

Jesus is born: praise the Lord!

Message for Christmas Eve, 2011
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: various

Here's something interesting which someone pointed out to me. If you read the story of Jesus' birth in the Bible, everyone who was connected with his coming responded with praise and thanksgiving. And I don't mean "Oh, that's nice." But they were excited and joyful, praising God for what was happening.

Our culture doesn't make a big deal about Jesus; but it sure makes a big deal about Christmas. If you follow all the expectations of what you're supposed to around Christmas — decorations, parades, Christmas cards, gifts, parties, meals, visiting the in-laws, and going to church on Christmas Eve — well, by now you may very well be frazzled and frustrated by it all.

What I'd like us to do is to listen to how the people around Jesus responded to his coming. And as you listen, may you share their joy.

1) When Elizabeth heard the news, she was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed her wonderment with loud voice. Even her unborn child leapt in the womb

Luke 1:41-45 (NIV)

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

2) Mary responded by also praising God:

Luke 1:46-49 (NIV)

And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name."

3) When Elizabeth delivered her baby, her husband Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and praised God.

Luke 1:67-69 (NIV)

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come and has redeemed his people.
He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David."

4) The angels added their voices to the chorus of praise:

Luke 2:8-14 (NIV)

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But 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 Saviour 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 favour rests."

5) The shepherds gave glory and praise to God after they had gone and seen the Saviour for themselves.

Luke 2:15-20 (NIV)

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

6) When Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the Temple to be dedicated, they met Simeon; and Simeon praised God:

Luke 2:25-32 (NIV)

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon

him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you now 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 glory to your people Israel.”

7) Also at the Temple was an old woman named Anna, who thanked God for Jesus.

Luke 2:36-38 (NIV)

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

8) Finally, the last people mentioned in the Bible in the story of Jesus' birth, the Magi, came from the east. They were overjoyed to find Jesus, and worshipped him.

Matthew 2:9-11 (NIV)

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

At the start I said “everyone was happy.” There's one exception to this. That last passage, if we read the next few verses, tells us that King Herod was furious about this new king; he took it as a personal threat against him, and did everything in his power to kill that baby.

But he's the exception. All the others were full of joy. That would be my prayer for you as well, that you may leave aside all those expectations of society, and focus on the one thing that is truly important: God has come

into our world, and invites us to come into his world, as Jesus put it: the kingdom of God.

I'd like to tell you a story about the difference Jesus makes in people's lives.

Miracle in the Ardennes

During World War II, twelve-year-old Fritz Vinchen lived in the Ardennes Forest on the border between Germany and Belgium with his mother, Elizabeth, in a small cottage. Their home in the city of Aachen had been destroyed, and Fritz's father had managed to locate a remote cabin deep in the forest and there the mother and son were hiding during the war.

It was Christmas Eve, and the temperatures had plunged. Long, heavy icicles had formed outside the windows. Suddenly Fritz and his mother heard voices outside their little house. “Mother blew out the candle,” he said, “and we waited in fearful silence.”

Then there was a knock at the door. Then another. When Mother opened the door, two men were standing outside. They spoke a strange language and one of them pointed to a third man sitting in the snow with a bullet wound in his upper leg. His name was Herby. The men were American soldiers, and they were freezing and worn out.

Elizabeth invited the soldiers into the warmth of the small cottage and sent Fritz to the outdoor shed to fetch some potatoes. As Elizabeth tended to the Americans, there was heavy knock at the door. Elizabeth and Fritz froze in fear because they would likely be killed on the spot if it were learned they were harbouring Americans.

Opening the door, Elizabeth saw four German soldiers who were also seeking refuge from the freezing cold. Elizabeth said, “Frohliche Weihnachten” (Merry Christmas), and told the soldiers there were other dinner guests in the cottage and she reminded them it was Christmas Eve. She told them sternly there would be no shooting, and she ordered the soldiers to take their weapons to the outdoor shed.

As you can imagine, the atmosphere in that little cottage was tense and nervous at first, but then one of the German soldiers, who had been a medical student before the war, began tending to the Herby's leg. Another German soldier revealed that he had a loaf of rye bread to contribute to the Christmas Eve meal. One of the American soldiers had some rations of instant coffee.

Everyone squeezed around the table, and Elizabeth read from the Bible and told the group that there would be at least one night of peace in this war, and it would be

tonight, Christmas Eve, in this little cottage in the forest. Then she offered a simple prayer, saying, “come here Jesus and be our guest.”

Fritz later said, in recalling the scene around the table: “I saw the battle-weary soldiers were filled with emotion. Their thoughts seemed to be many, many miles away. Now they were boys again, some from America, some from Germany, all far from home.”

After supper, the soldiers all fell asleep in their heavy coats. The next morning, they arose and wished each other a Merry Christmas. They all worked together to fashion a stretcher to carry the wounded American. The Germans pointed the way back to the American lines, and both parties shook hands and marched through the snow back to their respective armies.

Because of Jesus, because of Christmas, right in the middle of the Battle of the Bulge on a freezing night of terror, seven young soldiers met as enemies and parted as friends.

May you also allow Jesus to change your life.