THE TRUE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT  
(Luke 2:8-20)

INTRODUCTION:

Do you have the “Christmas spirit” yet? We talk about “getting” the Christmas spirit, but what is the true Christmas spirit?

We lived in Panama Canal Zone for several years. Panama is a tropical country, hot all year around. One of the things we experienced was that it was difficult to get into the “Christmas spirit” because it was always hot. But does the Christmas spirit have to do with the weather.

In the drama “Scrooge” there are three Christmas spirits -- Spirit of Christmas past, spirit of Christmas present, and spirit of Christmas future. But are these the true Christmas spirits?

What is the true Christmas spirit? I believe that there is such a thing, but it is not necessarily related to the weather nor to some nostalgic feeling we developed as a child, nor to a classic Christmas movie. In the Gospel of Luke we have the Christmas story and in this story we can see what the true spirit of Christmas is in certain attitudes and actions of the angels, the shepherds, and Mary. We have angels announcing to the shepherds the birth of Christ. We have shepherds going to Jesus and spreading out their garments. We have shepherds spreading the word of the things they have seen and heard. We have Mary pondering in her heart the meaning of these things. Certainly in this passage is the true spirit of Christmas.

THE SPIRIT OF JOY

The first clue to the true spirit of Christmas is found in verse 10 and it is the spirit of JOY. And the angels said:

Luke 2:10 NIV "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

Joy is a natural feeling at the Christmas season. Most of the time we see many people hustling and bustling about joyfully, saying “Merry Christmas.” Now there are some who are not as joyful as others at Christmas, especially those who live alone, or whose family is not with them. We need to remember these people especially at Christmas.

God is a God of joy. He wants his people to have joy and be joyful. I found out an interesting fact about the Hebrew language of the Old Testament.
Kaufmann Kohler states in the Jewish Encyclopedia that no language has as many words for joy and rejoicing as does Hebrew. In the Old Testament thirteen Hebrew roots, found in twenty-seven different words, are used primarily for some aspect of joy or joyful participation in religious worship. Israelite worship was essentially a joyous proclamation and celebration. (Steve Graham, Virtue Church pastor, told us about how a Jewish service knows how to celebrate.) The good Israelite regarded the act of thanking God as the supreme joy of his life.

Psalms 16:11 NIV You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

I believe that this verse gives us the secret of the true spirit of Christmas. It is the joy of God’s presence is with us and in His presence is fullness of joy. Jesus’ name is Immanuel, i.e. “God with us.” As the angels told the shepherds:

The angel told the shepherds, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”

To have and to express the spirit of Christmas joy, we need to focus our hearts on the presence of God through Christ as Savior. Whether we get presents or not, whether we are alone or with family we can have the true Christmas spirit, the spirit of joy of having God with us through Christ. Is this the Christmas spirit that you have?

THE SPIRIT OF PRAISE

Next this passage shows us that the spirit of Christmas is also a spirit of praise. Verses 13, 14:

Luke 2:13-14 NIV Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, (14) "Glory to God in the highest heaven….”

The angels broke out in praise to God as they considered His great gift of Christ to mankind.

The spirit of joy in our hearts as expressed in praise to God is the spirit of Christmas. I wonder how many angels appeared with the first angel? It says, “heavenly host.” Could it have been a hundred? A thousand? Tens of thousands? It must have been a thrilling sight to see and hear thousands of angels praising God and giving Him the glory for what was taking place in Bethlehem!
Our praise to God for Christ is the evidence we have the true spirit of Christmas.

Do you remember the children’s book by Dr. Seuss, How the Grinch Stole Christmas? The Grinch, a sour and unpleasant creature, tries to prevent the fun and merrymaking of CHRISTMAS in his village by stealing all the gifts and decorations. The villagers celebrate the holiday anyway, and the Grinch reforms.

There are some modern-day Grinches that can steal our Christmas spirit. One is time. We get so busy with cards, presents, cooking, shopping, parties, that we get exhausted and lose our Christmas spirit. We fret over whether we will ever get ready for Christmas we lose the joy of Christmas. We need to slow down and get into the true Christmas spirit of giving praise to God for the His gift of Christ to us.

Another Grinch that steals the true spirit of Christmas is financial concerns Christmas brings us. Many people go into debt at Christmas just to buy presents which for the most part are unneeded and become unused items in a closet. At a gas station I was at one time the attendant was complaining about it taking him six months to pay for Christmas. Surveys tell us that 31% of people will spend more than they can afford on Christmas. Many go into debt at Christmas and their joy is robbed the rest of the year!

Don’t let busy-ness or going into debt or any other thing steal your joy in praising God for his indescribable gift to you this Christmas.

When the angels first announced Christmas they expressed their joy in praise to God for His gift to mankind. This is the spirit God wants to give you -- the spirit of praise. Is this the Christmas spirit that you have?

THE SPIRIT OF PEACE

Another way this passage shows us the spirit of Christmas is that it is a spirit of knowing God’s peace. Verse 14b:

and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (NIV)

You will notice that different translations translate the last phrase differently. In the KJV and the NKJV “… and on earth peace, good will toward men. “

In the ESV “… and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”
The difference is that one is speaking of ‘goodwill’ as in addition to God’s peace and the other is that it is speaking of the ones on whom God’s peace rest. (εὐδοκίας is genitive, not nominative εὐδοκία as later MSS have).

The latter reading fits the Greek better and it fits in more with the message of the angels. Their message is that the One born in Bethlehem is the One who would bring salvation to the world. His salvation includes God’s peace and favor resting on those who receive the Savior.

Whichever way you want to take it, peace is the focus of the statement. Peace is something we desperately need in our world today.

Some have keenly felt the irony between God’s purpose of bringing peace into this world through the Christmas event and the horrible wars and evils this world has experienced since. The poet Coleridge wrote some bitter and sarcastic lines when thinking of the angels’ message of peace and the reality of wars:

Strange Prophecy! If all the screams of all the men that since have died to realize war’s kingly dreams Had risen at once in one vast tide. The choral song of that vast multitude Had been o’er powered and lost amid the uproar rude.

What a contrast. With all the evil and tragedies in the world today, one wonders how we can believe that God is truly with us to bring us peace.

We may feel like the little boy who was enjoying the beach with his mother. They were lying back looking at the beautiful blue sky. The little boy asked, “Does God live up there?” His mother replied, “Yes, He does.” The little boy then said, “Wouldn’t it be nice if God would poke his head out so that we could see Him and know for sure that He was there?”

Our faith is in a God who is with us and our faith is based on the fact that God has not abandoned us, but He poked His head out and sent His son Jesus Christ into this world to do something about our situation. What He has done is to live a perfect life, died a substitutionary death, be raised victoriously over the grave, sent His Holy Spirit to save us, guide us, and strengthen us. And who has promised to return to bring judgment and justice at last. And to those who put their trust in Him, God gives peace, peace with God and the peace of God.
The true spirit of Christmas comes from receiving God’s peace and favor through the One born at Christmas, the Lord Jesus Christ. Is this the spirit of Christmas that you have?

THE SPIRIT OF GIVING

Finally I see that the true spirit of Christmas is the spirit of giving. Throughout this story we see this spirit of giving. We see God giving His Son. We see the angels giving praise to God. We see the shepherds giving the message to all they met. We see the wise men giving Christ gifts. The true spirit of Christmas is the spirit of giving.

But if we are honest about it, from our childhood on up we are taught to look at what we will receive more than what we will give. We ask one another, “What do you want for Christmas?” Maybe, we should be asking, “What are you giving for Christmas?” We even have turned the tradition of Santa Claus around. We look at Santa as the one who will bring us gifts, as the source of our joy. But this is God’s place and His alone. We emphasize what Santa will bring us, what we will be receiving. But this is backward from the original meaning of Santa Claus. You probably have heard how the tradition of Santa Claus came into being?

The name Santa Claus comes from an English version of the Dutch name, Sinter Klass, which was a name for St. Nicholas. Nicholas was a real person. He was a Greek BISHOP of the fourth century.

He was born in A.D. 280, and when he was still just a boy his parents died, leaving him great wealth. Early in his life he devoted himself to serving God. Later, as a bishop in Asia, he gave away much of his wealth to the poor -- especially to children. When he was persecuted and imprisoned, he always shared his meager provisions with the inmates. He believed that giving to the needy was the same as giving to Jesus. St. Nicholas gave to others because he loved Jesus.

This is the original meaning of Santa Claus -- the spirit of giving to the needy in the name of Jesus. St. Nicholas is a great example of the spirit of giving. But we have it backwards. We miss the point of the life St. Nicholas. Somewhere we began to think that Santa Clause is going to bring US GIFTS. How bazaar! God is the source of our gifts. St. Nicholas is a great example of how we are to have the spirit of giving to others because we love Jesus. Get the point?

This is the spirit God wants to give to you -- the spirit of giving. Is this the Christmas spirit that you have?

CONCLUSION:
Do you have the Christmas spirit yet? You should and you can. It is the spirit of joy (the joy of knowing that God is with us through Christ), the spirit of praise (praise to God for the gift of His Son), the spirit of peace (the peace that God gives us through faith in His Son), the spirit of giving (giving because God is a giving God). Which one of these elements of the Christmas spirit do you need to recapture? Joy – praise – peace – or giving? How do we get the Christmas spirit?

A Catholic priest (Henry Fehre) one time said, “The Christmas spirit will come to us if we meditate on the meaning of Christ as Mary did-- search out a place for Christ in our world as Joseph did -- announce Christ's coming with peace as the angels did -- hasten to find Christ as the shepherds did -- persist on our journey as the magi did. And if we have the true Christmas spirit, it will be with us all year long.”

But the beginning point to having the true Christmas spirit is to have the One who came into the world at Christmas in our hearts. This is the key to having the true Christmas spirit. Let Jesus come into your heart. Then you will have the true Source of the true Christmas spirit.

So, let’s get into the Christmas spirit this year. Let’s let Jesus come into our hearts, and then let us share that Christmas spirit with one another and others?

Amen? Amen!