

Joy In Christmas

One cannot possibly experience the entirety of Christmas without knowing the Jesus who came to earth at Bethlehem. As Jesus walks with us through all of the periphery, and leads us toward the center of the celebration, it can and will be the best experience of our lives.

Instead of being overwhelmed with the tradition of gift-giving, we can find Christmas a time of joy. When we concentrate on how much we love those to whom we are giving, and are filled with the love of God which overlooks petty differences and human imperfections, it can become infused with heaven's joy.

Perhaps we don't decorate as much as we used to. It may be because our family circumstances have changed. Some of Christmas joy comes from the children. Their wide-eyed wonder, their excitement about Jesus in the manger and the gifts they find on Christmas morning are unmatched. That same wonder and excitement and more can be ours because Jesus is the center of our lives whatever our age.

I remember the tree my grandmother had my grandfather place in their cold living room each Christmas. They only heated one or two rooms, and the unused rooms were frosty cold in December. It was silver, with a multi-colored disk rotating to turn that tree different colors. After some fifty years, they are now becoming popular again. But it was not the tree which gave Christmas joy. It was the people who placed it, the Jesus in the Luke 2 reading we always did, and the family who gathered around it.

My other grandmother also put up a tree in the front window, but my sharpest memory there, which takes a lot of sharpening at this age, is of the manger scene. Like no other I have ever seen of scenes, it was placed in the paneled den with a coal burning fireplace, in a large gourd hanging from the ceiling, with an opening in the front which made one able to see Mary and Joseph, and Jesus in the manger. A large light bulb was hanging from a cord in the top, illuminating the scene. It was the people who placed that decoration, and the God in whom they believed, and the children who were now beginning to believe, which made Christmas full of joy.

Many of those traditions continue in our family. Trees, manger scenes, gift giving, family meals and gatherings with several generations present. Grandparents and some parents are gone to experience heaven's joy, others still here. Kids grown up and our own grandchildren are there. And God's promise of joy is always there, never going away.

When we look at the bad things which happen in the world, we can sometimes feel discouragement at Christmas. War happens. People die. We can't always have things the way we would prefer. Politicians with whom we disagree may take office, or ones with which we

celebrate. God's joy makes us able to find peace whether things are good or bad, because faith does not depend on human circumstances.

If we must never put down someone who thinks differently than we do, we will not find joy in Christmas. Forgiveness for those and other sins will bring joy. True joy comes from being full of faith especially when we are in pain or our own way is not had. Love, God says, seeks not her own, is not selfish. So the true test of faith is when we do not get our way, and can still be full of God's joy.

The joy in Christmas is not made with hands. It is not how much we have or don't. It does not come from the special present which may appear under the tree. It does not come from how many worship times we had or how well the preacher preached or didn't on a certain Sunday. It comes from knowing the true Savior Jesus, and it emanates from us as God lives in us daily.

We will want to be in church, for that is where God's people gather. We will desire to read the Bible, for it tells us of Jesus. We will have to pray, for that is who we are, people who are in contact with Almighty God.

Joy at Christmas comes from finding the Jesus who came from Heaven to Bethlehem for you and me. As Luke writes in his gospel, the angel Gabriel says, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

So may the Joy of Christmas be yours in this holy Christmas season. Saying Merry Christmas or **Mele Kalikimaka** is a good first step. But the real joy of Christmas comes from knowing to kneel at the manger, and bringing all of who we are and can be to the baby Jesus.