

“Christmas Around the World: Brazil”

Luke 2:8-20

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All Scripture quoted from ESV unless otherwise noted

As in the other countries we’ve visited, the main Christmas celebration occurs on Christmas Eve, and it is truly a family affair. Everyone who is somehow related gathers to celebrate together on Christmas Eve. Christmas Day is often much more low-key and relaxed, without all the celebrations and parties that characterize Christmas Eve in Brazil.

Folk plays based on the story of the shepherds who visited Jesus on the night He was born are common, often including one or more female shepherds, who are accompanied by a gypsy, who tries to steal baby Jesus.

What threatens to steal the joy out of your Christmas? Unfulfilled expectations? Family obligations? An unshakable feeling of guilt, loss, failure, or boredom? There are many things that threaten to steal the joy, not just out of your Christmas, but away from your life. So how do you guard against that? Maybe there’s something in today’s passage that might help.

First of all, to keep joy in your life and in your Christmas, see what Jesus is really like. Imagine the shepherd’s response to their angelic interruption. Disbelief? Shock? Fear, for sure. Notice their response – v.15 – “**Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.**” This statement is filled with curiosity and excitement, but it is dominated by a sense of faith – ‘Let’s see this thing that has happened.’

If you want to keep joy in your life, take a long look at who Jesus is. But how do you understand what Jesus is like? Well, how do you understand what anyone is like? Whether it’s Abraham Lincoln or a School board candidate or your real estate agent or the new guy at school or work, you get to know them the same way. As much as is possible, you read about them, you talk to them, and you talk to others who know them. So it is with Jesus. Read about Him – He wrote an autobiography – the Bible. You talk to Him – Pray / anywhere, anytime. And you talk to others who know Him – community (church services, small groups, Bible studies, etc.)

Secondly, guard against joy-robbers. There are things that can keep you from experiencing joy in your everyday life. Usually, that looks less like a gypsy abducting Jesus or a grinch stealing your presents or decorations, and more like something just . . . got in the way. It’s less like your work obligations preventing you from knowing joy every day and more like your work obligations standing front and center, making it more difficult to embrace joy in your everyday life.

Acknowledge your responsibilities, yes, but keep them in their proper place. Don’t let them get in the way of your experiencing the joy of the Lord every day. In *A Christmas Carol*, Belle tells Ebenezer Scrooge, “Another idol has taken my place.” Where she was once his love and priority, now she has been replaced by the love of money and the priority of worldly gain.

She had been, if you will, “Sent to the back” so he could focus his attention on something that now mattered more to him.

We have traditions, decorations, and plans – but none of that matters if it matters more than Jesus. It’s like going to a concert and sitting right behind a pillar; you know there’s something going on and can tell people are having a good time, but you know you’re missing out on something big. No one wants that seat, especially when they could have equally chosen the best seat in the house – front and center, where nothing would obstruct your view.

If you want to keep joy in your Christmas, keep Jesus at the center (v.16). I’ve never seen a nativity scene with Jesus off to the side, or behind the other characters. Imagine if the shepherds arrive and ask where Jesus is, only to be told, “Oh, uh . . . over behind the camel, I think. Or maybe with the sheep?” It reminds me of the story of a confused little girl quoting John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world, He gave His only *forgotten* Son.” Jesus doesn’t belong in the margins of your Christmas, or of your life; He belongs at the center of it all. Don’t allow anything or anyone to press the “Send to back” button and relegate Jesus to a forgotten detail; keep Jesus at the center.

Third, let the good news change your course. Imagine the shock and awe of what the shepherds experienced. What should they have done next? One of the unanswered questions about that first Christmas is what happened to the sheep. Did they leave them behind? Take them along? Leave a few shepherds behind to watch them? We simply don’t know. For a shepherd, sheep are their moneymakers – their job is to take care of the sheep, so they would not have easily or lightly left them behind. But there was something about this newborn king that they knew was most important. Indeed, event today, the good news of Jesus Christ pulls you away from the everyday, and says, “There’s more than all that this world has to offer.”

If you would keep joy in your life, let the good news of Christmas into it. American minister Halford E. Luccock – ***“The central core of truth is that Christmas turns everything upside down. The upside of heaven come down to earth. The Christmas story puts a new value on every man.”***[1]

There really is something about Christmas, isn’t there?

In *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge is a very different man the day after Christmas than he was the day before Christmas. That’s a fictional story, but it illustrates a valuable point – he was a changed man. Don’t wait for four ghosts to visit you – let the message Christmas in. That message is that the long-awaited Savior, who is Christ the Lord, has come. Let that message change your course; let it change you...and when it does...

...spread the word. When you share with others, you invite them to experience your excitement for themselves. Luke 2:17 – **“And when [the shepherds] saw [Joseph, Mary, and Jesus in the manger], they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.”** Have you ever been so excited about something that you felt like you just had to let it out?

It's a Wonderful Life – George Bailey talking about escaping Bedford Falls: “I’ve been hoarding pennies like a miser in order to... Most of my friends have already finished college. I just feel like if I don’t get away, I’d bust.”

There’s a time for quiet, meditative thoughts – reflections on the year that was and the year that will soon be or soft moments of cherishing the blessings you have – but there’s a time for shouting from the mountaintop, too! ***If you want to keep joy in Christmas, let it out!***

The last full moon of 2021 was at its brightest last night at 11:36. A full moon is brightest because the sun is shining directly at it, rather than shining in from the side. When the sun is shining directly on the face of the moon, its craters and valleys are not casting shadows, so it shines the brightest. You shine brightest when you allow the joy of the Lord to fully shine in your life. Turn every area of your life fully in His direction, with all the craters and scars from wounds you’ve received, all the valleys of sorrow you’ve endured, all the peaks and mountain slopes of happiness you’ve encountered. Sometimes, joy comes as the result of your decision to focus your eyes and life on Jesus Christ. Let the true message of Christmas – joy to the world! The Lord has come! – reverberate in your life; let it change you and remind you to keep Jesus at the center of it all, not just at Christmas time, but all the time.

[1] <https://quotepark.com/quotes/1786793-halford-e-luccock-christmas-is-good-news-in-a-world-of-bad-news-thi/>

DIG IN!

Here are some farm-fresh questions that will help you to personalize and apply this morning’s message.

- 1. What did you find most insightful, helpful, or troublesome from this morning’s message? Why?**
- 2. What are some things that might steal the joy away from your life? How do you guard against these?**
- 3. Henry Cole sent the *first* Christmas card in 1843. Do you think the recipients felt obligated to send a card in return?**
- 4. How can you learn more about Jesus?**
- 5. Who will you share the good news of Jesus’ birth with this Christmas season? When?**
- 6. What do you suppose the angels meant when they said, “Glory to God in the highest?”**
- 7. What might it have looked like for the shepherds to ‘glorify and praise God?’ What does it look like in your own life?**
- 8. How have you been keeping up with your Bible reading this week?**