

**“Our Real and Only Hope”
from Psalm 80**

- 1** Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth
2 before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.
Awaken your might; come and save us.
3 Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.
4 How long, LORD God Almighty, will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people?
5 You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.
6 You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us.
7 Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.
14 Return to us, God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see!
Watch over this vine,
15 the root your right hand has planted, the son you have raised up for yourself.
16 Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish.
17 Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.
18 Then we will not turn away from you; revive us, and we will call on your name.
19 Restore us, LORD God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.

Introduction

Last spring, an older couple arrived to see their doctor. “Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!” the gentleman said to everyone in the waiting room. His enthusiasm was infectious. Most of the patients ignored the outburst, but someone decided to respond, “Merry Christmas to you too!”

Sensing a sympathetic ear, his wife quietly said, “It started this past year. For no reason, my husband would get the Christmas spirit. At first we dismissed it, but then we realized how much joy it brought him. So we started decorating the house, singing carols, having a spur-of-the-moment celebration. “After doing this a number of times,” she said, “we look forward to it. Christmas can come anytime, anyplace. It’s always a pleasant surprise.”

I remember when we held a “Christmas in August” Sunday morning. We sang carols, read Christmas scriptures, and collected gifts of food and clothing for people in need. I think we all had a joyful time, especially watching people in worship who didn’t know ahead of time what would happen.

Today, the fourth Sunday in Advent, we lit the “Joy” candle in the expectation that Christmas brings Joy into our lives. The Bible is filled with messages of joy as a gift from the Lord and the experience of believers. Here are a few.

From the Old Testament: in Deuteronomy 16, “For seven days celebrate the festival to the LORD your God at the place the LORD will choose. For the LORD your God will bless you in all your harvest

and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete.” In I Chronicles 16, “Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and joy are in his dwelling place. Let the trees of the forest sing, let them sing for joy before the LORD.” Psalm 16, “You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.” Psalm 28, “The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him.” Psalm 47, “Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy.” Psalm 51, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation.” Psalm 95, “Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.” Isaiah 52, “Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices. Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.”

From the New Testament: in Matthew 13, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. In Galatians 5, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness.” In Hebrews 12, “We fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” In Philippians 4, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” In Luke 2, “But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.” In II Corinthians 13, “Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.”

Author Brennan Manning wrote: “I believe that the real difference in the American church is not between conservatives and liberals, fundamentalists and charismatics, or Republicans and Democrats. The real difference is between the aware and the unaware. When somebody is aware of the love that the Father has, that person is spontaneously grateful. Manning noted that “we’re not joyful and then become grateful — we’re grateful, and that makes us joyful.”

Madeleine L'Engle was an American writer of young adult fiction, including *A Wrinkle in Time* and its sequels. Her works reflect both her Christian faith and her strong interest in science. She wrote that “Evangelism isn’t what we tell people, unless what we tell is totally consistent with who we are. It’s who we are that’s going to make the difference. If we don’t truly enjoy our faith, nobody’s going to catch the fire of enjoyment from us.” How’s your joy as a head toward Christmas Day?

I. Shine on Us (vs. 3, 7, 19)

There’s much amiss in today’s world, in today’s America, in today’s Salt Lake City, in your life and mine. There was much amiss in Old Testament Israel and in New Testament church. We read from Psalm 80, a song about a plea to God for his saving grace. Three times the chorus sings: “Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.”

This song asks God to restore Israel, the sheep, the vineyard of the Lord. Israel is getting off track, the sheep are in danger, the vineyard is on the edge of dying. In a time when Christmas is all about niceness (pretty angles, gentle shepherds, cute baby), I want Christmas to be strange and provocative. In the Christmas story, is God promoting unmarried teenage pregnancy? The forbidden practice of star gazing to announce the Savior's birth? Unclean shepherds and Gentiles the most important visitors to see Jesus? God silent for 400 years while the Greeks and then the Romans invaded the Promised Land? Jesus and family forced to flee his home country as a child?

Christmas is one of the times when friends and family will come to church with you. Some of them are there only to be courteous, some because of tradition, some to entertain their children. But, here's an opportunity to undo some of the prejudices they may have about the Christian faith. Those who think Christianity is intellectual suicide may find it helpful to hear some apologetics at Christmas.

Let's be honest about the grave need the world, let alone the church, has for a Savior. The psalm asks of God: "Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself." This "man" and "son of man" can refer to the king over Israel and also Jesus as king over all. That his rule will benefit God's people in real human history. David was king about 3,000 years ago. And that his rule will benefit God's people in all the millennia to come. Jesus lived, died and rose again on this earth some 2,000 years ago. Christianity has shaped our world and culture for about 60 generations.

II. Save Us (vs. 2, 18)

"Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, you lead Joseph like a flock... come and save us. How long, Lord, will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people? Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish."

Because of the prominence of Joseph among his brothers and because of the size of the tribes of the sons of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh), sometimes the Scriptures refer to all of Israel as Joseph. Although appearing frequently elsewhere, the idea of God being Israel's shepherd occurs in the Psalter only twice, here and in Psalm 23. This name is full of tenderness, was selected by Asaph, the troubled Psalmist. Throughout the Bible, broken hearts delight in names of grace.

We live on this side of that amazing history. But, what do you think things would be like if you remove Jesus from history? What if Jesus hadn't come? How different would our lives be? Look at Jesus Christ's influence on world history, his church helping the poor, establishing hospitals and orphanages, promoting education, social justice, and much more. In an increasingly secular age, politically correct Americans have a case of amnesia when it comes to the progression of western culture that came from the life of Christ and his followers. This isn't a point of Christian superiority. The church has failed her Lord many times over. But this observation is a matter of interpreted historical fact.

As the world still reels from the biggest refugee crisis since World War II, it is not hard to draw parallels with the experience of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus fleeing for safety to neighboring Egypt. As huge inequalities challenge our nations, it is interesting to note that it was to poor and marginalized shepherds that angels were sent to give an invitation to the birth of Jesus. Looking back on a year of terrorist attacks, political turmoil, personal tragedies, and financial hardships, there is much to show the poignancy of the real Christmas story.

Conclusion

Jason McElwain, a high school senior with autism, was the basketball team manager for three seasons. He diligently carried water for the players. He chased rebounds in warm-ups. He was busy mopping up sweat. For the last game of the season, Jason’s coach decided to reward this young man by allowing him to suit up. Then, with the team ahead by twenty points and only four minutes to go, the coach put Jason in the game. You can find it on youtube.

He missed his first two shots, but his third was a three-point swish. As the ball went through the net, the gymnasium erupted with shouts of joy. Jason went on to make six three-pointers — a school record — to finish with twenty points in a little more than four minutes.

With each basket, the crowd became more enthusiastic. By the time he hit his last shot, everyone was jumping up and down. When the game ended, the bleachers emptied onto the court as the crowd gathered around Jason, and his teammates hoisted him onto their shoulders.

Jason’s success touched many more lives than his own, as those who celebrated with him experienced the selfless joy of delighting in others.

Jesus did infinitely more to thrill our hearts and create an amazing joy for us. The only person who can be at the right hand of God as intercessor, is Jesus the Christ, the Messiah. Let him become your Deliverer. Accept him for this purpose, and let his strength be manifested in your weakness! By him alone can we find mercy; through him alone can we ever be reconciled to God.

Luke 1:46-53

46 And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.

50 His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.”