

SERMON
The Nativity of Our Lord
December 24, 2009

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

In 1966, the singing duo Simon and Garfunkel came out with a hit song entitled; “Seven O’clock News/Silent Night.” It begins with the beautiful tones of “Silent Night” being played on a piano as Simon and Garfunkel softly sing the well known lyrics.

But very slowly and almost imperceptibly, the sound of a reporter reporting the news comes in. At first it is in the background. But then by the end, you can’t even hear the song. For all you hear is the news reports about the war in Vietnam, riots in the streets of America, drug overdoses, murder and poverty.

You know, sometimes we get lost among the soft glowing candles, the beautiful decorations, and the voices of angels singing. All seems so bright and wonderful during the Christmas season. Perhaps we see tonight as a night of escape – a time to leave the worries of the world behind.

We light candles and sing “All is calm, all is bright,” and we forget. We forget the real world. The place beyond the carols where people are sick and in pain – where people are abused and hungry – where people are suffering and dying – where people are lonely and grieving.

We get so lost in the story that we forget that Jesus came into THE WORLD – into THIS WORLD. A world full of poverty and injustice. A world full of sin and sickness and death. He became a part of a world of darkness and pain. In the world Jesus entered, all was not calm – all was not bright.

But he came bringing light and hope and life. He came because of love – love for you and me, and all creation.

Karl Barth was one of the greatest theologians that ever lived. One day, he was asked to be a guest lecturer at the University of Chicago Divinity School. At the end of his captivating closing lecture, the president of the seminary announced that Dr. Barth was not feeling well and was quite tired.

He knew that Dr. Barth would love to stay and answer questions but was concerned for his health. Then he said, “Therefore, I will ask just one question on behalf of all of us.”

He turned to the renowned theologian and asked, “Of all the theological insights you have ever had, which one do you consider to be the greatest of them all?”

It was the perfect question for a man who had written literally tens of thousands of pages that included some of the most sophisticated theology ever put into print. The students were holding their pencils right up against their writing pads, ready to take down verbatim the profound insight of the greatest theologian of their time.

Karl Barth closed his tired eyes, and thought for a minute. And then he half smiled, opened his eyes, and said to those young seminarians, “The greatest theological insight that I have ever had is this: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

My dear friends in Christ, I submit to you that the story of Jesus coming into the world is the greatest love story ever written. And I wish with all my heart that everybody could read it that way.

However, I am sad to say that I meet people all the time for who it reads more like a used car contract. Somehow, in the midst of all of those beautiful love verses, they hear only clauses and conditions. If you do not follow the rules of the contract, you will be penalized. The Bible becomes a list of do’s and don’ts and how to’s.

So I thank God that Christmas comes around once a year to remind us that God isn't in the business of keeping books and tallying ledgers.

God is not like Santa Claus who makes a list and checks it twice to see who's been naughty or nice. Nor is God concerned about our status or position in life.

Rather, Christmas is the beginning of a classic love story with all the right ingredients: infatuation, pursuit, risk and relationship. But in all relationships of love, there does have to be that first meeting, doesn't there?

When I was a child, I remember thinking; "what if I had been born to another set of parents? I would never have known the love of the parents I know and love now." But then I thought, "that's kind of dumb, for I couldn't have been born to different parents. If I had different parents, I wouldn't be me, I would be someone different."

My wife and I met almost 25 years ago. We met at a gift shop that was owned and operated by the non-profit organization "Save the Children." I had seen an ad in the newspaper that they were looking for volunteers to work in the store. My wife was the Assistant Manager of the store in charge of training volunteers.

But I still occasionally find myself asking those curious "what if" questions. Do you ever find yourself asking those kinds of questions? What if I had not gone to the volunteer training session that night? Our lives might have never crossed paths. We would have never been married. Our two children would not exist as we know them.

My dear friends in Christ, I submit to you, that Christmas is a crossing of paths. Christmas is where we find the God of the universe intersecting with humanity. Christmas is our first and best meeting with the God who has desired a relationship with us from the very beginning.

I truly believe that if it weren't for what we celebrate on Christmas, we might never have known the intensity of the love that God has for us.

Mary and Joseph were a long way from home. Mary was a peasant teenager giving birth in unsanitary substandard housing. There was no fanfare, no royal delegation. They just laid the baby in the feed trough (after all, that's what a manger really is). And they watched his little face; and they listened to his breathing, just like every new parent does. And there was love.

And as Jesus grew and went out into the world, so our understanding of just how much God loves us also grew. We find in Jesus that God's love doesn't demand perfection. After all, look at the sort of folks he chose to hang out with.

We also find that forgiveness isn't given away sparingly, but rather recklessly and indiscriminately. We find that unconditional really means unconditional, and that God's love is for all of creation.

And that, according to the apostle Paul, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This past decade has been a tough one. It has been filled with violence, from the attacks of 9-11, to years of war that have followed. Peace has seemed to be elusive for us as a nation.

But I believe that peace does not begin on the battlefield. But rather peace begins in the hearts of individuals. Peace begins with the knowledge of God's love. Peace begins with the one whom we call "the Prince of Peace." And that is what we celebrate tonight.

Now having said all this, I know that Christmas can also be a time of sorrow. It is a time when we miss those whom we loved that are no longer with us. It can be a time when we remember our failures of the past year. It can bring back painful memories of broken relationships.

But I also know that without the light that has come into the world – without the Christ child, we would have little or no hope to go on.

I would like to close this evening by telling you a story about a Christmas pageant that like life itself, didn't go quite as planned.

The youth group at a certain church was performing a manger scene. Joseph and Mary and all the other characters were in place and ready. They acted their parts very seriously, looking as pious as they possibly could. And then it came time for the shepherds to enter.

Dressed in flannel bathrobes and toweled head gear, the shepherds proceeded to the altar steps where Mary and Joseph looked intensely at the bed of straw. It contained a single naked light bulb that was playing the part of the glowing newborn Jesus.

With his back to the congregation, one of the shepherds said to the person playing Joseph, in a very loud whisper for all the cast to hear; “Well, Joe, when you gonna pass out cigars?”

Suddenly, the solemn spell of that occasion was not simply broken by his remark, it was exploded. Mary and Joseph's cover was completely destroyed as it became impossible to hold back the burst of laughter. The chief angel, standing on a chair behind them, was the worst of all.

She shook so hard in laughter that she fell off her chair and took the curtained back drop and all the rest of the props down with her. She just kept rolling around on the floor holding her stomach because she was laughing so hard. The whole set was in shambles.

But do you know what? The only thing that didn't go to pieces was that light bulb in the manger. It never stopped shining.

My dear friends in Christ, that baby in the manger is the light of our world, even when our world is in shambles. For in that child, the divine and the human cross paths.

The infant Jesus is our living, breathing sign of the unconditional love that God has had for all of us from the very beginning.

Christmas is the living promise that we are never ever alone. No matter where we are in life – no matter in what condition we find ourselves – no matter how far we might stray away, or how unfaithful we are, the light of Christ still shines.

God, the supreme lover, will pursue us in love for eternity! It's a love that never stops shining. For in the midst of the darkness of our world, the joy and hope of Jesus is born. Amen.

May God bless each of you and those you love this Christmas Eve. Amen.