

**Luke 2:12-15**

This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.'

**Matthew 2:7-12**

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

**“Thank God!”**

**December 25, 2011**

**Rev. Charles Schuster**

Two things that I want to say before I speak, you know what I mean, first of all, we don't have a nursery. There are children in the congregation and they're going to make some noise. That's their job. My job is to try to speak loud enough that, if you want to hear me, you can, and we're not going to worry about the children and the noise they make, because it's good they're here. We're glad they're here. And if you're a parent with a child and somebody glares at you, I've said this before, turn around and look at them and say "Get a life."

Now, looking over the sermon, I write these things out, and so I know how long they are. And this is the longest one I've ever written, and that's probably not good news. I was thinking, is that really fair? I mean, here are these people who get up on Christmas day and here they come, they made the effort to get here, and I give them this thing that goes on and on. Is that really fair? And then I thought, you know, somebody who gets up and comes to church on Christmas Day probably needs it. So you're gonna get it.

Truth is something that comes to us in different ways. Some of it is truth that we can master and some of it is truth to which we must surrender. What I'm about to say is the kind of truth that represents the latter. You can't master this. Maybe it defies logic, or maybe it redefines logic. The angel of the Lord, multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and singing "Glory to God" and "Peace on Earth and good will to all" and then it says, "with whom God is well pleased." "With whom God is well pleased," and that's been bothering me all week. How do we get into that group where God is well pleased? I

mean, what do you do to get well pleased by God? That means maybe some of us aren't. And so this morning, on this Christmas morning, I want to think about what it is to give God glory and to please God somehow. Let's think about how we can thank God for Christmas. Let's think about what it means to hear the angel voices praising and singing, and what is pleasing God and how do you do it? And I think of three things that at least make sense to me, and I think it, for example, pleases God when we discover the power of love that's more powerful than the love of power. I think that's one thing that pleases God. The power of love is more powerful than the love of power.

Years ago, it was a day in the week before Christmas, early morning I had in Denver and it was snowing, it was kind of a slushy snow, it was more water than flake, and I wasn't seeing too well because the windshield wipers didn't work and I was on I-25 and I noticed over on the side of the road there was a police car. I-25, it's called the mousetrap, and it was happening. I and the others were being pulled over, and a police car on the side of the road, and I looked again and there was another one, and then there was another one, and there was another one, and there were lots of them, more than I had seen since the students entered the President's mansion in 1967 at the University, that's when I saw more police than I saw then. Lots of police, motorcycle police, patrol car police, unmarked car police, helicopters above, a couple Air Force jets, National Guard. I thought maybe a bomb threat. You know, twenty years ago or so, some of you may remember, there was a truckload of torpedoes that tipped over on the mousetrap, you remember that? I thought maybe it was one of those kinds of things. But it wasn't. Or maybe a drug bust, or maybe a dragnet to catch some kind of serial killer. As the snow was falling, it was two days before Christmas.

Well, there was no arrest. The police were not searching for a criminal, and I was pulled off to the side of the road because they were clearing a path for the President of the United States, and the presidents of France and Germany and Russia and England. Some kind of summit. And it was power, there in the mousetrap, and my car was the first in line, and those limousines zipped by, followed by the grim-faced Secret Service, and I waved to each of them. Some of them actually waved back to me. That's power, you know? That's real power. The love of power. I was impressed. And then I began to look around, and that's when I saw it. A young man stood at the side of the road. He had come to see the world leaders. There was this young woman at his side, and he carried a six-year-old son on his shoulder, I'm guessing he was six, and the man carried a cane. It was a white cane, for the young man was blind. He had come to see the world leaders. He who could not see had brought his child to see the powerful of the world. And as I pulled my car away from the scene, a car jostled into place ahead of me with a bumper sticker message. I hesitate to say it, because you'll think I made it up. Imagination of a preacher on a cold day before Christmas several years ago, it was, and maybe I've embellished the story or perhaps it's grown in my memory. Perhaps the defectiveness of memory, or exaggeration of memory, because I'm a preacher, but at the risk of losing whatever credibility I may have, I'll tell you what it said. Because it did. That car had a bumper and a sticker that said, "God is watching." God is watching. And I thought of the power of the world's leaders and the man with the sightless eyes who brought his son, led by his wife, and there was something great and wonderful on the curb by the highway where the

Presidents and the world leaders traveled. Through the eyes of a blind man, through the love of a father for his son, and the love of a wife for a husband, God is watching. And I thought, you know, it all comes to us and we see it. We see it in our city streets, in our office places, in our schools, under bridges with homeless people. We see it in our churches and in our Sunday School classes. We see the power of love. The gift of a poor widow, the mite that was more mighty than the gift of the rich, or the little town of Bethlehem and the power of the Roman empire. Compare those to the power of love. The husband who believed in his wife, and the wife who believed in her God and the child who was born, in the back alley barn, begins to kind of make sense. That God is well pleased. Every time we see it, every time we understand that the power of love is more significant than the love of power. Sometimes, don't you hear the angel voices?

Secondly, I think God is well pleased when Christmas comes to us as we have brought Christmas to someone else, and I hope we did. It's a true story, but it's a truth story. It's about a woman named Betty. That's all you need to know about her. I knew her. It's about her parents. They lived on a sprawling farm in Iowa. They were described as salt-of-the-earth people, backbone of the community. They raised their children with high expectations and a positive sense of self. They expected their children to do their chores, morning and evening, and to get to school on time and to make good grades and be decent people. And the old man was having health problems and it was decided that he go to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota for tests. It was December, and they got a hotel near the clinic. It was decided that his wife would go with him, but just for a few days, because she had community and church obligations, and then she'd come back home. In other words, they were going to be apart on Christmas. The day before Christmas, one of the children, that's Betty, called her mother, and her mother seemed sad, morose even. "This is the first time your father and I have ever spent the Christmas holiday apart. It's just not Christmas without him." And Betty called her father. He too sounded despondent. What could Betty do? She lived in California then. Well, Betty decided her parents would be with each other on Christmas Eve, and she called all her brothers and sisters and worked out a way to get her father back home. She called her father and told him about the plan, but he objected to it. He said "It's too dangerous, it's a mistake, it's too much trouble. Betty persisted. "No, Dad, we can do this. It'll work." And so he agreed.

Her brother picked him up and they started for Iowa, and the children across the country kept track of their progress by cell phone, and it was just past nine o'clock Christmas Eve when Dad called to say he couldn't possibly go home without a gift. There was a certain kind of perfume he always gave her, and this would be the first time in 50 years that he didn't have a present. And so the children began calling all the area stores and shopping centers, and they found one open. It had the perfume. They stopped on the way and they bought it, and they headed on toward home. Then at 11:50, Christmas Eve, they drove into the farm. "Dad was acting like a schoolboy, as he stepped around the corner, just waiting there for the time." The brother knocked on the door, and the mother was surprised, surprised to see him. He said to her, "Mom, I just wanted you to know I visited Dad today and he said to bring you his laundry." And he carried the suitcases in. All she said, softly and sad, was, "I miss him so much. Might as well get on that now, might as

well do it." So she picked up the bags of clothes and Dad came out of his hiding place. He said, "Well, you don't really have time to do that tonight." Betty's brother called and related all this to the other siblings. Betty talked to her mom. "Merry Christmas," Betty said. "Oh, you kids." Her mom choked back the tears. Betty thought to herself, "I was two thousand miles away from them. It's the most special Christmas I've ever spent with my parents. It was like I was there. It was like we were all together."

Bob Reed told this story, and Dell Pittman gave it to me yesterday. In a church in Brooklyn, December 19, a storm hit the town. The old church roof leaked. A large area of plaster fell from the front wall behind the pulpit. The pastor was new, a rookie pastor. They give churches to people like that. It helps them decide if they really want to be preachers. We've all had them. "What do I do? Clean up the mess?" He thought about, "Well, let's postpone the Christmas Eve service. There's no way they can come into this situation." He started for home. On the way home, there was this flea market for charity purposes, and so he went, for some reason, and he saw this beautiful handmade ivory-colored crocheted tablecloth, exquisite work, fine colors. There was a cross embroidered in the center of it, just the right size. He thought, maybe that would cover the hole behind the pulpit. So he bought it, and he headed back to the church. Then it started to snow, and an old woman was trying to catch a bus. She missed the bus, she tried to run after it, and the pastor saw her, and invited her to come into the warm church to wait for the next bus to come. She sat there in the pew while the pastor got to work, started cleaning things, up, got the ladder out, started nailing the tablecloth over the hole, just a perfect fit. He could see it as a wall tapestry, it was beautiful.

Stunned, the old woman got up from the pew and walked toward him. "Where did you get that?" See if the initial E.B.G., see if it's there on the right side of it. I made that tablecloth 35 years ago in Austria." Before the war, she and her husband were well-to-do, lived in Austria. The Nazis came. She was forced to leave, her husband was to stay and come the next week. He was captured and sent to prison. She never saw her home again. She never saw him again. "Well, you take it, Ma'am." "No, you keep it," she said. So he volunteered to drive her home. That was the least he could do, so he did. She lived across town. She was in Brooklyn that day because of a housecleaning job. What a gift. Christmas eve came. The church was almost full. The music was great. The spirits were just the best, upbeat. At the end of the service, something happened. Would you believe it? An old man, a visitor to the church, sat in the pew after everyone left. After the candles were lit, extinguished, Silent Night, he sat there, staring. Finally, he walked up to the pastor. "Where did you get that tablecloth" My wife made an identical one. We lived in Austria. The Nazis came, forced my wife to flee for her life. I was supposed to follow her. I was arrested, I was put in prison. I never saw her or my home again." The pastor said to him, "Would you get in my car and go with me?" That's all he said. He took him to the house where he had taken the woman before. He helped the old man climb the three flights of steps to the woman's apartment and he knocked on the door. That preacher has delivered many impressive Christmas Eve sermons over the course of his ministry, but none could match the greatest Christmas reunion that brought together a man and a woman, tied beyond the years by a table cloth on the wall with a cross in the middle of it.

I remember a book that Clyde Reed wrote, *You Can Choose Christmas*. In that book, he points out that you really do have a choice about Christmas. You can choose to be miserable, or you can choose to be happy, but the best thing is to get away from your expectations, because sometimes those don't happen, and work as hard as you can to make Christmas for someone else. Make Christmas happen, and you know, we see it. As we learn to share it, we share it with our friends, by the calls we make to them, and you'll make some of those calls. The cards you send, we share it with the food, the festivity of Christmas, we shared it last night with all the candles and the sanctuary. 2,500 people here last night. A time when this sanctuary was dark was turned from darkness to a glow that's just amazing, as we remembered the living Christ, the child of Bethlehem, the savior, the prophet, the Messiah and the friend. Christmas happened for the Magi when they gave the Christ child their gifts and Matthew tells us they went back another way. Matthew could also have said they went back different people, because they did. Christmas happens when we make it happen, and God is well pleased, because we make it happen for someone else.

Finally, when we know the power of love, when we make Christmas happen for someone, then our best gift on Christmas comes in swaddling clothes. Truth is, for us, Jesus is the reason, and there will be something of the Christ child in the manger for us in some form or another. Christmas is about the Christ child. Derek Johnson, I've quoted his book in the bulletin, and the book is *The Wonder of Christmas*. It happened in California/ There's some dispute whether it was Los Angeles or San Francisco. It was Christmas morning. Father Hopkins unlocked the church door in preparation for mass. Everything seemed to be in order. At first, that's how it seemed. You know, sometimes when you walk into a room or you're looking around, you think something just not right, that's what he thought. Something's not quite right, but he couldn't put his finger on it. But then after the first service, Father Hopkins checked and he noticed the Christ Child was missing from the nativity scene. No statue of the Christ child. Everything else in that manger scene was intact. Why would somebody want to do this? A hand-painted plaster of Paris likeness of the Christ child. The manger set wasn't valuable by itself, even complete, and that one statue of a child was worth very little, but without the son of God, it was worth nothing at all. It was conspicuous by the fact that it wasn't there. Why? Why would somebody do it? Some anti-religionist, some atheist, some angry Scrooge type trying to ruin Christmas for the people of the congregation? A search was undertaken, and it was fact. Someone had stolen Christ right out of Christmas until early evening, nine o'clock. Christmas day a little boy came to the front door of the church pulling a new wagon, and in the wagon was the missing statue. "Juan, where did you find Jesus?" Father Hopkins asked. "Oh, I didn't find him. I took him." was the answer. When Father Hopkins asked him why, he said, "Well, I prayed to Jesus for a brand new wagon and I promised if I got one I'd give him the first ride."

That little boy may have had the truest spirit of Christmas in what he intended. Maybe not in how he did it, but it's true. We've got to find a way to adore the Christ child, but he can't stay in the manger. A Christ who never leaves Bethlehem is not the Christ we worship. We've got to take him into the world, you know? We see it. When we take the

Christ child out of the church into the world, when we take the Christ to each other and become that, when we mourn the death of a loved one and still feel blessed, like the Beatitude says, or when we suffer for what is right and feel like we have inherited God's kingdom, or when we become pure in heart and will only one thing, and that is the good will of others. When we face the impenetrable darkness with the confidence that comes because we've seen the indescribable light, and the angels pondered that one boy, didn't exactly steal the statue, and he did return it, and it was glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will to all. And God was pleased, I think.

Richard Lisher remembered how, back in the days when black church bombings were happening in the South, how Martin Luther King and his associates, when there was a bombing, how they would go to the place where it happened and they would conduct a preaching and prayer service, often in the smoldering building that had been bombed, and Lisher interviewed some of the people who had attended those services, and to each one he asked, "What did he say?" And each one responded, in effect, "I don't remember what he said, but I will never forget where he said it." The word became flesh. The child born in Bethlehem, his parents took him to Egypt, then to Nazareth, then to the world, and people today remember what he said and who he was and where he said it. It's called the Gospel, it's called God's word. It was spoken, and is spoken every time we live the power of love, every time we make Christmas happen for somebody else, and every time we take Christ out of the manger into the world, our faith becomes real and our lives become transparent to that which lives in us as we surrender to the presence of Christ, and God is well pleased. Let us pray.

O God, this Christmas, as we leave this place of worship, may we take the Christ child out of the manger and give him a ride in our wagon. Amen.