

The Christmas Spirit

Luke 1:30-35

Do you have the Christmas spirit yet? You should. This month began with a wonderful snowfall which transformed the Lehigh Valley into a winter wonderland. Let's see, there are other reasons to make merry. The stock market just passed 10,000, unemployment is down, our church is prospering – and oh yes, God sent Jesus to save us from our sins. That's enough to make us joyful, isn't it?

If you aren't rejoicing this Advent, perhaps it's because some other spirit has crowded out the Christmas spirit. Do you have a spirit of exhaustion, like Pop Wagner? Or are you afflicted (and afflict others) with a busy-body spirit like Ruby, Diamond, and Pearl? Perhaps you are like the "normal" American family – deprived, greedy, and depressed. When the busy season really gets going, do you order around your husband (or wife) – or wish you could? Do you, like everyone in the skit, give in to a spirit of argument every Christmas? And if so – if you are governed by some spirit other than the spirit of Christmas – why? Why aren't you filled with the Christmas spirit?

The problem is that joy is not a commodity we can manufacture, advertise, sell, and invest in. I'm absolutely certain this is the case, or it would be prominently displayed at Wal-Mart. Joy is a spiritual response to an inward reality. Happiness may arise from a passing pleasure – and it also disappears like wrapping paper on Christmas morning. But joy arises from deep within our souls and lingers forever. Joy is a spiritual condition. It doesn't always issue forth in laughter or merriment, but colors everything about us with serene contentment and deep satisfaction. Joy overrules external circumstances and can be just as powerful in sorrow as in pleasure.

Joy is a spiritual response to an inward reality. No amount of snow or stock market success or Christmas presents or happiness will make us joyful unless we have that inward reality which produces a spiritual response in us. Look at yourself. If your life is characterized by deep-seated anger, frustration, jealousy, selfishness, and envy, no wonder you can't get the Christmas spirit. God says in Galatians 5:19-21 that you are ruled by the spirit of the flesh. Even when good things happen, your pleasure is short-lived because deep inside you, the real you is corrupt. Good times are merely bright paint over a rotten heart – and paint doesn't stick to rot.

Actually all this longing for the Christmas spirit is so misplaced, it is doomed to failure. We don't need the Christmas spirit, we need the Spirit who brought Christmas in the first place. Jesus didn't just drop out of the sky or pop into Mary's womb. The Son of God took on human flesh when the Spirit of God hovered over Mary. Luke records the angel's explanation of how Mary will conceive a baby.

Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God."

Luke 1:30-35

Just as God's Spirit hovered over the earth, creating the dry land, the plants, and the animals at the beginning of time, so now at the beginning of redemption, God's Spirit will hover over Mary and create a

new living being. Just as God breathed His Spirit into the lump of clay and made a man, so now God will breathe into Mary's womb and create a new man – a truly spiritual man, one who is eternally inhabited by God's Spirit and lives an entirely different life than the race of men into which he was born. This man created by God's Holy Spirit will be holy. He will never know sin, although He will be sorely tempted by it. He will experience hearty laughter and infinite sorrow, yet with joy that looks through both pleasure and pain to His Father who is better than pleasure and loves Him with an unquenchable love. Jesus has the Christmas spirit 24 hours of every day because He is in fellowship with the Spirit of God who creates joy in the depths of man's soul.

God promised long ago that He would visit His people and give them His Spirit. At perhaps their lowest point, when Israel's temple was burned and her cities were laid waste and her productive citizens were slaughtered or carried captive to Babylon – when Israel was essentially destroyed – God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel. God explained why they had been destroyed, and what the survivors needed to do so that they would not perish, too.

“Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live!”
Ezekiel 18:30b-32

You see, those problems you encounter in the Christmas season and everyday – frustration, greed, selfishness, jealousy – these are sins which will kill you. Your iniquity will be your ruin. You cannot simply try to get through another day and hope for the best. You cannot shrug your shoulders and say to yourself that Christmas is rough on everyone. These habits are sins, and they will kill you. But you cannot just change your behavior anymore than you can change your height. Behavior springs from the heart. If you have an evil heart, you *cannot* stop sinning. Sin is in your nature. It's as natural, as automatic, as inevitable as breathing. Only if you have a change of heart will you stop sinning. So God tells Israel to get a new heart and a new spirit. It's as simple as that. With a new heart and a new spirit you will begin to stop sinning and you will live!

There's only one small problem. Where are you going to get a new heart and a new spirit? These aren't on sale at Wal-Mart, either. You can't make them, you can't buy them, without them you are dead. You're stuck. The only thing that will save you, that will give you life, is impossible to get. You are doomed.

Now here is where God's love comes into the picture. God knew we couldn't save ourselves. He knew we couldn't get a new heart and a new spirit on our own. So He did it for us. Later in Ezekiel God made this promise.

For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God.

Ezekiel 36:24-28

You see, when God gives you a new heart and a new spirit, you keep His commands. You naturally obey Him, because it's your nature to do so. And when you keep His commands, you have the promise that you will not die – you will live! And when Jesus came in the flesh by the power of the Spirit of God, that was the beginning of God's Spirit living in all people everywhere who believe in Him.

Isn't this exciting? Isn't this worth celebrating? Doesn't this put you in the Christmas spirit? You know, if by the Christmas spirit you mean spiked egg nog, or a wild office party, or amazing gifts for the family, it really doesn't matter much if you have the Christmas spirit or not. If your Christmas doesn't include these things, your life will go on much as it always has. But if you don't have the real Christmas Spirit – the Spirit of God in your life, you are headed for a fiery eternity. We all sin from time to time, but if your life is full, day by day, year by year, of the sins we saw in the skit this afternoon, you don't have God's Spirit in you, and you are in trouble. Repent! Decide right now to abandon your wicked life and trust Jesus to save you. Jesus said,

“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will *your* heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” Luke 11:13

Pray, therefore, and ask Jesus to give you the Holy Spirit – and He will. And your life will never be the same.

If you *have* believed in Jesus and *do* have His Spirit, you also need to repent of sinful attitudes which creep into our lives. You don't need to wear a plastic smile on your face all day, but the joy of knowing Jesus should be evident, even at Christmastime. Complaining most definitely should not.

In this Advent season the best way to prepare for Christmas is not by putting up the tree and getting presents for family and friends. The *best* way to prepare for Christmas is to prepare our hearts. May we all so prepare our hearts that this will be the best Christmas ever.

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Christmas Program, December 13, 2003