

The Power of Christmas

Luke 2:10-11

December 24, 2016 (7 p.m.)

Andre Massena was one of Napoleon's generals in the early 1800's. He led French armies to dozens of victories during his decades of service. During one campaign he surprised an Austrian town with an army of eighteen thousand men. The town had no means of defense. Defeat and death seemed inevitable.

The town council had nearly decided to surrender. Then the old dean of the church reminded them that it was Easter Sunday. He begged them to hold services as usual and to leave the trouble in God's hands. This they did. When the French army heard the church bells ringing joyfully, they assumed that an Austrian army had come to relieve the place. The invaders quickly broke camp. Before the bells ceased ringing, all the Frenchmen had vanished.

The incident has often been duplicated in individual lives. They have rung the joy bells in the face of pain, and sickness, and poverty, and fear, and loneliness, and all other trials. Then the joy bells have conquered. Speedily, the foe has slunk away. Speedily, the bell ringers have found themselves in possession of the field. For no enemy is quite so strong as faith filled with joy.

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people...’” **The power of Christmas is faith filled with joy.**

What actually happened at Christmas? Martin Luther puts it this way in a sermon from 1521.

“In this manner Christ takes to himself our birth and absorbs it in his birth; he presents us with his birth so that we become pure and new in it, as if it were our own, so that every Christian might rejoice in this birth of Christ and glory in it no less than if he, too, like Christ, had been born bodily of Mary.”

That is, for Luther, one of things that makes Christmas so special. Christmas is the celebration of God's intent and action to be joined to us fully. At Christmas, God takes on our lot and life completely. God does this to give us all grace and goodness. God promises always to see us and treat us as if we are Christ.

St. Athanasius said it a millennium before Luther: “Christ became like us so that we might become like Christ.” **The power of Christmas is a faith filled with joy.**

Author Leo Buscaglia tells this story about his mother and their "misery dinner." It was the night after his father came home and said it looked as if he would have to go into bankruptcy because his partner had absconded with their firm's funds. His mother went out and sold some jewelry to buy food for a sumptuous feast. Other members of the family scolded her for it. But she told them that "the time for joy is now, when we need it most, not next week." Her courageous act rallied the family.

We live in a time without joy. We are surrounded by suspicion. We are driven by paranoia and pain. We expect the worst and we get it. Drowning in stuff and swimming in information we are as unhappy and lonely and depressed as Americans have ever been.

It's Christmas! Now is the time for joy! Let us resist this descent into darkness. Robert Louis Stevenson, at his life's end, said, "To miss the joy is to miss everything!" These days, joy is an act of courage. Let us fight back with the best weapon we have. **The power of Christmas is a faith filled with joy.**

Except for the Gospel, there is no better Christmas story than Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*." Scrooge discovers that he has not died. Better yet he has not missed Christmas. His response is a life filled with joy. I love the way Dickens describes him.

Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset; and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him.

The world may surrender to sorrow. But it shall not be so among us! "[T]o you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." **The power of Christmas is a faith filled with joy.**

Let's pray...

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