

Movie Message on Advent Joy: Christmas Vacation  
Luke 1:47-55  
December 21, 2008  
St. John United Methodist Church  
Anchorage, Alaska  
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A story is told of a retiree in Phoenix who called his adult son in New York a few weeks before Christmas and said, "Son, your mother and I have been married for 40 years, and I just wanted to call and tell you that we've decided to get a divorce." His son was aghast. "Dad, that's terrible! Don't you and Mother do a thing until I've had a chance to come and talk to you. I'll be on the next plane to Phoenix!"

The son then called his sister who had the same response and then she called her dad to say she is also flying to Phoenix. Her father hung up, turned to his wife, and said, "Honey, both kids are going to be home for Christmas, and they're paying their own way!"

Advent is nearly over and Christmas joy is just around the corner. What is it that needs to happen for you to get in the Christmas spirit? Like this father are you ever tempted to manipulate people in order to get the Christmas you want? Do you put subtle and not-so-subtle pressure on your family to do this or that? And what is the Christmas spirit anyway?

I submit a simple answer. The Christmas spirit is pure and simple joy. It's that deep feeling you have when you take the time to let the whites, grays, and blues of a frosty Alaskan morning filter into your soul. It's the emotion you feel when you go out of your way to do something helpful for a stranger or neighbor. It's the feeling that overwhelms your heart when family comes together around a festive meal.

No doubt this is what Mary felt at the news that she would bear the Son of God. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." (Luke 1:46) None of the women here will give birth to the Son of God, but what joy do you hope will be born? What is it that gives you joy this Christmas?

Today is the last in our movie message series and I took the liberty of changing the movie to Christmas Vacation. It's not a movie for children as it is rated PG-13 and it doesn't have deep emotional or spiritual significance. Clark Griswold is the dad who wants desperately to have the perfect family Christmas. It begins with a family trip to the country to get the perfect Christmas tree.

## VIDEO CLIP

What do you want this Christmas? I'm not talking about jewelry or tools or electronics. What do you really and truly want to see happen in the next several days in order for you to feel Christmas joy? The first step is knowing ourselves well enough to know what we want. For Clark it begins with taking his family into the country to trudge through the snow and cut down their Christmas tree.

But here's the problem with many families during holiday celebrations. Not everyone has the same idea of how Christmas should be celebrated. Children get frenetic and so excited. Teens try hard not to act too much like a child or let on that

they enjoy being with their families. Moms want family harmony and dads feel it is important to pass on family traditions. Is everyone in your family a willing participant in every family tradition you have at Christmas? Do you have any forced family Christmas rituals? “Johnny, you WILL sit down for the traditional reading of the Christmas story, and you WILL enjoy it!” Has something like that been said in your home?

In this scene Clark has spent hours decorating his home with Christmas lights. The big moment arrives and the entire family is coaxed onto the front lawn to witness the first time the lights are plugged in. The image Clark had in his mind for this ritual did not match with reality.

## VIDEO CLIP

Disappointment happens because people imagine a future they would like to see. And when that future does not match the dreams of our imaginations we are often let down. I cannot imagine what future Mary envisioned when she was pregnant with the Son of God. Surely she did not foresee his amazing ministry or his miracles or his crucifixion.

Sometimes we experience this gap between what we imagine to be and what actually happens when we shop for Christmas. One woman was doing her last-minute Christmas shopping at a crowded mall. She was tired of fighting the crowds. She was tired of standing in lines. She was tired of fighting her way down long aisles looking for a gift that had sold out days before. Her arms were full of bulky packages when the elevator door opened. It was full. The occupants of the elevator grudgingly tightened ranks to allow a small space for her and her load. As the doors closed she blurted out, “Whoever is responsible for this whole Christmas thing ought to be arrested, strung up, and shot!” A few others nodded their heads or grunted in agreement. Then, from somewhere in the back of the elevator came a single voice that said, “Don’t worry. They already crucified him.”

Don’t we all need to be reminded of Jesus whose birth in Bethlehem was and continues to be the reason for the season? Despite many disappointing Christmas moments for Clark he does manage to have a victory now and then. With the family gathered at the table he takes a moment to reflect and smile. This is one of his Christmas spirit moments. And then he asks his Aunt to say grace.

## VIDEO CLIP

The challenge for us in seeking this Christmas joy is to have ready and open hearts to receive it when it comes.

On December 17, 1903, Orville and Wilbur sent their sister a telegram from Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. It read, “Sustained flight for 59 seconds. Hope to be home for Christmas.” Their sister found their successful flight extraordinary news, so she took the telegram to the local Dayton, Ohio paper. The next day a small headline on a back page read: “Popular bicycle merchants to be home for Christmas.” Sometimes we miss the extraordinary because we are blinded by the ordinary.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> —James R. Noland, “Up, up and away,” May 27, 2001, *The Church of the Good Shepherd Web Site*, goodshepherdva.com.

Our goal should be to not be blinded by the day-to-day details so much that we miss the glorious moment when Christmas joy will reveal itself to us. Have you ever had the experience of missing an important moment because you were so focused on minutia? Is the routine of your life so entrenched that it often prevents God from breaking through to your heart?

In a small town in Europe there is a wall where the elderly make the sign of the cross when they pass it. One day a child asked his grandfather why they do this. The wall was nondescript and was painted a dingy white. The grandfather said he didn't know. It was a ritual he had done since he was a child. So the child's curiosity forced him to examine the wall. He began to peel away flakes of old paint. Underneath all that paint he discovered a beautiful painting of the nativity. Now the people learned the reason for the ritual.

Perhaps some of our Christmas traditions have become so important that we have lost touch with why we have them. I suggest that no ritual should ever be so important that it squelches the joy that comes with knowing Christ. The purpose of rituals and traditions is to help us experience God's love and joy.

In the movie Clark finally gets his crazy array of plugs and wires to work. It is a moment of pure joy for him. And it is the nature of joy to share it with others. This moment helps him forget all the idiosyncrasies of his family and he reaches out to each one.

#### VIDEO CLIP

It is one thing to know what would put us in the Christmas spirit. It is another thing to try to force it to happen. The key is to prepare ourselves for when it surprises us. Be ready. Prepare a place for the Christ child in your heart. Joy is very near. Thanks be to God!