

## **Joy After Christmas: Sunday, 1/5/20**

**1** It's January 5th, and most of the Christmas parties are over. I say "most" because my family still has one planned for next week. But the presents have all been unwrapped, the unwanted ones boxed up for UPS or regifting, and we've gained a little weight from our feasting on Christmas cookies and peanut brittle. We've piled up all the bottles, cans, and cardboard for the next recycling pick up. We've even put away most of the Christmas decorations here at church. We spent months gearing up for Christmas, but now it's over. Most of us have to go back to work or school, the unemployed are still looking for jobs, houses in foreclosure are still being foreclosed on, and compared to the bright lights and carols of Christmas, the world can kind of look like a pile of empty boxes. So "Merry after Christmas." It's time to get back to work, lose some weight, and figure out how we're going to manage those alarmingly large credit card bills that will soon be arriving in the mail.

I hate to leave the Christmas story behind with 2019, because it's so obviously full of joy and hope. Less than two weeks ago we were basking in the ideal of the "Silent Night," focused on the good news of the birth of Jesus and mostly overlooking the smell of the animals in the barn and Mary's likely exhaustion from giving birth. In our family gatherings as well, we managed to overlook some of the blemishes. Perhaps the Christmas spirit helped us to find joy in family members and other details of our celebrations that on any other day might drive us crazy. But each present moment must swiftly fade into the past, and so now we're living in the time after Christmas. The choirs of angels have flown off and the party's over. Just like Mary and Joseph might have been wondering, some of us are asking ourselves, "Can there be joy after Christmas, or is it just all about cleaning up the messes and facing the tough times life has to throw at us until next Christmas rolls around?"

**2** I never thought I'd be saying this, but an old idea from the world of banking can actually help us put some perspective on this question. Have you ever heard of a promissory note? If you've played the Milton Bradley game of Life, then you know what a promissory note is. A promissory note is "a financial instrument ...in which one party ... promises in writing to pay a determinate sum of money to the other ..., either at a fixed or determinable

future time or on demand of the payee, under specific terms.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, if you hold a mortgage or a student loan, then you’ve signed a type of promissory note. And if you’ve ever used paper money, that’s a special kind of negotiable promissory note. The main idea is that the paper you’re holding isn’t what holds value, but rather the confidence you have that the issuer of the promissory note will exchange it for something of value under the conditions you agreed upon when you accepted the promissory note in the first place.

**3** In a way, the birth of Jesus on Christmas is like a promissory note from God. I’m not saying that the appearance of God in the flesh didn’t have value, but that the main value—the payoff for us, if you like—came later, and ultimately only after his death, resurrection, and exaltation. It’s pretty clear to me that the world treats Christmas as a much bigger deal than Easter. But really, Christmas is just the prelude to Easter, the promissory note issued by God that promises us that if we invest our lives in love the way Jesus did, then we’ll receive the full value of our salvation when the time comes for Jesus to return and remake the heavens and the earth for all eternity. The day after Christmas isn’t the end of the party at all, it’s just the beginning! Every moment between Christmas and Easter is a reminder of God’s promise to us of salvation as well as an invitation for us to take part in the unfolding of that promise in this life.

**4** Of all the things that are hopeful about this particular promissory note, one obvious fact stands out: Jesus came as a baby. No, he didn’t have blue eyes, white skin, and a pure, white blanket. But he came as a baby! Why is that hopeful? Because it means that for a moment in time, God was as helpless as God could be. Newborn humans are more helpless than even most newborn animals. They can’t even manage to focus their eyes properly, let alone hold their bladder, speak or stand. The helplessness of a baby is a hopeful sign to us because it epitomizes the very meaning of grace.

Grace is receiving something we haven’t earned or don’t deserve. Isn’t it abundantly clear that there’s nothing a newborn baby could possibly have done to serve the loving care and devotion of his or her parents? In fact, it’s quite the opposite, isn’t it? Every parent has moments of exasperation when they simply have to scream, throw up their arms, walk away,

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Promissory\\_note](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Promissory_note)

or do all three, because even though life includes little Kodak moments like the one in this picture, it also includes crying, pooping, peeing, vomiting, and temper tantrums. And yet, parents come back and continue to love their children. Unbelievable! That's grace!

Simeon, Anna, Joseph, and Mary had lived under the law of Moses their entire lives, depending on the correct performance of regular rituals to maintain their relationship with God. No wonder Simeon was so full of joy, so ready to come to the end of his life after holding God's salvation, Jesus, in his arms. It was all about grace! Simeon held grace in his arms. Can you imagine?

In the days after Christmas, as the grind of life reasserts itself, every baby or child that we see can be a reminder of God's promissory note that was born on Christmas. Every baby or child that we see can remind us that God loves us even more completely than even the most faithful of human parents. Every baby or child that we see can remind us that we can't possibly earn the approval of God, and we don't need to!

The promise of grace doesn't go away after Christmas it just grows stronger. What's robbing the joy in your life in these days after Christmas? Try hanging out with some newborn babies and re-experiencing the many ways that the miracle of birth teaches us about the joy of grace.

**5** Christmas is the beginning of the Good News, because we all need the saving that was promised in Jesus. Each of us finds ourselves in difficult or even desperate circumstances, what I like to call the vicissitudes of life. Our lives are not made up of one "silent night", day after day. Jesus even warned us, "in this life you will have trouble." We can all attest to that, can't we? In 2019 we grieved the loss of those we love. We grieved the loss of jobs, marriages, and houses. We faced the devastation of war, disease, and natural disaster around the globe. We've endured the stress of an increasingly polarized political landscape. And we've struggled with the weight of our own sin, our tendency to choose to serve ourselves instead of God.

Can there be any joy for us on this side of Christmas, when all the world can seem like such a shattered dream? Yes! God has been, is, and continues to be a God of hope and loving deliverance. The promise God made on Christmas is one that God continues to make good on, wherever we find ourselves. God doesn't save up the grace we need until we pull into the

church parking lot on Christmas Eve. God is there with us in the Doctor's office when get the news of cancer. God is there with us at 2am when we're holding a crying child. God is there with us in the trenches when life gets messy, because God entered this world in a messy way as well. For unto us a child is born. That's a promise of grace that can never be taken away from you should you choose to claim it. Thanks be to God. Amen.



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