Christmas Eve 1997
JOY IS ALWAYS AN OPTION

If you stop to think about it, it wasn't a very good time to have a baby. The Hebrews, as a people and nation, were about on their last legs. Things had been going from bad to worse for several generations. Now, they were completely under the rule of Rome. It can't be very pleasant to be an occupied country and completely ruled by outsiders, no matter how competent they might be. It's no wonder there were demonstrations and uprisings almost every week, and crucifixions by the hundreds, in an attempt to keep things under control.

There was excessive taxation, as you might expect under the circumstances, and a considerable degree of graft and greed in the collection of taxes.

There was a spirit of discontent among the people. They were restless, despondent, and jobs were hard to find. Even the Temple was not what it used to be. People who longed for leadership heard only the mumblings of bureaucrats, the Scribes, and the Pharisees. Some of the religious leaders were suspected of being in collusion with the Romans.

So, a young prospective mother waiting for her first baby might well have asked herself the question: "What future can there be for my child in a world like this?"

No, it was not a very good time to have a baby. But is there ever a good time? Some people believe that our time is not much better. More and more young couples are finding that both husband and wife need to work outside the home in order to support the kind of life they believe is necessary. Finding good daycare is not easy. To succeed in today's world requires more and more education, which means having children needs to be delayed.

Personal debt, especially on credit cards, is at an all-time high. Every day we hear the news that many large companies are downsizing. The future is uncertain.

The fact of the matter is, of course, that there is never a completely good time to have a baby. The world is never exactly the kind of world you would like to bring a child into. We can go on and say there is never the perfect time to do anything — get married, make a change in career, move to a new location, have surgery, retire, or even raise money for a new pipe organ, or to be in the process, as we are, of installing a new organ at the very busiest time of the year. The time for doing something important is always, to varying degrees, out of joint.

It is never completely the right time to turn over a new leaf, break a bad habit, or take on a new responsibility. The times are never quite right.

But Mary went straight ahead and had the baby anyway. When Mary was informed that the Spirit of God would rest upon her and that God would use her as a channel for God's power and grace, Mary said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." In other words, even though it's not the right time, I'm ready.

The times are never completely right. Even though the world in which she lived was in a mess and there didn't appear to be much of a future for her child, Mary said, "If that's what God wants me to do, I will do it, and I will do it gladly, and I will pour into it all my gift of tenderness and motherhood and sacrifice and care as if the future were as clear as the sun at midday."

Mary accepted the situation and went ahead gallantly to do it as well as she knew how. That is the way to go when times are not exactly right.

There are many people in these days who are making a considerable struggle and effort to lead a decent life, and it is not always easy. There are many influences that weaken the foundation of our lives, that invite us to live on lower levels. Yet, like Mary, we realize that in spite of threats to civilization and to the life as we know it, life goes magnificently and irresistibly on.

People still find themselves in love no matter what, and even though the future is uncertain, babies are born, families are kept going, and difficulties and illness are met with a courage that is surprising when you see it. Discoveries are still made, and appointments with destiny are kept.

What the events of Christmas teach us is that the times are never quite right, but it's not the times, it's the person that counts. Mary went right ahead and had her baby in spite of the times, and her baby was, and is, the Savior of the world.

Think of it! In the worst of times, new life springs forth where we least expect it. It implies all sorts of things about the energies and powers of God. Just when old civilizations are about to fall, a new one is born.

No matter what times we are in, whether the times are not quite right or not, the fact is, joy is always an option. That's true this Christmas and every Christmas because Christmas reminds us above all that when life looks as if it were about to break down, it is most likely to bring forth something new. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it."

Keep that truth in your mind this Christmas Eve. Let it open the doors of the future for you. Just when you think an end has come, God has a new idea. Just when you think all the doors have been shut and locked, a new door appears where you least expected it. Just when you think that all is darkness, a new light shines through.

That is why there is a joy about Christmas that is undefeatable and that undergirds all our sadness. Joy is always an option for these reasons: The times are never right, but it is not the times — it is you and other people that count. Joy is always an option because when life looks as though it were about to break down, it is most likely to bring forth something new and wonderful.

Remember this above all else: joy is always an option because there is always to be found somewhere one or more obedient servants of God who bring forth new life and wrap it in swaddling cloths and place it tenderly in a manger. Amen.