

Sermon for Sunday, November 30, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"JOY TO THE WORLD--BUT WHAT ABOUT HEAVEN?"

St. John 3:16

Text: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

St. John 3:16

When the angel appeared to the shepherds, he said, "I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people." And based on that message, we sing the hymn, "Joy to the World." But I want you to notice to whom the joy comes--it is to all the people, it is to the world. I've been wondering lately how God felt about it. That's something to think about, isn't it? The angels rejoiced--the people rejoiced--but what about God? And how would you have felt had you been in his place? If you were sending your only son off to a certain death--if you were sending your son to be born in humility and humbleness, to be despised and rejected of men, and knowing that in the end they were going to crucify him--would you have rejoiced that day? Well, you know very well you would not have. I want you to realize how utterly different God must have felt about Christmas.

What was the problem that demanded so drastic an action as that? What was wrong that it was necessary for the Son of God to come to earth, to be born, to suffer and to die? You see, Christmas doesn't mean all is right with the world--not at all. Instead, it means that something is dreadfully wrong with the world and God is taking the most drastic and dramatic action conceivable to remedy the situation.

Well, the problem brought into sharp focus that Christmas is sin. It is sin in your life--sin in my life--that brought Christmas about. We can indeed shout with joy to the world during this season because it means God is moving to do something about our sin. But from God's side, his heart must have been breaking. Christmas happened because you and I are sinners--sinners who are lost; sinners who are condemned; sinners who are cut off from our Creator; sinners who are judged, weighted in the balance and found wanting.

So one of the first things we can learn from Christmas is that it tells us how bad our condition is. It tells us how desperate our situation is. I have people tell me that they are not so bad. They don't commit any of the major sins such as stealing and killing. They are not aware of anything especially dreadful in their lives. But if a man wants to know how desperate and hopeless his situation is, all he has to do is look at Christmas. Man's condition is so bad that God had to take that sort of drastic action to do something about it.

So one of the first things we learn at Bethlehem is how desperate our plight is. A second thing we can learn is how important we are in God's eyes. You may not be feeling very important this morning. You may be feeling awfully insignificant in God's eyes. A recent issue of a national magazine showed a picture of Dr. Billy Graham in Japan. Thousands of people had gathered to hear him--perhaps the largest crowd in the history of Japan ever to gather in one place to hear about Jesus. As you look at the sea of faces one cannot help but wonder, are all those people significant? Do they matter? Well, Christmas is God's answer to that question. Christmas says that you are the most important thing in all of God's creation. You are so important that God went to the manger in Bethlehem because you were in trouble.

On an evangelism call one night a man said to me at his door, "I don't want to talk to you. You Christians think that God cares about people like me and I just don't believe it. How can God know or care what is going on in my life?" Well, I can understand how he felt. But praise God Christmas tells me that he does care, that I am important--you are important. And the child born that day in Bethlehem was to say in days to come, "Not a sparrow falls to the ground without my father's knowledge. You are worth more than many sparrows." So, you may be feeling insignificant and insecure this morning but Christmas says that you are important to God--he knows your condition, he knows your problems, he knows that you are lost and he has sent his son to do something about it.

A third thing we can learn from Christmas is that not only are we important to God, but that he loves us. What is happening in the middle east today with the war and with the hostages and all the other problems brewing there, that is important to us but it doesn't necessarily mean we love those people. What Russia does in building up her military power is important to us, but it doesn't mean we love Russia. But Christmas not only means we are important to God, it also means he loves us--it is God reaching out to man to meet his need--to do something about his condition. There is a song that most of us have heard entitled, "The Love of God." The last verse was actually not written by the author of the song. He found the last verse written on the wall of a room in a mental institution. Some lonely inmate had penned the lines on the wall of his bare little room. He wrote, "Could we with ink the ocean fill, and were the skies of parchment made, And every blade of grass a quill, and every man a scribe by trade; To write the love of God to man, Would drain the the ocean dry, Nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky." Yes, Christmas tells us the joyous, incredible news that God loves us--even to the manger in Bethlehem.

So Christmas speaks to us of three things--first, of our condition as persons--that we are lost in sin; second, of our importance to God--that he takes the dramatic action of sending his Son to do something about sin; third, that he does all of this because he loves us. Yes, from God's side, Christmas must have hurt terribly. From God's side Christmas must have broken his heart because he sent his son and he knew what would happen to him. But, because he knew we were lost, because we were important to him, and because he loved us, God acted to do something about our problem. So joy to the world--but what about heaven? Do you know what brings joy to heaven? I don't think it was Christmas because Christmas broke God's heart. Let me share with you what Jesus says brings joy to heaven. He is telling parables and he tells the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coins. You will find it in the 15th chapter of St. Luke--here is what brings joy to heaven. "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents..."St. Luke 15:7. "Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents"...St. Luke 15:10. Joy to the world the Saviours come--joy in heaven when we respond.

Now, the question I want to raise this morning is this: are you ready for a Christmas that means that? You see, it means two things for us. First, it means we must be ready to receive such a love. God isn't going to force Christmas on you. By an act of your will, by a free decision, you must invite Christmas into your heart. Jesus will not be born into your heart or your life unless you invite him in. The innkeeper had no room for Jesus and it became necessary for him to go elsewhere to be born. He would not compell the innkeeper to take him in. The same is true for you. He will not force himself on you. He will not batter down the door of your heart and make you take him in. He says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man opens the door I will come into him and sup with him." Yes, he knocks but he won't batter the door down.

So, the first question that Christmas raises for us is the question, are we ready to receive a love like that? The writer of the Gospel of John tells the Christmas story in a different fashion from the other gospels. He says, "In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness." Is that light shining for you?

The second question Christmas raises for us is this: are you ready to serve such a love? You see, if you are ready to receive God's love you must also be willing to let that love change your life. At this point some of us may want to stop Christmas because we are not ready. Many of us this morning don't want our lives changed. We are afraid of what our friends might think of us. I have a young friend who is trying to let God's love change her life. She is taking her Bible to school with her. Her friends are laughing and ridiculing her and calling her a Jesus freak. Some of us are afraid of that. We may want to stop Christmas and say wait--I'm not ready to serve like that.

To serve God's love may mean dramatic action. I have a layman friend in West Texas who gave his life to Jesus and put his life at his disposal. Today he is a business administrator for our missionary enterprise in Korea. Are you ready for that? If God calls you to some distant land, are your bags packed? Some of us may want to stop Christmas.

To serve God's love may mean a radical change in our life. A lot of us this morning don't want to change. There are sinful things going on in our lives. There may be a bad relationship that we are not willing to heal. There may be some affair we're involved in and we are not ready or willing to end when we know we are out of God's will. There may be some business deal we are in that is shady and we are not ready to give that up. I have a friend who is a minister in a small rural church. He is struggling to get by financially and the place he serves seems small and insignificant. It was not always so with him. Once he was a prominent attorney who was very successful. But when he invited Jesus into his life he put his own life at God's disposal. He is doing now what he feels God wants him to do. And while he doesn't have the things he once had, he has something far more important--he has a sense of fulfillment. But are you ready for your life style to be changed? There are a number of families right here in this congregation whose life styles have changed. There emphasis is no longer on the social set, the country club but on witnessing and serving Jesus. Are you ready for your life to be changed or do you want to stop Christmas.

From God's side Christmas hurt--it meant giving his son to humiliation and death. But you and I were lost, we were important to God, and he loved us. That's why Christmas came. Are you ready to receive such a love? Are you ready to serve such a love?

Back during the Civil War a young man was called into the service. From the battle fields came regular letters to the girl to whom he was engaged. Then suddenly the letters stopped. After a few weeks a letter came in a strange handwriting. The letter said, "There has been another battle and I have lost both my arms. I asked my friend to write this letter for me, to tell you that I release you from our engagement. I can no longer work and support you." The young lady never answered the letter. Instead, she caught the first train southward. When she reached the hospital she came to the young man's bed and kneeling down beside him, she took his face in her hands. Tenderly she whispered to him, "I will never give you up. These hands of mine will work for both of us. Our love is great enough."

Is our love great enough this morning? You see, "Christ has no hands but our hands To do his work today; He has no feet but our feet To lead men in his way; He has no tongue but our tongues to tell men how he died; He has no help but our help To bring them to His side." Do you want to stop Christmas or are you ready to serve a love like that?