

## REJOICE!

Merry Christmas! We say this to one another and we mean it. We want Christmas to be a time of merriment, a time of joy.

After all, that is what the angels told the shepherds, right? On the night when Jesus was born the angel said, "Do not be afraid, for I am bringing you good news of *great joy* for all the people." God intended Christmas to not just be a time of joy, but a time of great joy!

But it is not always a time of joy, is it? For some, Christmas may seem more of a hassle than a source of happiness. For some, Christmas creates more pressure than pleasure. Is this true for you?

You may not be looking forward to Christmas. Just the thought of Christmas may make you feel uneasy or lonely. Maybe you dread getting together with relatives. Maybe you are worried about the financial strain that Christmas creates. Maybe you're all alone and you don't have anyone to share the Christmas holiday with you. Maybe Christmas reminds you of a loved one who has died or moved away. Maybe you are reacting against the helter-skelter pace of the holidays. Or maybe you are just plain exhausted and worn out from all that has happened to you this past year.

And this Christmas - well, this Christmas is going to be extra tough for some folks. Thousands have been laid off from their jobs. Others are having wages or benefits cut. Pension funds have shrunk. Soldiers are still deployed. There's a lot of uncertainty and fear in the air. Christmas is not always merry.

Even though it should be!

The Bible reading from First Thessalonians says, "Rejoice always." Notice, this is a command. This is what we're supposed to do. This is what God wants us to do. Rejoice always! And that includes rejoicing during the Christmas season. But how can we rejoice when we are not feeling very joyful?

Perhaps the first Bible reading, the reading from the Old Testament book of Isaiah, can help us. The prophet declared, "I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God." And why was the prophet so filled with joy? Had the prophet just won the lottery? Had he just become a new parent? Had he just won the award for the best prophet of the year?

Why was the prophet filled with joy? He gives an answer. "For God has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness." That's what creates great joy! The garments of salvation! The robe of righteousness!

"Do not be afraid," the angel said to the shepherds, "for I am bringing you good news of *great joy* for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Christmas means the Savior has come! Christmas means that the One who clothes us in the garments of salvation has come! Christmas means that the One who wraps us in the robe of righteousness has come!

In March of 1996 I went to Stoneybrook Retirement Center to serve communion. One of the persons who had come to the service kept asking, "Why am I here?" Over and over again she pleaded, "Why am I here?" Whether the culprit was Alzheimer's or dementia or whatever, much of her memory had been stolen away from her. Her eyes told the story. Without memory to serve as an anchor, she was feeling lost.

We proceeded with the communion service. She listened to the Gospel reading. She prayed the Lord's Prayer. She ate the Bread and drank the Wine. I noticed tears welling up in her eyes. The prayer of thanksgiving was said and the Benediction spoken. We sat in silence for a moment. And then she spoke. "I feel like my sins have all been taken away." Her faced beamed with joy. And we all rejoiced with her.

"All God's children got a robe," go the words of the spiritual. All God's children got a robe! It is not so much a stately, formal, pressed outfit as it is a set of party clothes, clothes that make us feel happy just to put them on. We receive that robe in baptism, and here at the table we get a foretaste of God's party.

Because of Christmas you have received the garments of salvation! Because of Christmas you have been covered with the robe of righteousness! Jesus the Savior is born!

No matter what is going on in the world, no matter what is happening in your life, no matter what the troubles may be, there is reason to rejoice. Jesus the Savior is born! Jesus - YOUR Savior is born and he has given you his robe! Rejoice, I tell you. Rejoice always!