

"Christmas Eve"

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2004

There is a story about a mother who was out Christmas shopping with her two young children. After many hours of fighting the crowds of shoppers and standing in long lines - after looking at row after row of toys and everything else imaginable, - after hours of hearing her two children begging for everything they saw on those shelves, she finally made her way to the elevator on her way out of the mall.

She was feeling what so many feel during the holiday season. She was overwhelmed by the pressure to go to every party and activity of the season. She felt the need to taste every holiday treat that was presented to her. She felt the pressure to get the perfect gift for every person on her shopping list and make sure that the Christmas cards got out on time.

Finally it had gotten to her and when the elevator doors opened she saw that it, like the whole mall, was packed with shoppers who had been experiencing the same pressures. But she was not going to be denied and pushed her way into the elevator with her two kids and her arms full of packages. When the doors closed and she was pressed against the other shoppers, she could not take it any more. Without really thinking that she was saying it out loud, she blurted out, "Whoever started this whole Christmas thing should be found, strung up and shot!"

There was a momentary silence before someone in the back of the elevator responded. "Don't worry lady - we already crucified him!"

Well – Merry Christmas! We have put behind us much of the frenzied preparation that have lead up to this night and now it is to simply complete your own family traditions. Whether you open gifts and have a big deal tonight or tomorrow morning – or even if you are waiting for the family to gather at a latter time – no matter what your family traditions, most of the craziness is past and we finally have these quiet moments when we can just sit together and remember the story that has led us to all of our traditions. And my great hope tonight is that you can truly use these moments as a quiet time of worship and reflection on the nature of the real Christmas gift that we have received from our God. — "FEAR NOT - PEACE BE WITH YOU!" Peace be with you because God is with you. Yes, for many there will still be the trauma of finding out if the gift is just right or not – and there will be the added trauma of returning or boxing up gifts that were not quite right - - - but please, for these moments set all of that aside, forget about the meal preparations and the dishes that need to be done - for these moments just experience the peace and joy of Christmas as we worship together. Soak up the warmth and peacefulness of the Christmas lights and candles. Let the haunting melodies of the music reach deep into your soul and stir the love that God has planted there. Sense the true beauty of the people sitting around you that God created to share either your whole life or just these few moments. And in it all, recognize that there is a God of great love that has created it all and has such compassion for you that He comes to wrap His arms around us in this way. Peace be with you - because God is with you!

I wish I had a lot more time tonight to talk to you about things like our Christmas traditions and why we do the things that we do at Christmas. I would love to talk about how we have come to 'Christmas as we know it' and try to encourage us to refocus on the real message and meaning of Christmas. It is really hard, however, because there are so many different things that people talk about as the "true meaning" of Christmas. And the traditions are too wonderful to be ignored. But I would ask you, in the midst of all that you have done and will do this season – listen again to the Christmas story, as if you were hearing it for the first time.

I received an email this week that was quite touching. I often hate to share e-mail stories with you because they circulate so rapidly that maybe you have already read it. It talked about two Americans answered an invitation from the Russian Department of Education to teach in Russia in 1994. They were invited to teach at many places including a large orphanage. There were about 100 boys and girls who had been abandoned, abused, and left in the care of a government- run program were in the orphanage. As Christmas approached, the two Americans gathered the orphans and told them the whole story of the birth of Jesus. Many had never heard the story before. They told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room in the inn, the couple went to a stable, where the Baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger. The children and staff sat in amazement as they listened.

Imagine hearing it for the first time. Imagine really wondering about the miraculous birth and the message of the angels. Imagine questioning if it were all true and what it might mean – what it might mean to have such a God of love that would come as a baby born in a manger.

The children were given materials to build a simple manger and a tiny baby Jesus to remind them of the story. The American teachers told of how well it went - at least until they stopped to look at one child's manger - a child named Misha. Looking at the little boy's project, they were surprised to see not one, but two babies in the manger. Through a translator they asked the boy why there were two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at this completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously. For having heard the Christmas story only once, he related it remarkably well—at least until he came to the part where Mary put the Baby Jesus in the manger. Then Misha started to ad-lib, making up his own ending to the story. He said, "And when Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with Him. But I told Him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give Him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept Him warm, that would be a good gift. So I asked Jesus, "If I keep You warm, will that be a good gift?" And Jesus told me, "If you keep Me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me." "So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and He told me I could stay with Him---for always."

As you open your gifts and sit up to your Christmas feasts - as you enjoy the warmth of family gathering and carol singing, remember that a child is born and wants to snuggle up to you. A child comes and just wants to keep you warm and safe.

AMEN