



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **Christmas Day Selection I**

#### **Christmas Is a Choice**

**[RCL]: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)**

Christmas is not an event. Christmas is not a holiday. Christmas is not a church service.

Christmas is not a set of familiar carols or decorations of red and green or a jolly man in a red suit with eight tiny reindeer. Christmas is not an occasion or a party or a festival. It is not a piece of history or time off work or a gathering with family.

All of these things are connected to Christmas, but fundamentally, Christmas is not an event.

Christmas is a choice.

Mary didn't have a choice about being on the road when she went into labor. Joseph had to register for the census and that meant traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Joseph didn't have a choice about the fact that this child was not biologically his own. It was a done deal by the time he found out about it. Neither of them had a choice about the fact that Jesus would be born in a stable. There was no room at the inn, so it was either the barn or a ditch by the side of the road.

They were made vulnerable by their circumstances: vulnerable to gossip about Jesus' parentage, vulnerable to physical pain and danger in Mary's case, vulnerable to a feeling of failing to provide for his family in Joseph's case.

The shepherds didn't have a choice about being out in the fields with their sheep in the dark and the cold. The sheep needed tending and guarding, and the sheep were the shepherds' livelihood, their means of economic survival. The shepherds were vulnerable to the weather and the terrain. They also didn't have a choice about the visiting angels. The heavenly host descended on them out of nowhere, and suddenly Glorias were filling the air. They were terrified, and had no defense against their fear.

As you think about your life this year, where do you feel like you didn't have a choice? It's likely that many things come to mind. You don't have a choice about the Alzheimer's or dementia that has taken over not

just the life of your spouse or parent, but your life as well. You don't have a choice about the heart attack or cancer that took away a loved one all too soon. You don't have a choice about the job you hate or the job you lost or the job you can't get. You don't have a choice about your own struggles with food or relationships or sleep or alcohol, the fight to make good choices that you seem to lose over and over.

And so, we come to Christmas. And Christmas is all about God giving us a choice.

God places the power in our hands. God comes into the raging inferno of our insane world and says to us, "Do you want me? Will you allow me to be born among you? Will you accept this tiny infant as your savior and your friend and your hope?"

And we're free to say no. Because underneath that choice is another choice, and that is the true choice of Christmas.

We have to choose to be vulnerable to joy. Vulnerable to joy? That doesn't seem to be much of a choice. Who doesn't want to experience joy?

Well, it's more complicated than that. Despair and cynicism and even hatred are actually the paths of least resistance. When something offends us or frightens us, the easiest response is to lash out in anger and vicious self-defense. And with the difficult situations in our lives compounded by the conflicts in our society, our walls are very, very high right now. We will not be caught defenseless. We will not be left unaware. We will not be caught off guard, made to look foolish, victims of a surprise attack. Our fear almost makes us seek out darkness everywhere we go, if only to justify the walls we've built around our hearts.

And how does God answer our minds and hearts and communities bristling with self-defense so aggressive that it actually seems to be offense?

God gives Godself to us in the most vulnerable form possible: a fragile human baby.

And how could we respond with anything but joy?

Joy is surprisingly difficult to let ourselves feel fully. We hedge our joy. We celebrate and give thanks, but in the back of our minds, there is the knowledge that this goodness could be lost in a moment, that it will probably all turn bad in the future, that even this light does not erase the darkness in our lives. We hedge our joy, unwilling to let go those last shreds of defended self-consciousness, the final walls that protect us from being utterly vulnerable, able to be hurt.

That is why true joy requires vulnerability. We have to set down our weapons, take off our armor, lay aside our power and control, in order to even see the infant Christ in each other, much less kneel and adore him. It is a terrifying prospect.

But the choice of Christmas that we make is in answer to the choice that God made, the choice to come to us fragile, undefended, vulnerable, utterly reliant on us humans for his survival in the world. And God took joy in giving Godself to us in this way. So if we can take the same risk that God did, we can feel the same joy God feels. Light meets light, joy touches joy, and the darkness itself bows in awe at the radiance that shines out of the fragile infant Christ.

And what happens when we do take off the armor? What happens when we stop trying to be right all the time, safe all the time, in control all the time? What happens when we let the light radiating from that small face in the manger penetrate our hearts?

Oh, it is so beautiful. You may laugh. You may cry. You may laugh through your tears and cry in your laughter. Joy is deeper than happiness or celebration or giddy exuberance. Joy is a force that knocks down all the walls around our hearts and levels us with the goodness, the grace, the unearned and unending love and healing that is our newly arrived Jesus.

Joy remakes us, tears down our cynical and fearful identities and gives birth to a self that is trusting, patient, believing, knowing that all will be well and all manner of things will be well. Joy is the reward of the long nurtured faith that got us here. Joy is a quiet and lasting foundation that endures while the currents of happiness and grief wash back and forth over the surface of our hearts.

Joy is the first breath the resurrected Christ takes in the tomb on Easter morning. It is the breath behind the healing words he speaks to you when you clutch at the hem of his robe. It is the quiet, sweet breaths of the sleeping baby in the manger as we look on, feeling our hearts overflow. The joy of Christ becomes our own breath, and if we surrender this far to grace, we could no more choose not to live in him than we could choose not to breathe.

That is what awaits us behind the choice of Christmas. That is what being vulnerable to joy feels like. That is what joy can do to us if we let it—if we have the courage to let go into the miracle.

It's all up to us. What choice will you make?

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