

With Love

Christmas Eve, 2005

Bible passage: **Luke 2:1-20** (*New Living Translation*)

Sermon nugget: Christmas is about God's gift of love coming into our hearts once again.

Message part 1

When I was a little girl, I remember riding up to a little town in Kentucky to view a living Nativity scene. I'm not sure I understood exactly what it was all about, but it was the first time I'd ever seen one that had real, living human beings instead of statues, and that seemed to bring it alive to me in a special way.

Now I don't recall having thoughts like those of another little girl who was doing the same thing with her family—riding in the car and viewing the various Christmas displays. They went by a church that had a beautifully-lit Nativity scene, and even got out of the car to look at it more closely.

The child's grandmother, said, "Isn't it beautiful?" and the little girl answered, "Yes, Grandma, it's really nice." Then she continued, "But isn't baby Jesus ever going to grow up? He's the same size he was last year!" And thus the questions began...What was this all about anyway? And why do we keep celebrating the same thing every year?

Some of us may have similar thoughts tonight, although we may just squelch them in an attempt to enjoy the normal celebrations and traditions. Why do we tell this story year after year? Why is it such a key part of our faith story?

It's clearly important in our society. Just think--Last year about this time, two of the major weekly publications, *Time* and *Newsweek*, both ran cover stories about the birth of Jesus. The two articles were quite similar in tone, with each one trying to determine what was or was not historically accurate and theologically true.

Both basically agreed that the stories about Jesus' birth, found only in Matthew's and Luke's gospels were, as *Newsweek* writer Jon Meacham put it, "some of the original Christian attempts to ensure the survival and success of a religion that began as little more than one sect within first-century Judaism, a milieu of great religious ferment."

It certainly is a beautiful story that's familiar to many of us, and we will hear it in several forms tonight. The version of the story that we have is the one written by Luke as many as 60-70 years after Jesus was born, and we can't swear to the accuracy of all the details, but the truth of the story rings loud

and clear. In some mysterious way, it is the story of the birth of one who was believed to have embodied the very essence of God in the flesh. Jesus is called “Immanuel,” which means “God with us,” and that, in a way that’s beyond our ability to comprehend, is what we are gathering to celebrate in word and song.

Song: *“Immanuel, God With Us”*

Message part 2:

Actually, what we honor is the life of one who has changed the course of history; who has served to inspire many of us to live our lives in a more loving way. In fact, I’ve always liked the writing that’s called “One Solitary Life.” It was written by Dr. James Allen Francis in 1926. You have probably heard it, and it goes in part like this:

“Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was 30, and then for three years, he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put his foot inside a big city. He never traveled 200 miles from the place where he was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself.”

The reading concludes with these words: “I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever were built, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of humanity upon this earth as powerfully as has this one solitary life.”

That’s the one whose birth we celebrate tonight—the one who, in a way that we can’t completely understand, has changed the course of history and the course of our own lives. Somehow the fact that he lived is what mattered, and that’s why we’re here—to remember the meaning of his life.

Song: *“Heaven’s Child”*

Story: *“Another Boy”*

Song: *“This Baby”*

Message part 3

No matter what we think of the story, it marks a turning point in the story of humanity. The way I understand it is that the story of that first Christmas as told in the Bible is the story of God caring enough to be relationship with us, to dwell among us.

I've always thought of Christmas as an important part of God's marketing campaign. After all, we have never quite been able to get it right; as human beings we just keep messing things up. We have moments when we come close to God, and then we back up, or turn around. But the birth of Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, is God's way of trying to break through to us once again, of trying to get our attention, of communicating a love that supersedes anything we ever imagined possible.

In some ways, I see Christmas and God like a story a clergy friend told. He said that he was at a dinner party during the Christmas season. The house was beautifully decorated, and there was an electric train set up around the base of the Christmas tree. One of the children was making the train go too fast, and it derailed from the tracks. She was bent over trying to put it back on the track, when the host noticed what she was doing and went over to help. He said to her, "You can't do that from above; you have to get down beside it." Then he lay down on the floor beside the train where he could see to put it back on its track.

Maybe that's what God did at Christmas. Maybe the Christmas story is God's attempt to lie down beside us, to see and experience life as we see it, to help us get our lives back on track. Christmas is God reaching out to us across the span of time and space yet again, to be born in our hearts and in our homes once more this night.

Christmas is part of God's ongoing promise to be with us always, to be within us, among us. God's love can happen in our lives on this night in December or on some balmy evening in July. It can be real for us at any moment in life.

I wonder if it's like something that Bert Holloway of Cambridge, England, understands. Every year for 43 years, at one minute after midnight on Christmas Eve, Bert has handed his wife, Ethel, a love letter. The gift is a tradition they started when they were first married, and every year, he reaffirms his love for her, in letters she keeps and treasures.

I think that's what Christmas is meant to be for us—God's love letter. It's like God is sending you and me and letter, and is signing it, "With Love, God." This letter is God's reminder and affirmation of unconditional love. Tonight we have the opportunity to open that letter again, and we can treasure all that it holds in our hearts.

Story: *"Christmas Day in the Morning"*

Message part 4:

The love of God coming into our lives in the form of Jesus is like a light breaking into the darkness. We talked here at The Garden just last Sunday about how much difference a ray of light can make in a world that sometimes seems so dark and foreboding. The light which we are about to share through the lighting of candles is a symbol of the light of God's love. The light of this one little candle will be passed and the light will break through the darkness of this room. And if we carry the light of God's love in our hearts, it will go far beyond this place; it can brighten this city; it can brighten this world...

LIGHTING OF CANDLES (Song: "*Jesus Born This Day*" during lighting)

VIDEO: "*Silent Night*"

CLOSING:

Carry the light of the love of God in Christ Jesus into the world. And hear God saying to us, "This day is a gift for you, with love."

Have a Merry Christmas and go in peace. Amen.