

“Joy and the Christmas Burglar”: A sermon for Christmas Eve

First, a note to thank all those who wrote in with feedback on Steve Kuhl’s “Simple Version” synopsis of the distinction between Law and Gospel. I’ve passed all of your feedback along to Steve.

Second, an apology for not getting Steve’s “Fuller Version” out to you last week. It will come next week. Until then, please do keep sending in feedback on the “Simple Version” if you have any thoughts to share.

Finally, for this week, we bring you the sermon I had the pleasure of hearing this Christmas Eve at Messiah Lutheran Church in Fairview Park, Ohio, by my fellow Thursday Theology editor, Jerry Burce.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

“Joy and the Christmas Burglar” Sermon for Christmas Eve, 2014
At Messiah Lutheran Church, Fairview Park, Ohio
Text: Luke 2:1-20

+ In Nomine Jesu +

On this night of nights, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

And in this night I pray that God will bless you, each and every one, with a taste of joy, the gift that every parent in this place so wants their children to know, especially at Christmas.

And by joy, I do mean joy, which is something other than delight, I think—something deeper, something richer, not nearly so noisy, and it lasts a lot longer.

Delight is tearing through the paper on that box beneath the tree and finding out that Santa brought you the very thing you asked for. Delight is learning in that first glorious minute of Christmas dinner that mom still has her touch—boy, oh, boy, does she ever—yes, and dad stills knows his wine.

As for joy, that's another kind of feeling. If and when it pokes its nose up in days like these, we'll notice it mainly as a warm and happy glow that wells up from somewhere deep inside, and behind it—pushing it up, so to speak—is an understanding that everything is fundamentally good and right and well for you and the people you treasure, and this is so even if the turkey is a wee bit on the dry side for once, or the wine too sweet, or if the gift that lurks behind the paper is the kind the hapless husband seems always to buy—clueless, he is, and I say that from deep experience in the art of being clueless [when it comes to buying gifts, especially for a woman. I can tell you all those little signs that let him know right off the bat how once again he's missed the mark. Still, she says—so gracious she is—still, it's the thought that counts, you know, and in any case, all is well and all is good with all of us tonight, and tomorrow is so full of promise; and because she says it with a warm and honest smile, he says it too, and yes, there is joy in that house that night, a strong joy that wraps itself around the children's hearts, and they start glowing too, and they know that they are safe. What more can any parent want for any child of theirs come Christmas?

What more can God want this Christmas for his sons, his daughters—for each of you?

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There is not a lot of joy in that story I read you just now—you may have noticed. It's an old story, of course, so very familiar to many of us, though really, what makes it most familiar is not that we've heard it so many times before, but rather that it's filled with people so very much like us and the ones we read and hear about today.

So off in distant Rome there sits an emperor who wants a census taken so he can take a better stab at guessing how much tax revenue he can count on for the next few years. He has roads to build, you see, and armies to feed—and sure, cronies to satisfy. Now getting the revenue right has always been a tough and grinding business. It still is. Just ask your congressman—your mayor, for that matter. There are lots of perks to holding power, I imagine, but the daily taste of joy isn't one of them. There's not a lot of that in Washington these days. Again, you may have noticed.

Anyway, Caesar pushes his button and the human tide starts flowing. There are people here tonight who travel every workday morning in the great tide of cars that flows most heavily on local freeways from west to east, the sun glaring through the windscreen the whole long way. All it takes is one car bumping another, and the flow becomes a crawl. At that point you start to taste what Joseph and Mary were tasting as they trudged the seventy miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, jostled from start to finish by surly crowds, and she so great with child, so eager she is to be off the road and done with this wretched trip. What word would you use, I wonder, to describe taste in Mary's mouth? I'll guarantee it isn't joy.

Nor is "joy" a word that any thoughtful person would apply to the nighttime mood in Bethlehem, that little town where the sleep is nowhere near as deep and dreamless as the song wants us to think. How could it be? Has there ever been a night in

Fairview Park that wasn't troubled by someone's grief, or broken by another person's wrath and fury? So count on it: somewhere in Bethlehem, that long ago night, a teenage girl is weeping angry tears of frustration with her father who doesn't like her boyfriend. Somewhere a wife is wondering why her husband isn't home yet. Somewhere a father stands helpless in a corner; his child is hot with pneumonia and gasping for breath, and the sound it makes is tearing him apart. Two streets away a burglar skulks in the shadows of his next target. He's desperate for some cash. No, he won't bother looking for it in the stable yonder. Sure, a light flickers there, but people reduced to spending the night in a place like that will have nothing a burglar wants. So he thinks, at any rate.

Suddenly the cry of a woman in labor pierces the night. Soon after that he hears the tiny wail of a newborn baby.

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Now all of you know that our ancient brother, the burglar, has just caught the sound of God's best gift ever. He's clueless, of course. So is everyone else in Bethlehem that night—the frantic father, the worried wife, the angry daughter. Let's not forget the neighbors all around who in fact are sleeping through the night with dreams untroubled. Their turn for grief and woe is on its way—it's just not yet. Still, it's bound to come, we all know that. I admit, I had a birthday yesterday, and it's not as if I'm getting younger; and in the presents I got I didn't find a guarantee that mine would never, ever be the car that makes a mess of your morning commute, or mine the broken body that the ambulance is hauling away. None of you will find that kind of guarantee in your Christmas stocking tomorrow morning. God doesn't pass them out, you see; he never has, he never will, not to people like us, he doesn't, people who can't get through a single day without burgling something from somebody—that's just what sinners do. We filch, we sneak, we steal, and the worst of

it is that most all of us are absolutely startled when God points this out to us, and after that we get our backs up—all huffy and offended we are, not willing to listen, not willing to fess up, not willing for a moment to face reality.

But here is what's real—dare I tell you? Not a day goes by when I don't steal God's glory by putting myself at the center of my universe. I cannot help doing that, and you can't help it either.

Not a day goes by without me sneaking a heap of coins from the stash of love that God means to pass along to other people through me. I'd so much rather keep them for myself—those other people are such a bother, and some of them are so annoying. This too I can't help but feel as I jostle through the crowds that share the path I'm on, and yes, you feel it too.

So no, of course God doesn't pass out guarantees of trouble-free existence to the burgling likes of us—and anyone who says otherwise is a liar and a fraud. Why would God do that? How could God do that, and still be righteous?

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Yet even so God loves us. Imagine that! So in the night—our night—the baby wails. It's your turn now to hear that wail, and to ponder it, as Mary did.

Such an odd gift this is—a hapless husband kind of gift, or so it seems on the surface, and that for sure is how countless people through the centuries have responded to it. "*What* child is this?" they say. "What use is he?"

Well for that, let's ask the shepherds, that other cast of characters in tonight's great story. In the fields, they were, working the night shift. I've never worked a night shift in my life, though some of you have; a few of you do. I know that

daytime people like me take the night shift crowd for granted. That too is a piece of our daily theft. We never think to pass along the thanks and appreciation so richly due to the people who patrol our streets, or stock our stores, or clean the toilets in the office buildings we crawl to in the morning through all that traffic. Back in Bethlehem it's been years since anybody thought to thank a shepherd for anything at all, though I don't suppose the shepherds expect this. Truth be told, they're a lot closer to honesty about themselves than daytime people tend to be. You can tell by their reaction when all of a sudden the light goes on, that fierce and terrible light of the glory of God—not a speck of sin or dirt is hidden from its glare. "The jig is up," the shepherds say. "We're going to die."

Fear not," the angel answers. "Don't be afraid." For to you is born this day a Savior who will do the dying for you. He'll also do it with you, when your time comes, though that time isn't yet. For now you'll find him wrapped in swaddling clothes, a hint of the shroud they'll wrap him in later. You'll also find him in a manger, this too a hint of the cross they'll one day hang him on.

And now a detail the angel doesn't mention, though you know it well. When they string that Savior up they'll surround him with—who? A pair of burglars—thieves, as we usually say. One of these will have the sense to look him in the eye, and call him Lord.

As for the night-shift shepherds, what they discover when they scurry off to Bethlehem is that they matter. And the one who loves them most of all is God.

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God wants nothing more this Christmas night than for each of you to make like those shepherds, and to scurry to the manger where your Savior lies. All wrapped in bread and wine he is, for us to

eat and drink.

When you come near, be sure you also do as the one thief did. Use the eyes of your heart to look this Jesus in the eye.

Some things to think about as you do that tonight.

This baby born in Bethlehem grew up to be the biggest burglar of them all. Imagine that! He stole all kinds of things that people strangely cherish, though he did it in a strange, astonishing way—without once failing to give God the credit God deserves, or holding back on the love God wanted him to pass along to other people. The Righteous Burglar—that's who Jesus was.

So there came a day when people openly accused him of stealing God's thunder by forgiving sins. "Give God the glory," Jesus answered. "He sent me to do that."

And in forgiving those sins—in going on to pay the price for having done it—here are some other things that Jesus stole.

He stole the devil's right to force God to hold your sins against you.

He stole away your right to look yourself in the mirror and to say to your reflection, I am bad, I count for nothing, I have no worth. You younger ones in particular, will you please remember that?

You older ones, will you remember how this baby born in Bethlehem grew up to rob things like accident and cancer, tornado and flood, of their ability to vaunt themselves as proof that God doesn't like you. Who honestly can say in these days of Christ our Savior that God doesn't love you?

Will all of us please remember how this baby grew up to steal our right to live and act as sinners, as if that's all we are,

sinners only, and nothing more. While we're at it, let's remember too how Jesus robbed us of the silly clothes we often strut around in, those deeds and reputations we like to wear as proof that we're somehow better than the people around us.

"Here am I," says Jesus. "Wear me instead." After that he invites us to look around and notice once again how those low-life shepherds were wearing him first. So are countless others in the night-shift crowd that we daytime people ignore, and too often take for granted.

Taking people for granted—any person, anywhere—is the one thing God, at least, will never do. Why else was Jesus born?

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One last thought.

A few days ago I got a note from one of you who'd been reading ahead and thinking about this Christmas story. Here's what he said—

What stuck out for me this time through is where the shepherds returned home glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. No doubt absent in what they heard and saw was a treasure chest of money, a promise of life-long health, or even the notion of a crummy promotion to day-shift shepherd. None of it. Just a baby. Just Jesus. And that was enough to spark sincere joy. Here is the practical, tangible good that God provides me now, this very instant.

When you get home tonight, look at the people around your Christmas tree—your nearest and dearest, they are. Remember what you heard here, how the Son of God was born for them; how after that he died for them. He owns them now. God raised him from the dead to do that owning. These days Jesus is Lord, and Caesar is not. Nor is sin, nor is death, nor is the devil himself.

So dear these people are to you, of course they are, but each of them is dearer still to God Almighty, and you are too. And yes, because of that all is well and all is good with all of you tonight, and as for your tomorrow, it's so very full of promise. Come what may, it always will be, and that is true even in days to come when you're the angry teen, the worried wife, the frantic father, or even when you're back to skulking in the shadows as burglars do.

Even then Christ will be there to steal away your fear, your sorrow, your sin. He'll replace them with peace and hope. That's the very thing he was born to do. There is nothing, but nothing, that is big or bad or strong enough to cut you off from the love of God in Christ Jesus your Lord. So it is with your dear ones too.

God grant you all the taste of joy tonight. Merry Christmas!

+ Soli Deo Gloria +