



December 3, 2006

The Spirit of Christmas

Bill Johnson is a journalist for the Orange County Register. Last Year he wrote a feature story titled *A Lesson in Catching the Christmas Spirit*. He invited his readers to join him on a journey a "pilgrimage of the heart" to find the true Christmas spirit. His first stop was a Christmas tree lot, which he figured was a "hot bed of Christmas spirit". Unfortunately the only people there were a couple of mortgage bankers trying to get a tree for their office. After all it was Christmas and their clients would expect it to be decorated; not much Christmas spirit just a business move. Next it was off to the mall. As he got out of his car he noticed a family festively dressed and he asked them, "do you have the Christmas spirit"? And the mother said, "lets see yesterday we put up the tree, put lights on the house and played Christmas music all day long I'd say yes we have the Christmas spirit". When asked why they were at the mall the response was, "we feel like we're missing something so we came to get some of those Christmas earrings that light up".

Once inside the mall he immediately went to see Santa. There was a long line of children anxiously waiting and he thought, "here it is" then he noticed the photographer clicking pictures and doing the hard sell with parents shaming them into buying their child's picture with Santa. There was even a cute white fence with one lone gate so that you had to face the photographer and his minions as you left. No he thought this is not the Christmas spirit. So he went to the information desk and asked the woman who was working there, "where might I find the Christmas spirit"? She looked up at him and said, "you're in the wrong place". He looked at her and said, "You don't have the Christmas spirit here"? She looked at him shook her head and said, "nope, its in your heart".

As we begin Advent the coming of Jesus Christ we too are in search of the Christmas spirit. You won't find it in the mall, at the tree lot or even in the decorations these are all byproducts of it. To find

the Christmas spirit we need to go to the Bible. Luke Chapter 2 verse 20 is where we see the first reaction to Christ's birth. It was the shepherds who after hearing the angel's message and then seeing the baby Jesus, "returned, glorified and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen". This really is remarkable when you consider that our view of Shepherds as meek, pastoral, soft spoken and gentle eyed individuals on Hallmark cards is far from reality. In that day Shepherds were considered unreliable, untrustworthy, uncouth, uncultured, rough around the edges, in fact shepherds weren't even allowed to testify in court because their truthfulness was so suspect. You want a modern day picture of shepherds?

Imagine a bar on a Monday night lots of men beer manly noises and cheering for their football team. Add lots of yelling and words that are not polite in society and close to the demeanor of a first century shepherd. So when the scripture says they were glorifying and praising God it doesn't mean this was artistic praise it was more like the last second of the Superbowl, a lot of whooping and hollering that's the only kind they knew. Eight short verses later we see mild mannered Simeon sees the baby at the temple and His worship is reverent as he says, "sovereign Lord as you have promised you know dismiss your servant in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all people a light for revelation to the gentiles and for the glory to your people Israel". And then one verse later we see the response of Mary and Joseph, the child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him.

Each person react differently to the same joy but there's the spirit of Christmas. It is seeing the baby in Bethlehem knowing what he means and being filled with joy, marvel, unbelievable happiness and expressing praise and glory to God. Its not the celebration, people love to celebrate for the sake of celebrating but take away their party and their joy is gone. With the Christmas spirit take away the celebration the party and you're still filled with joy and the desire to glorify and praise God.

I read a story about Christian author and speaker Jill Briscoe this past week. She tells the story of being asked to speak to a church gathering of 200 refugees in Croatia. It was mostly women because the men had either been killed or fighting in the war. She realized that what she prepared was totally inadequate so she prayed and asked God to give her the exact words to say. She told the story

of Christmas the whole story born in a manger, together with His parents became a refugee and had to run to Egypt at night leaving everything behind. She told of His life, His miracle, His teachings, she told of the crucifixion. When she got to the cross she said, "He hung there naked not like the pictures tell you". This the Croatians understood; they too had been stripped naked and tortured. Then she said, "all these things have happened to you, you are homeless, you have had to flee, you have had suffered unjustly but you didn't have a choice, He had a choice, He knew all of this would happen to himself but Jesus still came because He loves you, He loves me, He loves everyone, He came to pay the price of sin, sin that has caused all the wars of all time, He came to make us one with God. He knows what you feel and He knows where you've been."

The women fell to their knees lifted up their hands praising and glorifying God. You see they had the spirit of Christmas. They had just experienced the Advent of the baby Jesus and they had joy in the midst of hardship, remember they were in a refugee camp. Advent, it literally means "the coming or arrival". The coming or arrival of Christ is the beginning of great joy for us we know what God gave and gave up for us for our sake; this is why we consecrate our covenant responses today. God has given so much to us so we now give back, but Advent isn't just about what has come as we heard in our scriptures this morning it is also about what is to come, Christ's second Advent when he comes to take us home.

May we join with the early church filled with the Christmas spirit, filled with joy and glorify and praise God and say, "Maranatha" which means "come Lord Jesus" and may we hear His beautiful words, "Well done good and faithful servant".

In our Savior's name, Amen