Book 9

"JOY IS POSSIBLE" Christmas Eve 1980

It's no accident that when the stories about Jesus' birth took form in the early church, they emphasized the fact that it was night when he was born. The world was in darkness.

Darkness is often a symbol for trouble, tragedy, evil. We talk about the "powers of darkness." But precisely at this point, the Gospel of John reminds us--"The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out."

The writer of the John's Gospel makes this proclamation with both amazement and gratitude. Sometimes the world is so dark and yet John stands in awe before the fact that after nearly a century, in spite of opposition and persecution, the light is still shining.

Even more so can we stand in awe, amazement and gratitude, for now after nearly 2000 years, the light still shines forth and the darkness has never put it out.

Like the writer of John's Gospel, we know a lot about darkness in the world and in our personal lives. In fact, some people are obsessed with darkness. There are those who are sure that darkness has more power than light. There are those who believe that the world is going to pieces. There is no hope. Evil has the upper hand.

And there is a lot of darkness around us. The hostages are still being held in Iran. Russia is ready to stamp out any movement for freedom in Poland. The Mideast seems always ready to explode into war. Torture continues to be used by political regimes in many parts of the world. Many of our own cities are unsafe in the darkness. Starvation continues for many people. It's no wonder that people ask, "Is joy possible?"

Racism is not dead!

Not only is there darkness in the world at large, but many of you here tonight, and many of you listening on the radio or watching on television, know the meaning of darkness in your personal lives. Some of you have experienced the darkness of the death of one dearly loved.

Others have known the darkness of a child or family member gone wrong. Still others know the darkness of separation or divorce, and for others there is the darkness of sickness and pain or the darkness of wrong decisions and sins committed and for some the darkness of poverty. And you wonder, "Is joy possible?"

The Gospel writer knows of the darkness in the world. Evil is real and it has power. But at the same time, the good news! The Christmas story is about light, the light of God's love and power entering the world in a new way. "In him was life and the life was the light for all people." The love of God became flesh and dwelt among us. The very "godness" of God came alive in human space and time. Isaiah foretold it, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness on them has light shined."

That's the astonishing fact--that no matter how dark the world is, no matter how much darkness there is in your personal life, the light still shines and nothing can ever put it out. This light does not avoid darkness, it shines in it and through it; the light overcomes, overpowers the darkness! Therefore, JOY IS POSSIBLE! The love of God can never be snuffed out or ultimately defeated. Joy is possible in the darkest of circumstances. In fact, sometimes it is only in the darkest times that we can see the light. When it is dark enough you can see the stars.

Some years ago there lived in an English city a man whom we shall call Fred Armstrong. He worked in the local post office where he was the "dead-letter" man because he handled those letters whose addresses were faulty or mostly unreadable. He lived in an old house with his wife and a daughter and a son. After supper he liked to light his pipe and tell his children of his latest exploits in delivering lost letters. He considered himself quite a detective. There was little darkness in his life.

No darkness until one day when his son suddenly became quite ill. Within 48 hours, the child was dead. In his sorrow, Fred Armstrong's soul seemed to die. The mother and their little daughter, Marian, struggled to deal with their grief. Not so the father. His life was now a dead letter with no direction. In the morning he got up and went to work like a sleepwalker; he never spoke unless

spoken to, ate his lunch alone, sat like a statue at the supper table and went to bed early. Yet his wife knew that he spent most of the night with his eyes open, staring into the darkness. As the months passed, his apathy seemed to deepen.

His wife told him that such despair was unfair to their lost son and unfair to the living, but nothing she said seemed to reach him. It was coming close to Christmas. One dark afternoon at work, Fred Armstrong sat on his high stool and shoved a new pile of letters under the lamp. On the top of the stack was an envelope that was clearly undeliverable. In crude block letters were penciled the words, "Santa Claus, North Pole. Armstrong started to throw it away when some impulse made him pause. He opened the letter and read:

Dear Santa Claus:

We are very sad at our house this year, and I don't want you to bring me anything. My little brother went to heaven last spring. All I want you to do when you come to our house is to take brother's toys to him. I'll leave them in the corner by the kitchen stove; his hobby horse and train and everything. I know he'll be lost in heaven without them, most of all his horse; he always liked riding it so much, so you must take it to him please, and you needn't mind leaving me anything, but if you could give Daddy something that would make him smoke his pipe again and tell me stories, I do wish you would. I heard him say to Mummie once, that only Eternity could cure him. Could you bring him some of that, and I will be your good little girl.

That night Fred Armstrong walked home at a faster gait. In the winter darkness he stood in the doorway garden and struck a match. Then as he opened the kitchen door, he blew a great puff from his pipe and the smoke settled like a nimbus around the heads of his startled wife and daughter. And he was smiling at them just as he used to do.

Many ~~Some~~times the light comes to our darkness in unexpected ways. The love of God that became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth ceaselessly strives to come alive in us. The power of that Spirit that filled Jesus to the uttermost, years to light up our darkness. I hope you will let the light of Christmas shine in your darkness whatever it is, now and forever and you will discover that Joy is Possible!