

Pastor Geoffrey R. Boyle
Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord
24 December 2013
Grace-Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita
Luke 2:1-20

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

There's something magical about Christmas.
It's almost the perfect formula concocted every year—always richer than the last.
Perhaps it's the contrast of the cold outside and the warm inside—
 leaving that condensed steam on the windows.
Or maybe it's the lights, and the smell of the trees, and hearing your favorite carols.
Jingling bells send chills up every child.
And the sweets and the drinks and the presents and the family and the joy.
Somehow everyone can imagine the perfect Christmas.

We hear about this “magic of Christmas” even from those who aren't Christians.
Everyone, this time of year, gets into the spirit.
In a way, it's what brings our culture together: nostalgia, consumption, and idealism.

The only problem—or, maybe the biggest problem—is that it's not real.

That Christmas you've got in your mind isn't real.
Chestnuts don't crackle in an open fire.
The only jingling that really takes place is the way the ice cubes hit when the glass is refilled.
The warmth is the alcohol and the wool sweater.
The tree is already rotting, the mold affects your allergies, and your favorite ornament just broke.

That's our reality—and we don't like it.
We try to escape this reality for an ideal, something make believe.
And in doing so, we turn Christmas into a myth.

To many, the Christmas story is no different than the story of Santa Claus.
And Jesus is a lot less fun than the merry ol' soul of St. Nick.

Do you ever wonder why there are so few people in churches today?
It's because the story of Jesus has been disconnected from reality.
Christmas is no longer the story of God coming to earth in order to save us from our sins—
 but it's a feeling, a magical time, a spirit that we need to catch.

But what about those who aren't *in the spirit*?
What about those whose spouse died this year and it'll be the first Christmas without her?
What about those who've just recently lost their jobs, or who can't afford the presents?
What about those who don't feel the joy or the happiness—not just now, but hardly ever?
Is Christmas not for them?

It's true, Christmas is a story.
But it's not a fake story.
It's not some ideal; it's not magical.
There's no spirit of Christmas apart from the Holy Spirit who calls sinners to Christ.

Christmas is a story rooted in real time and real place.
 Joseph and Mary really did live at the time of Herod and Quirinius;
 and you can still visit Bethlehem today.
 But most importantly: Jesus is a real person.

And that's the miracle of Christmas: that all of this is real.
 That God came to earth as one of us—*for us*.
 In this Jesus we truly have *Emmanuel*: God with us.

But He's not with us so that we might have a nice, nostalgic feeling of a magical Christmas.
 He's with us in order to save us—
 and in many cases, to save us from ourselves!

God became man to enter your suffering, your pain, your less-than-ideal reality.
 He became man in order to unite Himself to you.

And everything in our lives that separates us from Him goes against Christmas.
 It goes against this miraculous work of His.

So what is it that separates you from Christ?
 What pulls you away from Him and from the salvation He comes to bring?
 What turns you away from His word?

Is it the seeming hypocrisy of other Christians?
 Is it that the Church isn't quite the way you like it?
 Or are you just bored? Uninterested? Do you have different priorities?

In all of this, you must know that to be separated from the Church is to be separated from Christ.
 You can't have Jesus and not the Church.
 It's like saying, I'll take the head, but leave the body.
 And the Church isn't here just once or twice a year—
 it's the reality of what our life is like in Christ.

God became man in order that you might be united to Him.
 And that union lives by the Word.
 The Church is, as Luther once called it, the *mouth-house*—
 the place where the Word reigns.

Here you'll find the preaching of Christ Crucified for the sins of the world.
 Here that word attaches itself to water and gives life to old, dry bones—even those of an infant.
 Here the word becomes flesh and is given into our mouths for the forgiveness of all our sins.
 The Church is the body of Christ.
 Wherever Jesus is, there is the Church.
 And here He is for you.

Tonight you have encountered the Church.
 You've come to Bethlehem.
 The same Jesus who came to Bethlehem as the babe in swaddling cloths,
 is the Jesus who comes to us today, wrapped in His Word and the Blessed Sacrament.

Here there is a communion with Him more intimate than even that of Mary and Joseph and the shepherds who gathered that holy night long ago.

There God became man in order to take on the sins of the world.
 Here man becomes divine by that word of forgiveness,
 which was won on the cross, and is now delivered to you in bread and wine.

The reality of this communion is not seen with the eyes, but it is believed by the heart.
 It is a reality that is ours by faith.
 It's a promise, a guarantee that is sealed in Baptism and offered again and again at the altar.
 And this reality is yours.

Christmas isn't about the feelings of nostalgia, or manufacturing the perfect Christmas,
 but the hope of a life in Communion with God.

Whatever separates you from this communion, put it away.
 And if you find yourself too weak even for that,
 then you must know that Christ has already put it away for you.

He's already taken away what separates you from Him.
 Your sin is forgiven in Christ.
 He removed the veil that separated heaven from earth.
 He broke the chasm, and covered the gap;
 He brought the two together.

And now heaven and earth are in communion.

That's Christmas.
 That's the Church.
 And that's why we're here.

Christ the Savior is born—and He's present for you here.
 Merry Christmas!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit