there was the innocence and dependence of the baby itself. Nothing pulls on our emotions like a newborn baby. Babies can make mature adults say the silliest things and act like babbling fools. Amazing!

Of course, we can't forget the angels visit to the shepherds. Here we have heavenly beings coming down to mortal men to make a divine announcement. Isn't that wonderful?

Then those shepherds, after they had witnessed and heard this dramatic announcement, dropped everything to check out the news of a baby who was reputed to be God Himself, born to a virgin. I mean, isn't that amazing? They actually believed that what they had experienced wasn't a dream. It was real, and they had to see it for themselves. They had to check out this claim that God Himself had come to earth as a human being

And when they did, they found everything to be just as the angels had said. And they were so filled with wonder; the Bible says that they couldn't stop talking about it. **Luke 2:17 (NIV)** "*When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,*" You know, they were the forerunners of the church weren't they. They picked up the "*good news of great joy*" where the angels had left off. They told the wonderful story of Jesus. They told about encounters with heavenly beings. They talked about miracles. They gave testimony of the event they had just witnessed. It was too fascinating to keep to themselves.

And look at how the ones who heard their story responded? **Luke 2:18 (NIV)** "*and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.*" The NEB says translates the word "*amazed*" as "*astonished*" And the TEV translates it as, "*filled with wonder.*"

What it means is that they were like those reporters who witnessed the night launch of Apollo 17, their eyes were filled with light, their mouths flew wide open, and their faces lit up with wonder. Their dark world had been transcended with the brilliance of presence of God. The world of man had been invaded by the Word of God. The hopes of all the ages had been fulfilled in this one spectacular night. And don't forget, all this happened very differently from what everyone expected. It was the surprise of all surprises. Yet it was wonderful and wonder-filled.

2. Rediscover the Joy and Wonder of Christmas

What happened then can happen to you. You can rediscover the joy and wonder of Christmas in your heart?

The first thing you need to know is that:

A. Wonder Begins with the Presence of God.

The shepherds had seen God. They had been in the very presence of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Yes, He was a little baby, but He was the incarnation of God. They had seen the light. They heard the sonic boom and felt the bone-rattling vibration. The joy and wonder of God had shaken them to the core of their being. And they were changed men.

We need to see what they saw, feel what they felt, and hear what they heard. We need to let the mighty presence of “*God with us*” shake us to the core.

Wonder begins in the presence of God. Regardless of where we are, when the Lord is present, that place is alive with wonder and joy. Secondly, you need to know that:

B. Wonder Leads to Worship.

Because God is with us; we need to realize what that means. We need to let it impact our lives to the point to where we react as the shepherds. When the shepherds felt God in their presence, they began to worship Him. **Luke 2:20 (NIV)** says, “*The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.*”

One can't come face to face with the wonder of God and not worship Him. God's presence will have an impact upon your life. When Moses encountered God on Mount Sinai, the Bible says “*his face was radiant.*” When Elijah witnessed the presence of God on Mount Carmel, the people “*fell prostrate and cried, 'The Lord-He is God! The Lord-He is God.'*” When Isaiah saw a vision of God in the temple, “*the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.*” And Isaiah said, “*Here am I. Send me!*” So the shepherd's reaction was predictable after seeing Jesus in the manger. They celebrated and worshipped Him

Christmas is a good time to experience the joy and wonder of God. But it's just a starting point. You see, Jesus didn't stay a baby. At some point we have to get Jesus out of the manger and into our hearts. Yes, He came as God wrapped in human flesh, but we have to move from wonder to worship. We have to move beyond

cynicism and skepticism to celebration and salvation. The real story of Christmas is wonderful, but we have to go beyond being charmed by it and be changed by it. We don't truly understand Christmas until we truly worship the Christ.

Conclusion: Let me close with a story from "Chicken Soup for the Soul" by Dan Millman. He tells the story of Sachi. When she was four years old her baby brother was born. Little Sachi began to ask her parents to leave her alone with the new baby. At first, they said no because they didn't know if she was jealous and wanted to hurt the baby or what.

But eventually, as they watched her love on her baby brother, they were convinced that Sachi wasn't going to hurt him, so they let Sachi have her private conference with the baby. But it wasn't completely private. They kept the door slightly cracked open and watched as little Sachi walk quietly up to her baby brother, put her face close to his, and say, "*Baby, tell me what God feels like. I'm starting to forget.*"

That is a good way to celebrate Christmas. Just snuggle up close to God so you can see, feel, and hear Him again. Celebrate Christmas so you don't forget the "*the glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love.*" *Rediscover and experience real joy and wonder this Christmas.*

Have you experienced the presence of God in your life? Has the light of His presence dispelled the darkness in your soul? Has His presence shaken you to the core? Have you been changed by God living in you?

Christmas would be a great time for you to invite Him into your life. Come to the manger today, and discover for yourself the joy and wonder of Jesus.