

CHRISTMAS EVE

December 24, 2014 (cp 06, 05)

Luke 2:1-20

"A Cradle in my Heart"

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

A woman was Christmas shopping recently at a Mall with her two kids. After many hours of looking at row after row of toys and other goodies; and after hours of hearing the kids ask for everything they saw on those many shelves, she finally made it to the elevator with them.

When the elevator doors opened, she pushed her way into the crowded car and dragged her two kids and all her shopping bags in with her. When the doors closed she couldn't take it anymore – she needed to vent, so she said, *"Whoever started this whole Christmas thing should be found, strung up and shot."*

From the back of the car, everyone heard the **quiet calm voice** respond, *"Don't worry, **we already crucified him.**"*

For the rest of the ride, the elevator was so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

We all suffer from **Christmas overload** in December. And I'm sure many of you have arrived here [tonight] in a frazzled state, but hopefully you're not as bad off as this woman.

You come here to worship – weary, yet hopeful. Hoping for a little **Christmas magic to bring home with you.**

There's so much **sentimentality** and stress that's built up around Christmas, that the words of the cliché are right: it's easy to *"forget the reason for the season."*

All of this makes it a special challenge to preach on this night. I mean, how can a sermon about the birth of Jesus have the impact of a one-hour Hallmark TV special, or that yard out on County 27 with about a zillion Christmas lights burning brightly?

How can the mere birth of a baby compete with the **knock-your-socks-off technology** of the X-box One, or a huge plasma TV set?

Except..., except..., if I were somehow able to **express in words** what the **birth of Jesus really means**; if I were able to **rip away all of our sugary, sentimental images of the manger scene**, you just might realize that **the birth of Jesus** is a **bigger deal than anything you can imagine.**

Because, if we dig deep, past the "awwwww" reaction a newborn baby always brings, then we're **face to face** with one of the most **profound, dare I say, shocking mysteries of the Christian faith.**

At Bethlehem, GOD BECAME HUMAN!

Just try to wrap your head around that!

It's called the incarnation, and if we can grasp what that really means, it's enough to leave us speechless; ***'lost in wonder, love and praise,'*** in the words of a hymn.

How can it be, that the master of the universe, He who set the stars in the heavens, would humble himself and be born as a **helpless, little baby boy?**

Let me share some thoughts with you about just how shocking the incarnation really is. Then maybe you'll sense some of the wonder of this holy night.

Tonight, we **aren't just celebrating a birthday**; we're celebrating the **INVASION OF THE ALMIGHTY AND ETERNAL GOD INTO A HOSTILE AND BROKEN COSMOS.**

You see, the **manger** has **more in common** with the **beaches of Normandy** than **Norman Rockwell's** cheery holiday paintings.

The **purpose of this invasion** is nothing less than the **HEALING AND LIBERATION** of all creation.

God needed to come down because we are oppressed and enslaved to sin; we are broken creatures, and God just couldn't leave us that way.

Because of his great love for us, God became human. But why choose to be born to such a poor, simple nobody as Mary?

Here's how Martin Luther describes it:

In the village of Nazareth, Mary appeared as a mere servant, tending the cattle and the house.... She was probably between 13 and 15 years old. And yet this was the one whom God chose. He might have gone to Jerusalem and picked out the high-priest's daughter, who was rich, wore gold-embroidered clothing, and had a houseful of maids. But God preferred a lowly peasant girl from a mean town.

Why did God choose to come as a weak and poor baby instead of a powerful ruler?

The Bible gives us a hint, when it says that **God's power is made perfect in weakness.** You see, **where we are weak, there God's power is made known.**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

"The child in the manger is none other than God himself. He lies there, poor like us, wretched and helpless like us.... And yet he is God; he is strength.

Where is the divinity, where is the strength of this child? It's in the divine love, in which he became just like us. His poverty in the manger is his strength. And by the strength of his divine love he overcomes the chasm between God and humanity."

The sentimental way we view Christmas causes us to ignore the **harsh realities** of that **birth in a barn.**

And so we DON'T REALLY UNDERSTAND the **depths of God's great gift to us** on that night.

God became a man. Think of the process. Nine months before, while no one was aware, divinity arrived on earth.

Max Lucado says,

It all happened in a moment. Heaven placed her most precious one in a human womb.

The omnipotent made himself breakable. He who was larger than the universe became an embryo. He who sustains the whole world chose to be dependent upon the nourishment of a young girl.

Lucado concludes: *God came, not as a flash of light or as an unapproachable conqueror, but as one whose first cries were heard by a peasant girl and a sleepy carpenter. The hands that first held him were un-manicured, calloused, and dirty.*

This is **the reality of Christmas**. This is **what the incarnation is all about**.

God chose to come to earth and be born as a peasant baby, wrapped in rough cloth and **placed in a food bin** surrounded by **lots of smelly animals**.

We've memorized all the details of the scene, including the image of the perfect baby: a pink-cheeked, faintly glowing baby, perhaps with a halo, wrapped in clean flannel with a silk banner overhead that reads, "*Joy to the world and Peace on earth.*"

It's the baby at the center of your favorite Christmas card. But it barely scratches the surface of the **stupendous event** that took place that night.

So this Christmas eve, do yourself a favor. Reach into that picture and take this baby into your arms.

It's a bundle about as heavy as a sack of flour. His head is a little bruised from his rough entrance into the world. Examine his tiny fingernails, count his toes, **scrape the fleck of cow manure off his cheek**, and say to yourself: "*THIS IS GOD IN MY ARMS.*"

Smell Mary's milk on his breath as he sleeps in your arms, and feel the warmth through his swaddling clothes and repeat it: "*I AM HOLDING GOD IN MY ARMS. This is what God has decided to look like, all because of his love for me.*"

Shocking, isn't it? To behold the **king of the universe** UNABLE TO TURN OVER ON HIS BACK WITHOUT ASSISTANCE, **utterly dependent upon the kindness of his creatures?**

We know the Christmas story by heart, and **that's the problem**. We've **tamed and sanitized it** until it's lost its power.

But **the incarnation is not a Hallmark moment**. At Christmas, **GOD HIMSELF HAS TORN OPEN THE HEAVENS AND COME DOWN**.

It is **my fervent prayer for each of us** this evening, that the Spirit will cut through all our sentimental, sanitized thoughts about Christmas, so we can **begin to comprehend this most marvelous gift**, and **GRASP THE TRUTH OF THE CHRISTMAS MIRACLE**.

If that happens, then, like the writer of the hymn, we'll find ourselves "*lost in wonder, love, and praise.*" And our lives will be changed forever.

Many of you've spent a lot of effort this year **trying to find the perfect gift** for a loved one. Of course, that search is doomed to failure.

But **leave it to God** to GIVE EACH OF US THE PERFECT CHRISTMAS GIFT.

Our creator **thought long and hard** about **just what we needed**. And he gave considerable thought as to **what kind of wrapping to put this gift in**.

Two thousand years ago, God decided that **in order to repair the relationship broken by our sin**, he would give us THE GIFT OF HIMSELF. And that gift would come **wrapped in bands of cloth, as a tiny, helpless baby**. This is **the gift of this holy night**. GOD GIVES US HIMSELF.

God becomes **helpless, poor, and vulnerable** so that he can **rescue us** from **our poor, helpless, vulnerable condition**.

God gave himself; God gave his only son to the world on that first Christmas.

That's how much God loves us.

THAT'S HOW MUCH HE LOVES YOU. God gave that amazing gift once and for all; but he gives the gift again and again.

And tonight, God comes bringing that precious gift to you! Tonight, **God comes down the stairway of the stars with a baby in his arms**.

He enters our sanctuary. He **comes up to you and whispers**: *"Shhhh. Hush. Take my child into your arms and into your heart. Hold him. Look at him. A baby. Your baby. Let the child's spirit fill your heart with grace and peace."*

What an incredible Christmas gift!

It's ENOUGH TO TAKE OUR BREATH AWAY.

It's **enough to leave us lost**; LOST IN WONDER, LOVE, AND PRAISE.

When we leave here tonight, may we know that we take the baby Jesus with us.

And MAY HIS LIGHT SHINE WITHIN US AND THROUGH US INTO THE DARKNESS OF OUR WORLD. Amen.