

The Saving Power of Christmas Joy

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Take your Bibles and go to Luke 2 as we continue with "Rejoice, It's Christmas," and we're looking at the biblical narrative around the coming of Christ, his Incarnation, and noting how everything surrounding the coming of Christ is filled with joy and praise and celebration, and that's the way we ought to be. Joy and praise and celebration.

We come to Luke 2 and we're going to look at verses 8 through 12 this morning. Luke 2:8-12. Beginning in verse 8,

8 In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; 11 for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

I call this "The Saving Power of Christmas Joy." The saving power of Christmas joy. This angel as he visits these humble lowly shepherds gives a powerful statement of the saving work God is doing through this Christmas present that God is sending to earth in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, the joy of Christianity, the joy of Christmas, is not some thing. It's not the atmosphere. It's not the decorations. It's not the presents. It's not all of this aura that we sometimes sense. The joy of Christmas is Christ. He's the joy and he is the saving power of God. The salvation of God is not some thing, it's not some formula, it's not some plan, it's not some hoop jump you go through, it's not participation in rituals or sacraments or rites in a church building, the salvation of God is Christ. We place our hope in him.

So let's talk about him and this saving joy which he is for us. First of all, I, as we outline the text: the holy visitation. The holy visitation. Now, these are shepherds keeping watch over their flocks and, as a matter of fact, thinking back on it, a lot of good things have happened to men who were tending sheep. Moses received his commission to be the great human deliverer of the children of Israel out of Egyptian bondage while he was faithfully doing the lowly humble job of keeping the sheep. David was called in from the lowly

humble job of keeping the sheep and he was anointed to be the soon coming king of Israel. Boy, is there not an application for you and I here. What lowly, unnoticed, un-applauded task and responsibility has God given you and all he is doing is finding out, "Will you serve me with praise in your heart in the lowly task? Then I may give you a bigger task."

Well, these are shepherds. Nobody has thought much about shepherds. They lived constantly out in the countryside, out in the pastures with their sheep. A shepherd's job was to lead the sheep, to feed the sheep, and protect the sheep, and that's why the word of God says pastors are to be shepherds. Our job, as especially preaching shepherds or pastors, is to lead the sheep, feed the sheep, and protect the sheep. How often have I tried to give you insights and tell you fathers, "Be careful here. Be discerning about this. Be wise about that. Don't listen to everything that comes down the pike. Be aware of everything that says it's about Christ," because our job is not to just lead and feed but also to protect.

Well, let's leave that thought and go on to the fact that these shepherds lived on these hillsides all around Jerusalem. Bethlehem is a little bit south of Jerusalem. They would sleep in small little huts at night and in the nighttime they would take turns watching. Others would sleep and some would be on the watch. They had shift work, if you will. I believe these shepherds were a band of reforming holy remnant. They were a small remnant of genuine believers who understood that the great bureaucracy of God's people headquartered in Jerusalem had fallen away from God. I believe they were much like we talked about in the book of Amos where Amos was most likely scholars say, and I agree 100%, a part of a reforming group that said, "Let's get back to true biblical Judaism," and I believe these were some faithful shepherds. So they are this band of believers. I believe they sat on those hillsides praying together, studying the Old Testament Scriptures together, and longing for the renewal of Israel, and particularly longing for that promised Savior that God said he would send to their country, Israel, to bring them out of the darkness and into spiritual light in salvation.

So God chooses to announce the Savior's birth to lowly shepherds. God did not send the holy angel to announce this to kings, not to princes nor to nobles or to learned scribes but to shepherds. Sovereign grace selected these shepherds to be the first to know. Not the proud religionist in Jerusalem, they were passed by. Some of you may still have problems with the sovereign grace of God, the election of God. Well, how are you going to explain this? Why did these shepherds get a visit from the angels? Why did these shepherds get the announcement from the holy angel that the Christ had been born? Why not others? There were other shepherds on other hillsides around Jerusalem, why these? There is only one explanation for that and that is the unmerited favor of God. In sovereign grace, God chose these shepherds. They didn't deserve it any more than any others, just God's sovereign choice.

In Matthew's Gospel, we learn that some time later, and we'll get to this in a couple of weeks in our series, sometimes later there were some wise men who were led by God to find the baby Jesus. These wise men were the astrologers or the scientists of the day, but

notice the order and it still holds true to our day: first and foremost it's the lowly that seem to find God. First and foremost, it's the humble, the ones the world has no esteem in, and then in God's grace, some of the intellectuals or the scientists rather, follow next, but most often it's in that order. Zechariah 4:6 reminds us it's not by might, it's not the might of your intellectual prowess or your political or military power or the fact that you come from some noble family line. It's not by might, it's not by power but by the Spirit, says the Lord. That's how people come to know God. 1 Corinthians 1:26 reminds us, "For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh," in other words, there are not many of you who had intellectual superiority who came to Jesus, it's "not many mighty," not many of you who had some sort of power position and power place in culture that you found Christ. Not many mighty, not many wise, not many mighty and "not many noble," it's not because you came from an esteemed family line. God chooses the humble of the world most often.

So we have this holy visitation. These shepherds are keeping watch over their sheep by night and an angel comes to them to announce Christ's birth. A holy visitation. II. A holy trepidation. A holy trepidation. The word "trepidation" means "fear and trembling." Oh that our churches, oh that those who confess the name of Christ would have more of a trepidation in their souls about the glories, the holiness, the awesomeness of God. I mean, what a scene we have here, what a holy vista. We have faithful shepherds doing their job, taking turns on the night shift. The cool crispness of the tranquil night, the blue veil of heaven with sparkling luminaries above, the soft and gentle braying of the sheep, the tender sound of an occasional sheep hoof on earth and on rock, the dim light of the watch fire, the soft crackle of the embers, the melodious song of the shepherd on watch as he passes his time like he had a thousand other nights, and then verse 9 says, "And an angel suddenly stood before them." It means just out of nowhere, boom! The holiness of God in a mighty holy angel appears in that tranquil setting.

Have you ever wondered why it is that when God sends his angels to his people, the first thing they do is scare them to death? Can you imagine? The Bible says terribly frightened, it means they are shaking in fear. And it doesn't mean it just hit and left. I was with Brother Matt some time ago in his house, he was showing me how he was building his house and we came downstairs and I ran around a corner and there is a little girl that lives near there named Prentice, and she was hiding in a closet so she could scare her pastor. And I went around the corner and she jumped out and yelled and I screamed. She scared me. I mean, she got me good. But I looked and saw it was a little girl that lived there and I was over it in about 30 seconds. That's not what happened here. These guys are terrified and they continue to be terrified because they don't recognize anything about this being they've ever seen in anything else before. Suddenly, instantly terrified and trembling.

Well, there's a reason, friends, to be trembling before a holy angel. The book of Revelation says some holy angels will be released by God against the earth and they will bring catastrophic devastation to the earth. They are that mighty. The Bible tells us in the Old Testament that one angel that visited the Assyrian camp in one night killed 185,000

Assyrian soldiers. They are mighty. You and I cannot even estimate the might and the power and the intellect of holy angels.

But then sometimes the Bible says God will camouflage an angel. He will let an angel come into your life, maybe in a time of trouble or difficulty. Do you remember the story Barry King told us? Or maybe I told you because Barry King told me that when his father was a pastor and he was a little boy, they had a terrible business meeting in the church to fire his daddy and terrible and horrible things were being shouted at his daddy and ugliness and vileness and false accusations, and little Barry was sitting on the pew. He said a man came over and picked me up and started stroking me and said, "Son, everything's going to be good. Everything's going to be fine." Took Barry out of the meeting and just walked the hallways. He said he just comforted me and consoled me and when the meeting was over, he brought me back in and sat me down in the pew and the man left and he said, "You know, to this day my dad, my mom, and nobody in the church knows who he was, where he came from, or where he went when he left." That was a small town, I believe in Arkansas. Barry said, "I believe he may have been one of those angels unaware." Isn't it amazing that God can take these mighty beings that are capable of worldwide catastrophe if they just unleash their power on the earth, yet God can clothe them and they can come and comfort a little boy.

It's amazing what God can do and here as these angels come and minister during the time of Christ's birth, we see some pretty amazing things. The angel appears to Zacharias in the temple. Remember, he was shocked when an angel showed up. Then of course, he appeared, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to share with her that the baby she was carrying was the promised Messiah. The Bible doesn't say she was shocked or terrified but I imagine she was shocked. So these angels appear on this night suddenly, piercing the dark calm night and terrifying these shepherds.

Then they quickly respond there. Look if you will in verse 10, "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid.'" Do not be afraid. I believe there is a real application for us here. God has things for us. God's truth for us is so good for us and it's nothing to be afraid of, yet you and I are so often afraid of the very thing we need. Some of you sitting here this morning, how many of us sitting here this morning, and you're afraid, you're afraid to trust God with your finances. God says, "Return to me a tithe. Be generous to my work. Support my work through your local church," and so many of you are afraid of that. "I don't know if I can do that." Why are you afraid of the very thing you need? Some of you young people sitting here, maybe some of you are not so young and God says, "Follow my biblical principles about who your life partner should be, who that future husband or wife should be." Young person, are you willing to say, "I may not date hardly at all," as a matter of fact, I hope none of you date, I hope you do Christian courtship. It might be through college before you have hardly any relationship because you've decided, "God's word is what I'm going to stand on and I'm not afraid of that." And in 1,001 other areas, why are we afraid of God? What is it about us? I can tell you what it is. Do you know why we are afraid of God and his truth? We are fallen, depraved beings. It takes God to change our hearts so that we can begin to learn to treasure and trust him and his ways.

Remember the story of the country preacher back before there were many automobiles and he went to his preaching assignments on an old mule he owned and he didn't have much to feed the old mule, the ribs were poking through, I mean, the thing was a poor old beast. And the preacher is riding that old mule down the road and a wagon had gone by earlier and a big clump of hay had fallen off the back of the wagon. So he's riding the mule along and he said, "Well, I guess my old mule is going to get something to eat today." And the mule got closer and closer and right before it got to that clump of hay, the mule spooked, ran into the ditch and came out on the other side of the road and kept on going. The mule didn't know what that clump of hay was. He was afraid of it. The preacher looked down at that mule and said, "Silly mule, you're afraid of the very thing you need." And so are we.

These shepherds are about to see and face the most glorious and wondrous privilege and blessing ever given to people on the earth and they are terrified and afraid of it. Some of you this morning, God has told you to turn to Christ and receive him as Lord and Savior. You must do that. Why are you afraid of that? Why are you afraid of Christ? Think about it, why would anyone be afraid of that? How depraved our hearts are. How fallen we are. Some of you have been saved and God's word says it's time for believer's baptism but you're afraid of that. Why would you be afraid of God's word? You're afraid of the very thing you need.

Well, look at verse 9 as we go back up and the Bible says here, "an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them." I mean, all of a sudden things are bright and wondrous and glorious. Now in my previous message, we talked about the deep quiet joy of Christmas and there should be some of this, but we see here that it's as if heaven cannot but celebrate what God is doing. Christ's humiliation is joined by divine honor and this is something that speaks to though he came in such a humble fashion yet he is the glorious and all honored one. Van Doren said in his commentary, "The Son comes to redeem, the angel comes to announce, and men come to adore." Isn't it true? Is it not fitting imagery that when Jesus died, the midday became black like night, and when Jesus was born, the black night when an angel appeared shone as the brightness of midday? God can turn anything around, do you know it? He can turn anything around.

Well, III. The holy proclamation. The message that this angel had for these shepherds, it's a powerful message, particularly for them but has application to all of us in any generation. He says there in verse 10, "Do not be afraid." What a statement. You know, we shouldn't be afraid of friends, much less be afraid of foes. The Bible teaches, as a matter of fact, that love casts out fear. It means love casts fear outside and I think the point would be the angel says do not be afraid because God – listen now – God has chosen in his grace that you sinners who ought to be the objects of his wrath, he has chosen by his sovereign decree to make you the objects of his love, grace and mercy, and if God Almighty has chosen to focus his love on you, then that should cast out every fear you could possibly have. Don't be afraid, shepherds. Perfect love casts out fear. The problem is you and I don't have perfect love, do we?

I remember just as clearly as I'm standing here today, I was going into Walmart, this was probably two decades ago, and I happened to know that some people who really really really did not like me were in Walmart. Not working in Walmart, I just knew somewhere in there were some of my enemies and I didn't want them to be my enemies but they were my enemies and I thought, "This is going to be so hard. I don't want to go in there. I know I can turn down an aisle and there are going to be a whole bunch of them right there." I guess it was fear but it's just not pleasant anyway, and do you know what God told me? He told me pretty much in my heart through the Spirit that perfect love casts out fear. Do you know what I decided that day? I said, "Do you know what? I can love them." I can love them. And if you really are functioning in love, you don't care what happens to you. It's a nonissue. So I decided if I see them, I'm going to be as kind and sweet and loving as I know how to be. It doesn't matter how they respond to me. And all of a sudden my shoulders went up and my chin came up and I got a spring in my step and said, "If you just go out to love, it just doesn't matter." I wish I could tell you I walk like that all the time, I don't think you probably walk like that all the time, but it is true, perfect love casts out fear.

But do you know what? God is the God of perfect love. When he cast his heart of love toward you, you unworthy sinner, and chose to redeem you and save you and make you the objects of his divine elect favor, that love never fails. No wonder the angels could say to these shepherds, "You guys, don't be afraid." Look, God, the holy and just God, has chosen to pour love out on you. There's nothing for you to be afraid of now. He's going to protect you and he's going to keep you and he's going to preserve you. Perfect love casts out fear, literally drives it away, and if we can walk grasping that truth and walking in that truth, we can overcome the fear that comes in our lives. You say, "Well, I got a bad diagnosis. I don't know about my health." Yes, but he holds you and he keeps you in life and in death and for eternity. Perfect love casts out fear.

Well, the angels appeared to these shepherds in verse 10 and said, "Do not be afraid; for behold." The word "behold" is an interesting word. It means this is an event of wonder and an event of awe. It's awe-inspiring. The point being if holy angels are awed and wonder over Christ's birth, how much more should we? These angels functioned in the presence of God yet what God was doing through Christ was of such stupendous wondering glory, even holy angels said, "This is something to behold. This is an awe-inspiring event."

It continues on, "for behold, I bring you good news of great joy." The phrase "good news" is the word for evangelize, it's the word for spreading the Gospel. As a matter of fact, the good news of Jesus Christ is ultimately speaking the only real good news there has ever been. "I bring you good news of great joy." Do you know why? Because the Gospel, the message of Jesus Christ, is the only rational joy that fallen men have ever received. Did you hear me? It's the only good news and rational joy fallen men could ever receive. You say, "Wait a minute, I have received some good news. I received, I got a \$20,000 pay raise." Yes, but if you don't know Christ and if you're not focused on Christ and his glory, that's \$20,000 to be used against you in the judgment. You see, the only true rational joy is that fallen beings rightly deserving the wrath of God can be pardoned

and forgiven through God's Son, Jesus Christ. You say, "Wait a minute, I found the perfect wife. I found the perfect husband and that's a joy." No, if you're not saved, if your marriage isn't dedicated to him and his glory, then everything you do together just builds the account of wrath against you. There is only one truly good news and only one rational joy that has ever come to mankind and that's the good news of God's grace and favor through Jesus Christ.

The good news and the great joy is that us guilty helpless sinners can be forgiven and even made a part of God's family, even God's eternal family, and then we can begin to use our lives to build treasures in that eternal kingdom and honor and glorify his name. What a gift that is. Sins forgiven, which means that's such good news, that's victory over sin and its power to condemn us. That's victory over Satan, his power to accuse us. That's victory over death, that's power to hold us. And that's victory over hell, hell's power to punish us and keep us. What a gift that is, forgiveness of sins, and then we are given a new heart. A new heart to begin to love and treasure things that we didn't even care about before, and we begin to love and treasure a group of people in our local church we didn't care about before. And even bigger than that, we begin to have a love for all people that we didn't have before. A new heart which speaks of our new family, even, and a new home forever for all eternity. That's why this is good news of great joy.

Well, he continues on in verse 10 and he says, "which will be for all the people." What does he mean it will be for all the people? I think, again, it has the idea of not just Jews but Jews and Gentiles, but in a broader perspective, this means all of those whose hearts are open to the Savior. All of those who are who are humbled and confess their sinful condition and embrace Christ as Savior, this is good news and this brings great joy. But do you know what, it wasn't good news of great joy for Herod. It wasn't good news of great joy for Pilate. No, the proud and the self-satisfied don't find this as good news of great joy. But if you are one and you see your need and you know you're a sinner and you know there is a holy and just God that ought to crush you in wrath, then this is good news of great joy. For the humble, it's truly good news of great joy.

So there is that whole saving message pouring out of this angel as he's declaring what's happening to these lowly shepherds and then he goes on, look at verse 11, if you will, "for today," and that's more than just a word there, you've got to pause there for a moment. Today means at this pre-appointed time, at the fullness of time, at the right time, the time God has ordained, this has happened.

"For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior." Now you can even translate that a Deliverer. You know, this word "Savior" here in the Greek that we translate into the English as Savior, is the word they used for Caesar Augustus in the day. It's a word he took himself, "I am your Savior." We have some politicians that pretty much like to tell us that, don't they? "Give us all your money, give us all the power, and we'll save you. We'll take care of you." Let me tell you something: anybody other than Christ that says give me all of what you've got and I'll take care of you, they're a liar. They're a liar. There's only one who can say that and really mean that and really back that up and his name is Jesus Christ. Every other is a fraud. Every other is a fraud.

He is the Savior. Well, Caesar Augustus used this term for himself but the Holy Spirit took the term out of that Greek setting and gave it to this little lowly baby. He is the Deliverer. He is the Savior. And notice the text does not say that he is one who will become Savior. Look at it there again, if you will, verse 11, "for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior." It's not born for you a baby who will become your Savior. No, he's not one who is becoming Savior, he is one who is Savior and he just got born. He already was Savior. He already was with God before he was born. He already was the chosen, anointed, appointed Savior of mankind from eternity past, but there was a point in time in order to justly or righteously bring about our own forgiveness in justification, he had to enter the human race. So the Savior God now becomes part of humanity and he is born as a little baby on this day.

Verse 11 again, "for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ," God's anointed one. God set him apart. God anointed him in ways no other has ever been anointed. And then he is, "Christ the Lord," which means boss or master or supreme in authority. The angel is saying, "You've heard so many things from Greek philosophers and Roman teachers, you've heard so many things out of Jewish authorities and Jewish scribes and Jewish Pharisees, but let me tell you something, shepherds on the hillside in the dark, God has done something that trumps everything all of those have ever told you. All hope, all deliverance, all salvation is centered in one, this baby born and now laying in a feed trough in Bethlehem." What a glorious truth.

Let me give you three thoughts now as we close. First of all, I'd like to say to you he is a potential Savior. Not all are going to be saved, not all will turn to Christ, not all will believe on him, but he is potential. The angel says here to the shepherds in verse 10, "He's for all the people." That means, church, are you listening to me? Church, you can go to anyone, anywhere at any time and say to them, "Christ has died for sin. If you will turn to him, if you will trust in him, he will save you." He is potential but you have to turn to him in repentance and faith. John 8:24, "Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins." Luke 13:3, "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." He is potential but it's not a guarantee if you don't turn.

Now let me say a couple of things about repentance. I've said this with you before but you need to get this in your mind about repentance. There is primary repentance and there is secondary repentance. We usually get hung up on secondary repentance and that can be a misleading error from the enemy to get us like a dog chasing his tail. "Did I tell a lie? Did I have envy? Was I jealous? Did I trust in my heart? Did I take something I shouldn't?" Yes, we should be concerned about those sins absolutely, and as we find them we should be repentant about them, but that's what I call secondary repentance. That kind of repentance never – listen to me – never happens unless there is primary repentance. "Pastor, what's primary repentance?" Primary repentance is this: I no longer look to Caesar Augustus, I no longer look to the high priest in Jerusalem, I no longer look to the sacrifices of goats and sheep and lambs, turtledoves or pigeons, I no longer look to keeping the law, I turn from – that means repent – I turn from placing my confidence in

any and all of that, I come bankrupt as a wretched sinner to Christ and Christ alone and place my faith in an expiring man on a cross called Jesus Christ. That's my new hope. I turn from all other philosophies, all other teachings, all other religious rites, rituals, observances, whatever it is, and I turn to embrace Christ alone. That's primary repentance. That's the foundation and once you turn there, justification is sealed and then you begin growing to constantly repent of the secondary things. I'm not saying secondary because they are no big deal. They are a big deal. All of us are falling short of the glory of God when we sin but that's not what gets you saved. You can be a repenter of lying all your life and go straight to hell. You can be a repenter of lust in your heart and do that all your life and go straight to hell, but you repent of any and everything to fix your sin problem except for Jesus and that's primary repentance.

So he can be the glorious forgiving Deliverer, the Savior, if you repent of looking to anything and everything else and look only and exclusively to him. As much as we have preached against it, some of you sitting this morning are still trusting in a sinner's prayer you prayed and not in Jesus. It's not the sinner's prayer that saves you, it is Jesus that saves you. It is not walking to the front that saves you, it's Jesus that saves you. It's not repenting in prayer after the evangelist that saves you, it is Jesus that saves you. And on your deathbed as I told you before, do not look at me and say, "Pastor, I did that." I don't care what you did. It doesn't matter to me what you did. I want to hear you say, "I know him. It's not what I did, I trust him. I trusted him then, I've trusted him since then, and on my dying bed I trust him today. My faith is in him. I have repented of all the other." Is that clear enough? If you go to hell trusting something other than Jesus, your blood is not on my hands. Christ is the Deliverer and I'm going to tell you that's good news of great joy because I may not can come to the priest just right, and I might not jump through the hoop just right, I may not take the Lord's Supper just right, I may not have gotten baptized just right, but if I put my trust in him, he always does deliver me just right. He is the perfect, saving, delivering one. But he is potential if you are repentant and put your faith in him.

Secondly, he is perpetual. In other words, when he saves you, he keeps you saved. He is a perpetual Savior. He saves you when you first start believing from the penalty of sin. That's settled forever. As you grow in Christ, he continues to save you from the power of sin. Not all at once but we should be growing to overcome the power of sin. Then one day he will take us to heaven and save us from the presence of sin and that's glorification. So justification when you believe, sanctification as you're growing, glorification at the end when sin is gone forever. He keeps us saved. You know, there are some companies that advertise it's the gift that keeps on giving, well, that's Jesus Christ. He's the gift that keeps on giving. He is God's indescribable gift, as the Bible says.

Lastly, not only is he a potential Savior and a perpetual Savior, he is a personal Savior. He comes to save you. When Jesus died, you were on his heart. He didn't just die with mankind on his heart, he died with you on his heart. Notice the personal aspect here. A couple of things here. Look at verse 11 again, "for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior." Now, he's talking to these particular shepherds, for you. It's personal. Then verse 12, "This will be a sign for you," it's personal, "you will find a baby

wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." What the angel is actually saying, and Philip Ryken brings this out in his commentary, is that there is a present for you, a personal present for you. You know, when we give gifts at Christmas, we have a little tag on the gift. Usually the tag says like, "Merry Christmas, To and then From." He is saying to these shepherds, "The sign is if you go to Bethlehem you'll find this, it's not very big, you'll find this little cattle stall that's really a place hewn out of the side of a rock wall and inside that cattle stall there is a little feed trough and in that little feed trough is a little baby, and you're going to kneel before that baby and you'll see a little tag on the side of that feed trough that says, 'Merry Christmas, To: The shepherds, From: God.'" It's for you and that's what Christmas means to all of God's children. God's precious personal gift to me. Didn't work for it. Didn't deserve it. Didn't earn it. But God says, "Merry Christmas, To: You, my elect children, From: Me, God." No wonder, is it verse 20 where the shepherds leave just praising God and rejoicing? Amen.

The saving message of Christmas joy.