

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
CHRISTMAS EVE
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“JOY TO THE WORLD”
Luke 2:1-14
December 24, 2008
8:00 P.M. Service**

There are those of us who would argue that tonight is the grandest night of the year. And that's why we are turning to one of the grandest stories in all of human literature--Luke's telling of the Christmas story.

You know the story. Caesar Augustus issued a decree that everyone in the empire was to be counted and that each should register in the town of their family origin. So a young father-to-be named Joseph was forced to leave his home in Nazareth, along with his betrothed wife, Mary, and make the arduous journey to Bethlehem.

So Joseph and his pregnant betrothed wife make this journey. When they arrive at Bethlehem they cannot find lodging, and they take shelter in a stable where their son Jesus, the Savior of the world is born.

About this same time, there were shepherds who were watching over their flocks in a nearby field. In the middle of the night they were disturbed by an angel, a messenger from God. The angel said to them, ***“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”*** Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ***“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”*** Can there possibly be a more beautiful story?

This is a night for pure, unadulterated joy. How can you be a cynic on Christmas Eve? How can you be a killjoy? How can you be a grinch? It doesn't get any better than this in this world. Families getting together,

children fidgeting with wide-eyed expectancy, churches filled for candle-lit services. The music, the color, the well-wishes and the hugs. It doesn't get any better. Christmas Eve. A humble couple awaits the birth of their first son in a stable in Bethlehem. Overhead angels sing glory to God in the highest. This is faith at its most basic. This is hope at its most triumphant. The birth of a child. There's nothing like it. If you were to ask most parents, **"What was the most important event in your life?"** a significant number would answer **"the birth of our first child."**

What can bring more joy into our lives than the birth of a child? Oh, I know, there can also be heartbreak, but on this night of nights we focus on the joy that the babe in Bethlehem brought into the world.

"Oh, little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie . . ." It is appropriate that Christ should be born in this small town which lies about six miles outside of Jerusalem. Bethlehem had a long history. It was there that Jacob buried his beloved Rachel, and had set up a pillar of memory beside her grave. It was there that the faithful daughter-in-law Ruth lived when she married Boaz and from Bethlehem Ruth could see the land of Moab, her native land, across the Jordan valley. But above all Bethlehem was home of David, the man after God's own heart, the great king of Israel. Joseph, of course, was a descendant of David. The prophet Micah foretold that the Messiah would be born in the city of David, Bethlehem (**Micah 5:2**). This is part of the romance of Christmas. Christ wasn't born in Caesar's household. He wasn't even born in the holy city of Jerusalem. He was born in the little backwater town of Bethlehem. And he wasn't born in an elite family. He was born to a poor couple, a couple who had to make a laborious journey almost to the very time of his birth. And he was born in a stable because there was no room for them in the inn. His crib was a rough trough from which cattle fed. Millions of poor and weary people around our globe find hope for their lives from the story of Christ's birth. It would not be the same if he had been born in a palace.

This is not a night for pretentiousness. It is not a night for congratulating ourselves on how successful we have become or how many beautiful presents we will give or receive. This is a night for bowing in humility before the cradle of one who gave up everything in our behalf. And this is a night for receiving his peace and love. Christ emptied himself completely when he came into our world. Some of you are in pain this night. He has been in pain. Know that, as you bow before the manger.

One of the annual Christmas television specials that brightens up the season is the *Charlie Brown Christmas*. In this special Charlie Brown directs a Christmas play and hunts for the perfect tree, and Linus expounds on the true meaning of Christmas.

When the special was first shown, the folks at CBS were concerned that the use of actual Bible quotes in the special would turn off viewers. Imagine that--religion intruding into a Christmas special! But Peanuts creator Charles Schulz was insistent. So Linus recites from the book of Luke during the show, telling the same story we read tonight. Here was something I hope you noticed in the show. Linus, who was famously attached to his security blanket, lets go of it when he tells the story of Jesus' birth. (1)

And why shouldn't he? Here is our security. Here is our peace, our hope, our joy. God has come into our world in the babe of Bethlehem. Why shouldn't we sing for joy on this night of nights? Something very special happened in our world two thousand years ago. A babe was born to a humble couple, a babe who makes it possible for us to know and to love God. It doesn't get any better than that. **Joy to the World.** The Lord has come.

1. *Uncle John's Bathroom Reader Christmas Collection* (San Diego, CA: Portable Press, 2005), p. 21.