

Joy to Your World

My name is Carol, and I'm a Christmas-aholic!

Yes, I am one of those eccentrics who embraces the tradition of singing **Christmas carols** starting Oct. 1, of giving gifts to every person living on my street and of smiling at strangers in the outrageously long holiday post office lines.

But it was not always this way. Many years of my adult life, I was locked in the cold dark of a **depression** that shunned celebration and gave little reason for mirth. There was a time when I acutely dreaded turning the calendar page to December and when I realized I could be the present-day embodiment of **Charles Dickens' Scrooge**.

Although my husband and I had been given the gift of two precious boys who were quickly growing up, we also sent five consecutive babies to heaven, each of them between 12 and 20 weeks in utero. Our holiday mantle remained void of miniature **Christmas stockings**, and my arms and my heart went empty year after endless year.

After sending those five tiny lives back to the arms of the Father, the doctors then told me I would be unable to conceive again. But I believed with my entire being I was made to be the mother of a large family, and I begged God for the gift of another baby ... or two ... or three. During that season, my circumstances continuously assaulted me with disappointment, while the black hole of depression relentlessly called my name.

Eventually, I did bear another child—three more children, in fact. But before I ever felt the flutter of new life or held the miracle of new life in my arms, something changed for me regarding Christmas.

You see, I developed an addiction during the darkest days of

my life. My addiction of choice was not an over-the-counter medication or shopping or even chocolate. Mine was an addiction that injected hope into the cold and emptiness of my circumstances.

During my days of paralyzing and debilitating depression, I became addicted to the miraculous cure of the Word of God. Somehow, as I read the Bible, I found the strength to nestle into the truth of Christmas rather than the fantasy of the culture. Celebrating Christmas with faith and joy rather than the fairy tale of seasonal merriment turned me into a believer—and I know it can make you one too.

Carrying Christ The true Christmas story—the one I have chosen to weave into the fabric of my life—is the story of a girl who was ordinary, young and unqualified. God chose to place Himself inside her womb so you and I could one day carry His presence inside our lives as well.

God the Father, the Creator of the universe, the instigator of everything glorious and miraculous, chose you and me as the vehicle through which our generation would receive its greatest gift. It is our miracle that we have been called to demonstrate Jesus to the world in which we live.

But the world will only experience the joy of His birth to the extent we exhibit joy. The world will only taste the peace of His coming to the extent we reveal His peace. The world will only know the hope of Christmas when we respond to pain and disappointment as hopeful believers.

The glory of Christmas is found in the simple yet eternal fact that your depression or disappointment in life does not alienate you from celebrating an event so rich and rare that all of humanity stops to stare in wonder.

Jesus was born for your depression. The skies exploded over Bethlehem to melt away your darkness. The angels sang to heal your weary soul. Joy was eternally announced into your

hopeless life.

A Cleaned-Up Life The shepherds were dirty, uneducated men with grime under their fingernails and sludge in their brains. A group of them huddled one night around a fire in the inky black of night. These muddy specimens of humanity were cold and shivering while they tried to stay awake. Their only responsibility in life was to keep track of a herd of dumb sheep who were restless, disobedient and lice-infested.

These men were diseased by the sickening disappointment that nothing about their lives would ever change. Life can become quickly pointless if you are a man with sheep drool on your clothes and sheep dung between your toes.

Perhaps you are in a place where you feel like one of these hopeless, cold shepherds surrounded by darkness and dung. Perhaps you, like me for so many years, dare the holly-jolliness of the season to get close to your muddy, murky existence.

If so, get ready for a God-induced, Christmas-sized, eternity-driven explosion! God loves to invade the world of lonely shepherds and despondent humanity with the combustion that belongs singularly to Christmas.

That night more than 2,000 years ago, heaven exploded into the cold and dark world of the shepherds. The song of the angels burst forth into the war zone of earth and proclaimed the joy of heaven into their hopeless and meaningless existence. Stars were falling and bursting in rare and glorious colors while the heavens opened and a majestic angel choir began to sing a mighty symphony that can still be heard today.

Christmas has come to you in your depression and darkness. As the God of creation proclaimed, "Let there be light," the God of Christmas proclaims to you in the middle of your mess, "Let there be Christmas!"

No Longer Afraid Every time an angel appears in the Christmas story, the message is always the same: "Do not be afraid!" The angel said it to Zachariah, then to Mary, then to Joseph and finally to the shepherds on the hillside: "Do not be afraid!"

I believe this just may be the message heaven is sending you this Christmas season. Christmas definitively proves Jesus and fear are mutually exclusive. When Jesus arrives on the scene, there is no reason to be afraid. His presence powerfully removes any reason for fear.

The message of Christmas has not changed in 2,000 years, and the words of the angels still ring clearly into our 21st-century world: "Do not be afraid!"

When your circumstances are falling apart, remind yourself: "Do not be afraid!" When there is not enough money to pay the bills, remind yourself: "Do not be afraid!" When you are dealing with disappointment, pain or loneliness, remind yourself: "Do not be afraid!"

It is time for you to step away from your fear and step boldly into His presence. I pray that this Christmas—and every day this coming year—you realize that when Jesus is birthed in your heart, there is absolutely no reason for fear or worry.

Filled With Joy The first word the angel that appeared to the shepherds used to describe the birth of Jesus Christ was the word *joy*: "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord' (Luke 2:10-11, NASB).

I believe *joy* should also be the first word used to describe every believer at every moment in history. Joy is the birthmark of a Christian, because when you accept Jesus—the Baby found in the manger—into your heart, you are branded for life with His joy. Your life becomes purposeful as you carry

the Christ child to this dark and restless world. The hopelessness of your life dissipates as you understand the honor of transmitting the joy of His presence to the muddy specimens of humanity.

Similarly, when the star stopped the magi in their wealthy tracks, the Bible says these learned men “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” (Matt. 2:10). Just five words, yet what richness their scarcity holds. These five simple words are some of the most expressive words in all of Scripture.

Rejoiced means “let the hope of future blessedness give you joy.” What rich intent and calling!

This communicates to all of us, from every generation and every historical juncture, that because of the Baby born in the manger, we can look ahead with hope and expectation. When you encounter Jesus, there is reason to rejoice because of the many blessings now headed in your direction.

Exceedingly is defined as “greatly” or even “violently.” These first-century professorial types did not just bow low with scholarly hands clasped in front of their wise faces. The joy they experienced in the presence of Jesus was an explosion that knocked their mortarboards off their wizened heads. These men of highly respected academia were jumping up and down!

Great in this sentence means “with great effort of the affections and emotions of the mind.” It is significant that this particular definition of the word includes the word *mind*. The magi were men of scrolls and cerebral intensity, but at the moment this star stopped in the presence of Jesus, all they had ever learned or studied paled in comparison to this one momentous event.

And finally, the word *joy* is rich in meaning and texture because it is defined as “the blessedness that the Lord enjoys.” Every blessing that the Lord has, you now have—because of Christmas!

Compelled to Worship The magi fell on their faces and worshipped Jesus in full-blown, dynamic heart worship: "After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him" (Matt. 2:11).

These learned and respected men fell on their faces in His sweet presence. While Jesus was babbling in a language only his mother could understand, these men who were known for solving the mysteries of the ages lay prostrate before Him.

True worship always entails a change of position and a change in prominence. In the presence of the holy Child, these men cared not for tradition or liturgy. They only knew He was worthy to be worshipped, so they fell at His baby feet in heartfelt praise.

Will you fall on your face this Christmas in the presence of Jesus?

True worship always involves joy! These wise men had their scholarly world rocked with the joy that was found in the presence of Jesus Christ. They changed their academic regalia for a garment of praise.

Will you let go of your emotional human make-up and allow the joy of His presence to infiltrate your world?

Christmas Today In this Christmas season, I am the mother of five extraordinary young adults, the mother-in-law of three young women who have captured my heart in their own endearing ways, and the grandmother of five precocious and beautiful preschoolers who flood my heart with their own brand of sweetness.

Yet however priceless the gift of my beloved family is, it is not these family members that have taught me how to celebrate Christmas. My five children on earth have made me happier than any one woman deserves to be, but it's my five babies in

heaven—the ones I lost before they were born—who have taught me the miracle of the joy of Christmas.

I learned how to celebrate Christmas while my world was falling apart because Christ invaded my world with His joy. I learned how to embrace the beauty of heartfelt giving when all I felt was alone and forsaken. I began to sing the glorious anthem of the angels when my world was dark and broken.

The true miracle of Christmas is that He came while I was yet depressed. The Baby in the manger came for lost, lonely and heartbroken people like you and me. Christmas should never induce additional pain, but it has the miraculous power to alleviate all emotional diseases forever.

The mistake many of us make is being distracted by the magic of the season when what is actually occurring is miraculous. The miracle of Christmas is just one choice away. Will you yearn for snow, gifts and family—or will you lift your eyes to the miracle of Christmas?

I celebrate Christmas today not because my life is perfect but because He loved me enough to declare over my emotional darkness, “Let there be Christmas!”

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Watch Carol McLeod share more of her testimony about becoming a “defiantly joyful Christian” at