

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
December 24, 2011  
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Joy for a Hurting World  
Isaiah 9: 2-7, Titus 2: 11-14, Luke 2: 1-20

In his book, All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten, Robert Fulghum tells of answering his front door on a cold and gloomy Sunday afternoon, just before Christmas: "This holy hour of Lord's day bliss was jarred by a pounding at the door. Now what? Deep sigh. Opening it, resigned to accept whatever bad news lies in wait, I am nonplussed. A rather small person in a cheap Santa Claus mask, carrying a large brown paper bag outthrust: 'TRICK OR TREAT!' Santa Mask shouts. What? 'TRICK OR TREAT!' Santa Mask hoots again. Tongue-tied, I stare at this apparition. He shakes the bag at me, and dumbly I fish out my wallet and find a dollar to drop into the bag. The mask lifts, and it is an Asian kid with a ten-dollar grin taking up most of his face. 'Wanta hear some caroling?' he asks."

"I know him now. He belongs to a family settled into the neighborhood by the Quakers last year. Refugees. He stopped by at Halloween with his sisters and brothers, and I filled their bags. Hong Duc is his name -- he's maybe eight. At Halloween he looked like a Wise Man, with a bathrobe on and a dishtowel around his head. 'Wanta hear some caroling?'"

"I nod, envisioning an octet of urchin refugees hiding in the bushes ready to join their leader in uplifted song. 'Sure; where's the choir?' 'I'm it,' says he. And he launched forth with an up-tempo chorus of 'Jingle Bells' at full lungpower. This was followed by an equally enthusiastic rendering of what I swear sounded like 'Hark, the Hairy Angels Sing.' And finally, a soft-voiced, reverential singing of 'Silent Night.' Head back, eyes closed, from the bottom of his heart he poured out the last strains of 'Sleep in heavenly peace' into the gathering night."

"Wet-eyed, dumbstruck by his performance, I pulled a five-dollar bill out of my wallet and dropped that into the paper bag. In return he produced half a candy cane from his pocket and passed it solemnly to me. Flashing the ten-dollar grin, he turned and ran from the porch, shouted, 'GOD BLESS YOU,' and 'TRICK OR TREAT,' and was gone...."

"Trick or treat! After I shut the door, came near-hysteria -- laughter and tears and that funny feeling you get when you know that once again Christmas has come to you. Right down the chimney of my midwinter hovel comes Saint Hong Duc. He is confused about the details, like me, but he is very clear about the spirit of the season."

Now that story was "Joy for a Hurting World." And so is the message from God as found in the scriptures read and hymns sung on this Christmas Eve. I love Christmas Eve where we can finally shut out the artificial trappings placed on Christmas by our culture. Now we can fully focus on the joy filled and true meaning of Christmas: The saving grace of God appearing in the flesh in the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. No trick or treat, just grace. It is not easy getting to these few moments of full focus on the birth of the Christ child. We have to wade through the

swamp of commercialism, hike through the forest of preparations, and somehow survive the volcano of activities that seem to explode this time of year. The continuing battles in war torn nations and the economic and employment uncertainties of our times make us more than a bit jumpy. A good many of us also have to walk through the dark valley of grief over loved ones no longer with us to celebrate this holiday. So we need to hear God's message of "Joy for a Hurting World."

As tough as we may have it, the people to whom Isaiah wrote in 735 BC were faced with the pending destruction of their nation, temple, homes and lives by the invading hordes of Assyrians from the north. Those people had to be hurting. As Isaiah said, "the people walked in darkness." I have felt such darkness and fear in my life when our country has gone into war. I imagine that December 7, 1941 brought such darkness and fear upon those of you who were alive on that Sunday. My father was in the invasions of North Africa, Sicily and Omaha beach at Normandy during World War II. The darkness of uncertainty and fear had to be great for him, and all who were with him. Those were dark and hurting days.

Any kind of darkness can be scary and painful to us. I once experienced a darkness so dark that I hurt with fear. Back in 1975, I spent a day inside a coalmine near Pittsburgh that was 600 feet below the surface. There were lots of lights down there, but also there were places in the mine that it was so dark you could not see your hand in front of your face. The experience of being in a place I had never been before, so deep underground, with so many passages and plenty of rats scurrying around, and only one easy way out, that way unknown to me, with darkness all about me, laid heavily on my spirit and mind. It took extra strength and prayer to keep my sense of panic from taking over especially as I rode the underground rails at 60 miles an hour in a small metal car in the darkness of that coal mine.

Such a darkness of spirit might have been present that night in Bethlehem so long ago for Joseph, and soon to give birth teenager, Mary. There was no room for them in the Inn. That had to hurt. So the only option was to stay in a stable. It could have been a small dark cave near the inn or a shelter for animals next to a house. It may have been that no one was there to help this couple through the unknown passages of the birth of their first child—a child given to them in mysterious circumstances by God, for reasons even more uncertain. In that loneliness and darkness, I wonder how much they hurt.

The shepherds outside Bethlehem, who were at the bottom of the social ladder in that society, were out in the fields and had to deal with the darkness of the night. They also had to suffer with fear of wild predatory animals as they protected helpless sheep. In the daylight, they were shunned by all as smelly misfits. That had to hurt. The nation of Israel at that time was under the dark cruel thumb of Rome who oppressed and taxed them near to death. Indeed it may have been a silent night for those hurting people. As we sing in "Silent Night," all may have been calm, but at this point I doubt the bright. They may have asked what we ask when all appears to be darkness and pain; "Where is God?" "Where is the light and joy of life?"

Suddenly, the quiet and the painful darkness in Bethlehem was broken by the cry of a newborn child. I suspect that baby Jesus cried hard and long as God in the flesh

entered a world of troubles, sin and death. He was the light of the world that darkness tried to overcome, but could not. He was the light of life. He was the living joy of God born to bring comfort to a hurting world. The quiet and painful darkness were just as abruptly broken for the shepherds as an angel of the Lord appeared to them to announce the birth of a Savior. The sky, the universe in fact, was filled with the brilliant light of heavenly hosts singing "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" Some 730 years before God broke into our world with an un-snuffable light, Isaiah had proclaimed, "The hurting people of Israel, who walked in darkness, have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined." As Paul wrote in Titus, "the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all humanity,....the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." Oh what joy!

May the darkness and hurt in our lives and our world be as swiftly and effectively overcome again and again as we celebrate the birth of our Savior who is the light of the world. When I came out of that coalmine in Pennsylvania, suddenly there was bright sunlight, green grass, and a renewed sense of life in me. I had been hurting and depressed because I felt ineffective as a minister, and had considered working in the coalmine. The light of day overcoming the darkness of my soul and the depth of the coalmine was like Christ being born in me again. I felt joy again. Such is to be our celebration of the birth of Christ into this world. His birth speaks to each of us where we are at this time with comfort and joy.

For those of us in depression, or burdened by grief remember that this babe in the manger grew to say to us, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." (John 14: 6), "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11: 28-30).

For those of us filled with guilt of some sin, remember how on the cross he cried, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." (Luke 23: 34).

For those of us who are filled with joy, love, a sense of forgiveness, and presence of the Lord, that baby boy grew to say to us: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (John 15: 9-12).

For the children, the one who once was a child said: "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." (Luke 18: 16-17). And with joy he received the children.

For the entire world Christ's birth was summed up in Jesus' words to Nicodemus, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3: 16-17). Now that is joy for a hurting world.

This is just a minute portion of the scriptures that describe the grace and joy God has richly poured out upon us in the birth of Jesus. Baby Jesus is a gift that we will never finish unwrapping as long as we live. In fact, in the end, he wraps us up into his arms and heart to give us a package that will never be broken, misplaced or returned--everlasting life with him. No matter what store we shop in or internet site we click onto, we cannot buy this gift that removes our burdens, lightens our world, fills us with hope, joy, and redeems our very lives. God just stepped in and gave it to us in Jesus. No trick or treat, just grace!

What are we, in a hurting world, to do about this explosion of light, grace and joy? We are to do as the shepherds did that first Christmas Eve. Come see the one who has first come to us, and be filled with the amazement, joy and faith that the shepherds experienced. Let us also ponder all this in our hearts as the baby's mother, Mary did. Then let us join the shepherds in glorifying God for coming in the flesh to save us.

Come now, let us follow the Shepherds into Bethlehem where the baby Jesus lies in his mother's arms, and let us sing of this wondrous gift so silently yet powerfully given in the hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." (page 44 of hymnal)

1. O little town of Bethlehem,    How still we see thee lie!    Above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
The silent stars go by.    Yet in thy dark streets shineth    The everlasting light;  
The hopes and fears of all the years    Are met in thee tonight.

2. For Christ is born of Mary;    And gathered all above,    While mortals sleep, the angels keep  
Their watch of wondering love.    O morning stars, together    Proclaim the holy birth!  
And praises sing to God the King,    And peace to all on earth.

3. How silently, how silently,    The wondrous gift is given!    So God imparts to human hearts  
The blessings of His heaven.    No ear may hear His coming,    But in this world of sin,    Where  
meek souls will receive Him, still    The dear Christ enters in.

4. O holy Child of Bethlehem,    Descend to us, we pray;    Cast out our sin and enter in,  
Be born in us today.    We hear the Christmas angels    The great glad tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us,    Our Lord Emmanuel!

Music: Arrangement from the English Hymnal, 1906. Used by permission of Oxford University Press.