

## Joy

Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

In my newsletter article a couple of weeks ago, I talked about the Dr. Seuss book and movie, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Most of you probably know the story. A mean ol' Grinch hates the way that the Whos down in Whoville celebrate Christmas, especially the eating, the noise, and the singing. So he steals everything he can from them—all the toys, all the decorations, and all the food, and he plans to throw it all over a cliff. But, to his surprise, the Whos still celebrate Christmas. They come together outside and sing their morning Christmas song, smiles on their faces and joy in their voices. The Whos are able to do this because, as the Grinch realizes, Christmas isn't about any of those things that he tried to steal. It's about something far more important that brings a deeper, more profound joy than any of those things. It's about the birth of a baby and the coming of a savior.

The community into which that baby Jesus was born struggled a lot. They were living under an empire that was harsh and violent. Many people lived in poverty, struggling with disease and hunger. Even their own king, Herod, was a tyrant, collaborating with the Romans, wishing so desperately for power. In fact, as we know, after Jesus is born, Herod is so afraid of losing his power, that Herod

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orders children murdered in the hopes of removing the threat that he sees in Jesus.

It was a cruel and harsh world.

And yet, God chose that time and place to become incarnate. This is AMAZING. There are so many different ways God could have handled this situation. God could have appeared as a giant, scary face in the heavens, or as a warrior clothed in light to defend the people. God could have appeared as a dragon, or a monster, a pillar of fire again, or a whirlwind. Or God could simply have appeared as a fully formed adult—as a Roman emperor, a king, or any member of a ruling and wealthy class.

The fact that God didn't do any of these things is telling. Instead of choosing to appear in any of those forms, God chose to be born as a human baby to a poor, marginalized, broken, forgotten people, and raised by a seemingly insignificant woman and her husband.

This act, the incarnation, speaks volumes. Through this birth at that specific time and place and to those specific people, God made the invisible visible. What I mean by that is that we can sometimes feel abandoned by God. God's extravagant welcome and profound love for everyone can be difficult to imagine, especially in a world like ours or in a world like Mary's. But God made that love, that grace, that welcome visible in God's very own self by choosing to be born to Mary.

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It can feel like we've been abandoned by God, but Jesus' incarnation as a baby gives us hope. Babies are innocent, and full of the beauty of newness. They renew our sense of wonder. My mother-in-law used to talk about the way that babies would look at the world in wonder every time they would wake up, because the world was always new to them. I notice people stopping on the street to look at a baby in a stroller or to watch small children play. They just bring us so much joy! And I still remember the moments of quiet joy I would feel every time one of my babies would open their eyes, look at me and smile. God came to us as a baby, so every Christmas we are able to feel the quiet joy that babies bring to us.

It *can* feel like we've been abandoned by God, but Jesus' incarnation *shows* us that we are not. He came to usher in a new kin-dom, God's kin-dom where we all see each other as kin, as relatives who are totally worthy and loved. And he did this by growing up in that unjust and cruel world, and then by healing, teaching and preaching about how we and the world *should* be, thus bringing salvation to the here and now. He taught us about how we can become oaks of righteousness, seeking justice in an unjust world, bringing comfort to the brokenhearted, proclaiming mercy and rehabilitation to the prisoners. And it is not insignificant that, into such a world as this one, he brought the message of eternal salvation—

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that God's love and grace extends to all of us, no matter how unworthy we might feel ourselves or our world to be. This is a reason to feel joy, indeed.

It can feel like we've been abandoned by God, but Jesus' birth to Mary shows us that God truly knows what it's like to be a human, going through the stages of birth, growing up, adolescence, adulthood and death. God knows what it's like to suffer hunger, poverty, injustice, marginalization, incarceration, torture. God knows what it's like to be a refugee, fleeing for God's life. God knows what it's like to be overwhelmed and exhausted, to be angry and afraid, and to be bullied and betrayed. God even knows what's it like to feel abandoned by God--we know this because, at this death, Jesus cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." Jesus—God—truly understands what it's like to be us. So when I tell you that you are not alone, you are truly, truly not alone. That's what the incarnation means and that is why Christmas brings us joy—why the Whos of Whoville sing, even in the midst of cruelty and loss, why Mary, the mother of Jesus sings in the face of a shocking and difficult revelation, why our own souls sing, no matter what we are facing:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done

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FCUCC  
Dec 13, 2020

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great things for me, and holy is God's name. Thanks be to God. Alleluia.

Amen.