

## JOURNEYS OF JOY

by Doug Goins

This holiday season is marked by two things common to all of us: travel and celebration. There have been a number of articles in newspapers and periodicals about the fact that 1990 will see the most people in our country traveling the most miles to visit family and friends over the Christmas holidays. An article by Mike Sante in the *San Jose Mercury* last Friday says, "Christmas shoppers may be spending less on gifts, but they won't let a sliding economy, higher gas prices or the hassle of holiday travel keep them from going home. An estimated 34.8 million Americans will fly, drive or take the train to visit out-of-town family and friends over the next two weeks."

*The Dolly Parton Christmas Special* on Friday night had the theme, "I'll be Home for Christmas." The setting of the show was her old homestead in Tennessee, which she bought and restored because her home means so much to her, and the central cast of characters on the show were members of her own family. Going home for Christmas is important for everybody.

In the newspaper article I quoted, a couple of psychologists talk about why we're so driven to travel during the holiday season. A professor from Purdue says, "[It is] a deep primeval urge...that's perhaps as powerful as the pull which brings the birds back north in the spring. So we're willing to go to a great deal of expense and sacrifice to get to our home, even in times of high gasoline prices, crowded planes and highways." I don't know if it's a deep primeval urge, but a professor from Notre Dame strikes a more responsive chord, at least in my own experience. She says, "The thing that drives people to be with family members over Christmas is that it provides a point of stability in a world that is not very stable." We want to go home where it's safe, secure, and predictable.

In our 13 1/2 years of marriage, Candy and I have taken Christmas journeys from Los Angeles and Mountain View to Boise, Idaho; Fresno, California; and Phoenix, Arizona. We expended the time, effort, and financial resources because we wanted to enjoy Christmas with our families. The journeys were often bittersweet; there was difficulty and struggle mixed in with the joy of being with family. I remember three hours of white-knuckle driving on black ice in northern Nevada to get to Idaho for Christmas. I remember one Christmas Eve in Fresno having a terrible argument over when and how the Christmas presents would be opened because two family traditions were in total conflict. On a trip to Phoenix, Arizona four years ago, our car engine blew up on Christmas Eve in Blythe, California. (That was an adventure! But the Lord used it to help teach our kids some things about God's provision.) All of us probably struggle with unmet Christmas expectations that we place on people, experiences, and places.

This morning we've celebrated, wonderfully already, the joy we know as followers of Jesus Christ; we've sung about the joy he gives us personally. Our PBC family has observed this season of joy with a number of outreaches. For instance, the Daytimers outreach luncheon for 150 convalescent home residents, the children's ministry Christmas Festival, the PBC choir and orchestra celebration last week, and our December Sunday mornings, especially today. And it's because of Jesus and the difference he makes in our lives.

The scriptures, as well, specifically Luke's beautiful account of the birth of Jesus, include both elements, travel and celebration. There are three journeys in Luke's account. First, the 80-mile journey of Joseph and Mary from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea. Second, the angelic journey from the highest heavenly courts through time and eternity to the Judean shepherds' field. And, third, the two-mile journey of the shepherds to Bethlehem's stable and back again to their flocks. All three are journeys of joyful obedience to God's saving plan and purpose, obedience to God's revealed truth.

More than any other New Testament writer, Luke is captivated by the notion of joy, and the gospel resounds with the joy associated with Jesus and the kingdom of God. The angel Gabriel promised "joy and gladness" to Zechariah and Elizabeth in the birth of their son, John the Baptist, who would be the forerunner of the Messiah (Luke 1:14). The baby in Elizabeth's womb "leaped for joy" at the visit of his cousin Jesus, the Messiah, in Mary's womb (Luke 1:44). Mary's hymn of praise (which is entirely Old Testament scripture passages), sung after her obedient acceptance of God's plan for her to be the mother of Jesus, opened with her rejoicing in her relationship with God (Luke 1:47). And now, at the heart of our Christmas story, is the angelic message: "good news of a great joy" (Luke 2:10).

Let's look at the first journey of joy that Joseph and Mary took from Nazareth to Bethlehem in Luke 2:1-7:

**In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.**

A governmental mandate periodically required every resident of the Roman empire to participate in a census for taxation purposes. While it

was decreed by the Roman Emperor himself, Caesar Augustus, responsibility for it was delegated to each territorial procurator. Quirinius was the Syrian provincial military governor. The census was probably administered by King Herod, because the requirement that the citizens of Palestine return to their city of ancestry was Jewish, not Roman.

Both Mary and Joseph were descendants of King David, so they went together to Bethlehem in obedience to the Roman and Jewish governmental authorities, although Joseph could have probably have registered for both of them. They went together because Mary was in her final three weeks of pregnancy, and Joseph didn't want to leave her alone with the possibility that the baby might come while he was gone. Luke tells us that she had spent the first three months of pregnancy with Elizabeth. Mary then returned to Nazareth to hear the wonderful news that an angel had appeared to Joseph and convinced him, as Matthew tells us, to marry her, taking her as his beloved and caring for her. They spent the next six months together preparing for this journey. Joseph made a decision not to consummate that marriage; as the text says, they were still betrothed officially. This journey expressed Joseph's loving concern for his young wife, perhaps a desire not to leave her alone in Nazareth with any gossip about pregnant brides.

The journey ended quietly; it is an amazing understatement as Luke tells the story. Mary and Joseph were alone, delivering their son without the assistance of a midwife or anyone else. They delivered him outside in an animal feeding trough because of the crowded conditions in the local inns. Mary, after all the pain of childbirth, had to wrap Jesus in cloths for newborns all by herself, with no help. Childbirth under the best circumstances is long, painful, and difficult, but under these circumstances it was much worse than we can even imagine.

Where was the joy in this journey? For both Mary and Joseph there was joy. For Mary, it began when she responded to the angel Gabriel, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word [the word of God]" (Luke 1:38). For Joseph, it began when he responded in obedience to another angelic message. "He did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took [her as] his wife" (Matthew 1:24).

The hymn that Mary sang (the *Magnificat*) with Elizabeth begins with an Old Testament expression of praise: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47). This hymn is joy at work in her because of her trust in God to be faithful to her through all of these events. The entire *Magnificat* shows the depth of her knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures and her joyful celebration of the Savior God of the universe.

Throughout her pregnancy, during her time with Zechariah and Elizabeth and during the six months with Joseph in Nazareth, she must have meditated on the Hebrew scriptures in preparation for this journey. She must have had an understanding of the Messianic prophecies that told of this one to be born, even the specific prophecy that he be born in Bethlehem. She desired to live according to the word of God. Luke presents Mary as a deeply reflective woman who thoughtfully considered revealed truth. I believe the journey to Bethlehem was taken with full knowledge and understanding of Micah 5:2-5, a prophecy written 650 years earlier: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel." The rest of this prophecy goes on to speak of a Messianic savior and king who would bring peace and salvation.

The joy for Mary and Joseph came in knowing that they were going to Bethlehem in obedience to God's plans and purposes, so Messiah could be born there. Yes, they were alone, and it was cold, lonely, and difficult beyond our imagination. But their hearts must have been singing at the birth of Mary's firstborn son. God had loved them both enough to communicate personally with each one of them through an angel. He promised Joseph, "do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21). And it was a birth in fulfillment of God's promise to Mary: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the most High; and the Lord God will give to 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" (Luke 1:30-33). They chose to believe the message, the promise of God. Their obedience to that truth brought joy!

I think that Mary must have told Jesus about this experience and what filled her heart as he came into the world, and that Jesus recalled it when he spoke with his disciples in the upper room, on the night of his betrayal, of the sorrow the twelve would feel at his death: "But your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world" (John 16:20-21). The joy of Mary and Joseph came from their surrender to the truth God gave them, and their willingness to live in obedience to that truth. Throughout scripture, there is a consistent cause-and-effect relationship between obedience to God's revealed word and joy in life.

I spent a painful two hours last week with a young woman struggling with despair this Christmas season. She said she was suicidal. She told me a sad story of a love relationship she had had with a young man four years earlier. He had chosen to reject her, and her hurt had turned to hatred for him. She said she refused to forgive him for what he did to her. She talked about her anger against the Lord; her life wasn't turning out the way she thought it should. As I listened and then responded to her, I had the joy of telling her that Jesus is the only one who can heal that. The young man couldn't even if he came back and said he'd marry her. It wouldn't really change anything in terms of where she would find joy, healing, and fulfillment. I talked with her about what Jesus did on the cross as he was dying--he forgave the

people who hurt him most deeply. We looked together at the scriptures that show us that God is sovereign over life, even difficult circumstances, and that he really has been in charge of her life the last four years. We discussed the relationship between obedience and joy. She made a choice that afternoon to continue in her hurt and resentment, to reject the life-saving truth of God's word. She refused to echo Mary's response to truth: "Let it be to me according to your word." This will not be a Christmas season of joy for my friend, and I pray for her and ache for her, that she'll know healing through giving it all to Jesus and letting him minister to her.

Now let's turn to the second journey of joy, from heaven to earth, in verses 8-14:

**And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,**

**"Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among men  
with whom he is pleased!"**

This journey was intergalactic, from the courts of heaven to the open fields some two miles east of Bethlehem, where some shepherds had pastured their flock for the evening. A single angelic spokesman accompanied by innumerable heavenly creatures are described in military terms. These were not angels as we usually think of them, but heavenly soldiers; it was not a choir that spoke those words, but an army! It was a military invasion commanded by the Lord of time and space. These heavenly beings were surrounded by God's *shekinah* glory--radiant, brilliant light; blinding and dazzling! It scared those shepherds out of their wits. That's what it means when it says they were "filled with fear." Supernatural figures had come into their human experience out of nowhere.

The Judean shepherds were the lowest of the low socially--common men, a despised class with a bad reputation. Shepherds were known as thieves because they were nomadic, and as they moved their sheep around the country, sometimes they got confused about what was "mine" and what was "thine." They were all tarred with the same brush--untrustworthy, dishonest. They were not allowed to give testimony in a Jewish court of law. Their work made it impossible for them to observe the Jewish ceremonial laws and temple rituals, so they were considered religiously unclean and unacceptable. It's pretty amazing to think this heavenly invasion came to such social outcasts!

The purpose of this journey and this appearance was to bring joy. At the heart of the heavenly announcement was "a great joy" (verse 10). The joy the angel told the shepherds of was a joy that would overcome fear and apprehension about the future and the unknown. It was a joyful message that would be mind-blowing for them and everyone who heard it. The angel said it was for the shepherds specifically, for the people of Israel beyond them, and then for all of humanity--anybody who would listen, take it seriously, and try to understand the point of the message. Joy was concentrated in a baby, a gift given by God for "all the people" (verse 10), every member of the human race; a gift given to each of them individually. "For to you" (verse 11) addressed anyone, down to our day, who would recognize the identity and claims of this infant born in Bethlehem, the baby Jesus, who is Joy Incarnate.

The three words defining this great joy at the end of verse 11 are listed without articles in the original text. These words were titles identifying the one born in the city of David, continuing his kingly rule and authority, as "Savior, Christ, Lord."

We desperately need a Savior, as did that generation. A Savior is a deliverer, helper, and redeemer. He can confront the sinful struggles of each individual and save them out of their bondage to sin. He was the one described in Zechariah's prophecy: "[God] has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" (Luke 1:68-69). Jesus had been introduced to Joseph in the dream as the one who would "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Joy at Christmas is found in a Savior!

As Christ, he was the anointed one, the Messiah. He would confront all the religious chaos in the world, order it and make sense out of it, and establish a spiritual kingship on earth in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy: "The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and his anointed" (Psalm 2:2). Jesus was identified as this one by Matthew in his genealogy listing the legal lineage of Jesus. "Jesus was born, who is called Christ" (Matthew 1:16). Joy at Christmas is found in the Messiah!

Finally, he was given the title of Lord; he was the supreme authority, powerful in rule and reign. He would confront all principalities and powers both in and out of time and space. He was the sovereign of the universe and the Lord of each individual life (he wants to be totally in charge and in control of each one of us). He was the one described prophetically by King David: "The Lord [the creator God of the universe] says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool'" (Psalm 110). Jesus had been identified as this one to Zechariah by the angel Gabriel when he said that John would have a ministry of preparation for Jesus' coming "to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (Luke 1:17). Joy at Christmas is found in a relationship with the sovereign Lord!

This joy, which can be experienced only in "Jesus Christ, the Lord," is directly linked with peace in the praise of the heavenly army who joined the solitary angel (Luke 2:14). Peace, the *shalom* of God, means much more than the absence of war or conflict, although it's right

that we pray for peace now, as volatile as things are in the Middle East. We pray for God, as sovereign, to turn war aside in his purposes. But the peace that was announced at Christmas by the angelic hosts means the healing of the estrangement between God and man that was caused by our sin, rebellion, and anger against God. We are naturally resistant to who God is, to what he wants to do in our lives. Joyful Christmas peace was offered to men and women with whom God is pleased, people upon whom God's pleasure rests, people who enjoy friendship with God.

What kind of people are those who can know God's friendship, his pleasure? It has nothing to do with the ways we normally define pleasure, joy, meaning, and purpose. It has nothing to do with social status--shepherds or yuppies; nothing to do with ethnic origin--Jews or any other nationality; nothing to do with being religious--priests or those who can't stand church; nothing to do with vocational status--carpenters or Silicon Valley CEOs; nothing to do with military might--the Swiss Navy or Saddam Hussein. Experiencing the joyful Christmas peace of God's pleasure has nothing to do with economic advantage--a street person or an enormously wealthy tycoon; nothing to do with political position--an unregistered voter or James Baker; nothing to do with good taste or aesthetic sensitivity--whether your home is exquisitely decorated for Christmas this year or not; nothing to do with power and influence--someone living on the margin because of severe learning disabilities or, in Tom Wolfe's words, a "master of the universe."

The Apostle Paul tells us what kind of people can have joyful peace this Christmas, who can experience God's pleasure, his friendship: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God" (Romans 5:1-2). When we're in right relationship to Jesus Christ the Lord, joy comes out of this friendship, this comfortable relationship with our Father God.

One year ago, between Christmas and New Years, in an unheated office at an elementary school where we'd been involved, I had the wonderful delight of watching a friend discover the Christ of Christmas. He talked about how his life was full of fear and anxiety. He was going through a painful divorce. On his desk was a picture of his beautiful one-year-old son. He had a difficult work situation; he was new on the job, and he had been met by mistrust and rejection. We really did weep together. And out of all of that struggle, he came to know Jesus Christ personally. He accepted the Savior who could deal with his guilt and despair. He chose to worship the Messiah who could order his spiritual priorities. He surrendered to the Lord who wanted to control, direct, and guide his life. His immediate experience after we prayed together was "the peace of God, which passes all [human] understanding" (Philippians 4:7). He said, "You know, I really shouldn't feel this good!" He had dinner with us last week, and is still experiencing the great joy of having Jesus Christ at the center of his life.

Finally, the third journey was the joyful response of the shepherds who went up the hill to Bethlehem and back again, in verses 15-17 and 20:

**When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child...And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.**

It was a noisy journey of excitement, of breathless urgency in obedience to the angelic description of the baby in the manger. The shepherds recognized God at work in this supernatural invasion. There was about this journey an infectiousness. Sometimes Christmas joy just can't keep quiet (it's okay to be loud and raucous at Christmas!). At its heart is exuberant worship, "glorifying and praising God" (verse 20), and there is spontaneous witness: "...they made known the saying [to everyone]" (verse 17). The shepherds didn't just talk about what they saw, but about the life-changing "good news" they heard. It was indelibly written on their hearts. Joyful worship and witness like that of the shepherds is the result of personal experience with the Christ of Christmas. They accepted the fact that he had been born for them personally, and they had to tell everyone they met.

I have a dear friend in our church family named Ernesto Leon, whom the Lord found in Caracas, Venezuela when he was an angry, hurting teenager. I talked to Ernie last week, and he said he could identify with the shepherds very much, because as a young boy he watched his own father murder his mother and then take his own life. You can imagine what he's lived with all these years. But miraculously, God got his attention and brought him into faith in Jesus Christ. It's been wonderful to see how God has grown him up and healed him, given him a beautiful wife, and given him a ministry. The thing about Ernesto Leon is he can't quit telling people about the love of Jesus Christ, what he saw and heard, what he experienced and knows to be true.

Mary, too, had a joyful response. Her worshipful response was different from that of the shepherds, but it was still joyfully appropriate. Look at verse 19:

**But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.**

She continued to collect together everything she had seen, heard, and experienced, making order out of it. She was not astonished, but filled with a holy awe she could not forget. "Pondering" means to place together for comparison. Mary would go over each detail of the words of Gabriel, the Old Testament messianic prophecies, the shepherds' report, and her own experience. A. T. Robertson says, "She would brood over it all with a mother's high hopes and joy."

Just as appropriately, we can follow Mary's example this season and be quiet, reflective, and Word-centered. "Keeping" and "pondering" can provide a joyfully calming antidote to the frenzied, 20th-century Christmas mania that swirls around us at this time of year. We're called to experience joy in worship and in witness, and it doesn't really matter whether it's noisy or quiet. We aren't all wired the same way.

In contrast to the shepherds' and Mary's responses, we also see a troubling response in the townspeople. Let's look at verse 18:

**...and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.**

Most people "wondered." This is an unusual word in the New Testament. It means vague surprise, mild curiosity, or superficial interest, whether emotional, intellectual, or religious. The same word was used to describe the response of the neighbors at John the Baptist's circumcision when God gave Zechariah back his voice, and he gave an amazing prophecy about what God was going to do with his son in Luke 1:63-79. Luke says there that "all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea." Jesus was born six months later in the same Judean hill country, and again the response was mild interest.

The sad thing is that this third group in the story, "all who heard," have no gospel history of worshipping or obeying the newborn King. Magi, or wise men, from Persia showed up later, but no residents of the hill country of Judea. And every year in our own area, millions hear this wonderful story at church Christmas programs, on television and radio, at symphony concerts, at Messiah sings, or at the theater. The usual response will be superficial interest: intellectual stimulation, sentimental emotionalism, theological argumentation, artistic pleasure, or religious inspiration. You can hear it in comments like, "Wasn't it a lovely program?" or, "Weren't the shepherds cute?" You can hear it in heated debates about discrepancies in the genealogies. You can hear it in speculation about whether the star was a supernova or a constellation, etc. And in all this, people don't come to the Christ who is the heart of the story. But we have a choice to make: We can respond in worship and witness, or we can once again experience the emptiness of a superficial curiosity.

We looked at three journeys this morning. Joy is at the heart of each of these journeys, from Nazareth to Bethlehem, from heaven to earth, and from the shepherds' field to Bethlehem and back. Do you want to experience the joy of the journey this year? Do you identify with the statement that the psychologist from Notre Dame made? "The thing that drives people to be with family members over Christmas is that it provides a point of stability in a world that is not very stable." Hear again the message from God himself: "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Deep, permanent Christmas joy won't ultimately be found in travel or activity, no matter how rich, wonderful, and full it is. Stability in a world of instability comes from a personal relationship with the Christ of Christmas, the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord of life, the one who is our Peace, as the scriptures identify him. Joy will come from worshipful obedience to God's word, both the word made flesh in Jesus--the living Word of God--and the Bible, that revelation of the Father to us. I pray that we really will have a Christmas journey of joy that will last forever. Nobody can take this joy away.

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