Another year is quickly drawing to a close. The holiday season is just about over. The rush of preparation has culminated in a few hours of quality time spent with friends and family, but now that’s done. The gifts have been opened, the food has been devoured. Now what?

The hectic pace of the holiday season can leave us longing for a break. It can also leave us with a sense of melancholy, a sense of sadness. The tinsel and the glitter, the lights and the decorations, the smells and the sounds of Christmas – everything is replaced now, with the mundane sameness of life. Many people struggle with the post-holiday-blahs. Now what?

I wonder if Mary and Joseph felt some of those same things. The excitement of the Son of God being born that night, the visit of the shepherds, some time after that - the visit of the Magi from the east, bringing gifts. But now what? Those things are done - in the past, distant memories for Mary and Joseph. Now they set about the task of raising a family, making a living – the excitement of the moment is gone. Did they struggle with the post-holiday blahs?

God didn’t allow the holy family to live a peaceful and quiet life in Bethlehem for very long. Things couldn’t be peaceful and quiet, because the baby they were raising was the very Son of God, the Savior of the world. Satan would try to assassinate the Savior. Mary and Joseph would have to be placed into God’s witness protection program for a little while. Eventually, they would move back to their small hometown up north after things settled down. There was no time for Mary and Joseph to get comfortable in Bethlehem.

For you and I as Christians living in the 21st century, the events we are looking at today have a great deal of significance. As we sit here, at the end of the year, as all the holiday-type things come to a close, and we ask ourselves, now what? God answers that question this morning, through his Word. There is much ahead, much to think about, much to look forward to, and he shows us what those things are today as we focus on these early days in the life of our Savior.

It was the middle of the night, and Joseph was sleeping, when an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Get up, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” The wise men from the east had just visited Jesus. They had told King Herod that they were on their way to visit the one who was born King of the Jews, and this bothered Herod. He was the King of the Jews, or so he thought. He wondered if this newborn child would be a threat to his throne. The wise men didn’t return like he thought they would, and this upset him. Any threat to his position of power must be eliminated. And so very soon, maybe even the next day, Herod would send his soldiers into Bethlehem to massacre all boys under the age of two. “Get up, Joseph,” the angel said. “Get out of here as fast as you possibly can.” Satan was behind this whole thing – this was his first attempt to assassinate the Messiah. And so Joseph got up in the middle of the night, and he and Jesus and Mary made their way to Egypt, where they stayed until the death of Herod. Do you see the two things that happen here? Satan loses, and a prophecy is fulfilled. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.” When the prophet Hosea wrote that, he was referring to the nation of Israel, God’s Son, being called out of the slavery of Egypt into the promise land. But here, the Holy Spirit teaches us in Matthew that this
also applies to Jesus – just as God called the nation of Israel out of Egypt, so also God called his son Jesus out of Egypt.

Now what? Joseph, Jesus, and Mary are living with a group of Jews in Egypt, but not for very long. Herod dies, and an angel of the Lord appears in a dream to Joseph again, and tells him that it’s safe for him to go back to the land of Israel. So Joseph and Jesus and Mary return to Israel, but something is wrong – Herod’s son, Archelaus was in charge now, and he was just as bad as his father. Now what? Once again, Joseph was warned in a dream to leave the area. He moves north, to the town of Nazareth in Galilee, and that’s where he stayed.

Do you see the two things that happen here? Once again, Satan loses - the Messiah is safe, and a prophecy is fulfilled. And so was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: “He will be called a Nazarene.” The prophets of the Old Testament never wrote this prophecy down, but it was understood that the Messiah would be called a Nazarene, a despised person from a small town in the middle of nowhere.

The Devil went to work right after Jesus was born. But his plans didn’t work. Instead, he loses, and prophecies are fulfilled. The Devil is still at work today, and right after Christmas, it seems that he works extra hard, especially on Christians. He wants you to not only put your decorations away, but to put your joy away, and your faith away. “You can stop being religious now,” the Devil says. “You can stop being joyful now. Christmas is over.” It’s time to get back to the regular things of life.” The Devil attacks us with these thoughts, and unfortunately, we sometimes listen. We become melancholy – the birth of Jesus Christ fades into the past. Our desire to worship goes down with the lights. Our joy disappears with the wrapping paper.

Maybe our joy and desire disappear because we have bought into the world’s thinking more than we realize. Perhaps we believe the equation: happiness = material things, more than we think. If lasting happiness could be found in having material things, and in being able to indulge ourselves in whatever we wanted, then most of us in America should be delirious with joy, and happy beyond description, all the time. We should be producing books and poems that describe our state of unparalleled bliss. Our literature and art should rival that of the ancient Greeks and Romans and Renaissance craftsmen.

Instead, we find high rates of suicide, depression, child abuse, and other personal and social problems beyond description, especially during the holidays. We find people, and sometimes ourselves, struggling to stay joyful, because deep down inside we have been let down by the lies of the world - that happiness is found having all we want and being able to get more.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. The Word of God for today teaches us two things – Satan loses, and prophecies are fulfilled – and this goes on even after Christmas is over. Throughout Jesus’ life, Satan lost, and prophecies were fulfilled. Think about what happened about 30 years after these events - really, the opposite of our story for today. Instead of Jesus fleeing from harm, Jesus would walk right into harm’s way. Instead of fleeing from Herod and the Roman government, Jesus would allow himself to be executed by the Roman government. Instead of God the Father protecting Jesus, God the Father would punish Jesus - the opposite of our story for today. But even there, Satan loses, and prophecies are fulfilled. The prophecies that
foretold that the Messiah would someday suffer and die to take away the sins of the world. All of our sins - even those moments when we buy into the lies of the Devil – all of our sins have been washed away by Jesus on the cross. Satan loses, and prophecies are fulfilled. That’s why Jesus was born. And that’s what brings us joy, and keeps our joy alive, even after Christmas is over. These two small victories of Jesus, recorded in our verses for today, are just a taste of the big victory that Jesus would someday win for us at the cross, and at the empty tomb.

And so now what? How do I respond to the grace of God? How do I say thank you? How do I glorify the God who has done all this for me? I can live my life like Joseph lived. What was the pattern of Joseph’s life? He listened, and he obeyed. The angel told him to go to Egypt, so he went to Egypt. Go to Israel, so he went to Israel. Watch out for Herod number two, so he moved to Nazareth. Joseph listened, and obeyed. He wasn’t a self-made man, Mr. Independence, I’ll-do-my-own-thing-kind-of-guy. He listened, and he obeyed. That’s how he responded to the grace of God. That’s how he glorified the God who had sent the Savior into his very own family.

You and I can do the same thing. Today, God reveals himself to us not in dreams, but through his written Word. We can listen, and obey. We can be modern-day Joseph’s – people who do not rely on themselves, but listen closely to the Word of God, and obey. Throughout our lives, Satan will continue to lose, and God will continue to keep all the promises he has made to us – that pattern will never change. May God bless you with a joy and love for him that lasts long after the Christmas season is over. Amen.