

CHRISTMAS II  
Lutheran Church of the Master  
Troy, Michigan  
January 5, 1975

"NEVER THE SAME AGAIN"

"And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." (JOHN 1:14)

Before Angie's birth, many of you told Sue and me that things would NEVER BE THE SAME after the baby was born.

After Angie's birth, several of you have continued to tell us that LIFE WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN.

And after five months to the day with Angela, Susan and I bear witness with you that life for the Martyns WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN.

I am reminded of yesterday - I had received some relatively unhappy news in the morning -- that was compounded by the fact that an important pastoral resource of mine somehow had found its way to the garbage can. There I sat at the kitchen table angrily chomping at my noon sandwich. And then with childish innocence, Angie sends a beaming smile my way. . . . smiling lovingly as both nostrils ooze forth her runny nose.

Yes - that's love in the flesh -- that's God smiling through that little babe saying - "Come on, Dad -- life can't be that dark & dismal." Yes, thank God for the gift of life in the flesh - thank God for making things NEVER THE SAME AGAIN.

My dear Christian friends, if we can feel this way over the birth of our children - what feelings do we associate with the birth of the Son of God. If we experience new meaning and appreciation for life through the presence of our children - what meaning and appreciation

do we associate with God's presence in the flesh. If LIFE IS NEVER THE SAME AGAIN after the birth of our children -- CAN LIFE EVER BE THE SAME AGAIN after God faces us in the flesh as a child!?

Imagine those shepherds! The wisemen! Mary and Joseph! Seeing - touching - yes, and even changing the diapers of God in the flesh! Is there any wonder why these people were ecstatic!?! Here was God - making himself fully present in the flesh! How could life ever BE THE SAME AGAIN!?

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." I hope we get the real gist of this message - we sometimes like to limit God to our knowledge about him in the Bible. We often call that the Word of God. But here we see so clearly - that God's grace and truth are not merely thoughts, sayings, and ideas about God -- THEY ARE THE ACTIONS OF GOD IN THE FLESH.

The reason things can never be the same again IS NOT BECAUSE we know about a Christ child. There is no REAL significance in knowing about the birth. KNOWLEDGE alone does not change anything. IT IS BECAUSE OF WHAT CHRIST DID IN THE FLESH that his birth has such significance. HIS BIRTH GAINS significance as we look into his life.

IT WAS THROUGH Christ's life in the flesh that people were offered hope at the brink of despair -- that they received forgiveness when they deserved damnation,- that they were given compassion instead of rejection.

It is for this reason that John says - "In him was life - and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

We are a people who are no strangers to darkness. For if darkness is meant to convey a

a sense of uncertainty - of being lost - of being afraid; if darkness suggests conflict - conflict between nations, races, between friends and even family -- if these represent darkness, then we live in a world that knows much about darkness.

Darkness is what our media is too often about. Darkness has been exposed in political life. Darkness seems to be daily capturing man's curiosity in literature, film, and even recreation.

John contrasts this darkness to God's actions in Jesus -- John says his actions show us the way out of darkness. John claims that God's actions in Jesus are truth and grace. John asserts that if we choose God's action of ~~love~~ in Christ - (if we choose the light) - that things will NEVER BE THE SAME as they were.

*Not just  
but  
God's  
action  
in  
life*

With John, you and I make the claim that God in the flesh IS TRUTH AND GRACE. And we have had a multitude of experiences to confirm this reality.

For instance, a week before Christmas, the campus pastor at Oakland University informed our LCA Oakland County pastors that some 20 international students at the Univ. had been overlooked regarding board & room during the holidays. He asked our help. He was asking us TO MAKE THE TRUTH AND GRACE OF GOD a reality in the flesh.

One of your fellow Christians here donated nearly fifty pounds of ham to help meet the needs of these students. This week I received this letter signed by the students:

(READ)

My friends - Christ was made real IN THE FLESH -- AND THINGS WILL NEVER BE THE SAME FOR THOSE STUDENTS. They will not forget the truth and grace of God's love.

St. Philips Workers received four carloads of winter clothing from our membership on December 22nd. Through that offering, we were proclaiming our belief in the significance of Christ's birth -- we were participating in the Word become flesh -- we were offering God's light to many who are in darkness.

It is my hope that we will continue to offer God's light in 1975 -- AND THAT WE WILL DO IT IN THE FLESH, namely, through giving our talents and gifts in his name.

We are motivated to do this because we know THAT THINGS ARE NEVER THE SAME after sharing God's ~~love~~ in the flesh. /  
*grace - truth*

We recall Christ's birth because we believe in the significance of his actions in life. We believe there has never been greater truth or grace than in his life. And that truth and grace is offered as we gather around this table. He offers us his presence -- his light -- in order that we might be life-giving beacons rather than destructive bombs to others.

And so we receive -- and we share -- and we do it over and over again -- because in this action OF TAKING his life and MAKING it our life we believe WE CAN BE SOURCES OF TRUTH AND GRACE for a world filled with the darkness of uncertainty and conflict.

There is hope for 1975 -- things do not have to be the same as 1974 -- ~~that is~~, the uncertainty and conflict of 1974. *need never be the same again.*

Amen

CHRISTMAS II (NEW YEAR'S DAY)  
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo  
January 1, 1989  
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

## "BACK TO BUSINESS AS USUAL"

Now Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom; ... (and) After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and answers. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; ... And he increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man. Luke 2:41-42; 48-49; 51-52

About a month ago, as I was revising the preaching schedule, I looked with great delight to this day! After all, it was January 1st - the first day of the New Year - a great time to offer a profound, prophetic vision for 1989. What a perfect time to preach about a subject that all of us desires each new year - A NEW BEGINNING! That's the way we want to look at each new year, isn't it?!? Esp. after a year like I've had in 1988, I really want 1989 to be A NEW BEGINNING! Like many of you, I want to put the strain and stress, the surgeries and the scares of 1988 behind me. I want 1989 to be a FRESH START! With George Bush, I want '89 not only to be a good year, but a great year! Now, how's that for a totally selfish start to the New Year?!? But let's face it - it really isn't sinful to want 1989 to be A NEW BEGINNING?? After all, from God's perspective that's what he wants for each of us every day. In fact, in many real ways ... and esp. through the life and death of Jesus ... God has given us the potential to make 1989 and every year A REALLY GREAT YEAR ... A REALLY NEW BEGINNING!

But about 10 days ago, I came face to face with today's gospel text: the story of Jesus and his family going to Jerusalem for Passover; moreover, also a time for Jesus to fulfill the Jewish tradition of bar-mitzvah. As I read and re-read this text, it was nigh-impossible to see any great resolutions for 1989! This story just doesn't make great HEADLINES: BE IT THEREFORE RESOLVED ... that Jesus and his family went to Jerusalem for Passover! Not only was this text a letdown for my Great Expectations for New Year's Day - but it was equally a fizzle following the adorations and glorias of Xmas Eve.

Oh, we are still singing Christmas carols today ... and the decorations still gleam beautiful, but nothing quite beats the excitement, the expectancy, the anticipation of the babe of Bethlehem. One theologian has said, "Now is the season of still singing songs about the advent of our Master, but most of us are already thinking about the advent of January's Mastercard invoice." Instead of the "gloria in excelsis," instead of the wondrous star of "O Holy Night," instead of the angelic hosts filling the stable sky -- we hear something very conventional today ... a most mundane tale ... some of the ordinary stuff of our lives. We get this morning a story

about a pair of parents perplexed by their precocious teenager -- seemingly a story as exciting as last month's PTA meeting. Sounds like a story from my diary or yours, doesn't it?

But wait a minute! Maybe this is exactly the style of story that we need for a New Year. Because isn't this the way God moves most often in our lives?? Not with the fanfare and frolicking of Christmas Eve - where God's holy temple is turned into a gala, social gathering of once-a-year Xans. Today God invites us on a family pilgrimage with Mary, Jesus, and Joseph. Let's face it - this is where God's miracles are most often seen in our daily lives ... in our regular family pilgrimages, in our everyday bread and wine, in our every Sunday baptisms, in our daily experiences of forgiveness, in the plain water from our fountains that becomes the cleansing mystery of the font!

Today's gospel brings us graphically back into touch with the reality of our faith lives -- BACK TO BUSINESS AS USUAL ... or shall we say, BACK TO THE FATHER'S BUSINESS AS USUAL. What greater resolution - what greater new beginning could we make today than to promise to go BACK TO THE FATHER'S BUSINESS AS USUAL?!? And what is that "Father's Business" that especially needs uplifting on this first day of the New Year??

Well, I'd like to believe that St. Luke incorporates this story to show that even though Jesus is very new, very young, very much the Son of God -- he is still a part of something very old and very ancient (namely): A FAITHFUL FAMILY. FAITHFUL FAMILIES SHOW OBEDIENCE TO GOD THROUGH LONG-ESTABLISHED TRADITIONS AND PRACTICES THAT REVEAL GOD'S LOVING CHARACTER. Or said in fewer words, "faithful families regularly worship, revere, and glorify God!"

Like Mary and Joseph, we need regular pilgrimages of piety to feel our closeness to God. It doesn't come with one or two sentimental journeys to church on Christmas or Easter. Oh, we've all heard the religious critics, haven't we? They say, "church is boring; it's the same old jubilate prayers every week; the same old worship order; the same Bible stories; it's not spontaneous enough; it's not full of spirit and radiating from the heart!!"

Well, my friends, I don't know how spontaneous some people think they are -- but none of us lives very long without habit, without ritual, without sameness, without patterns and repetition. This is the glue that holds life together. When I travel, I always unpack my toiletries pretty much the way they are at home. My toothbrush, toothpaste, comb and brush are always located pretty much in the same place. Because being away from home is disorienting enough without being able to find the toothpaste. Just ask Angie how dad reacts when someone removes his comb or brush from its habitual hangout! Such ritual, such sameness keeps my life

manageable. Ritual gives order to life! Our Service here in the Lutheran church is no more patterned or predictable than at a Penecostal or black Baptist church. Every religious group has its way of doing the same things over and over again. Why?? BECAUSE WE DON'T WANT THE BUSINESS OF WORSHIP left to chance, or happenstance ... to disorder or chaos.

If every week's service were just like Christmas Eve, then there wouldn't be any Christmas Eve. Because life is not lived forever on a mountain top. In fact, God's real life is most often experienced in the humdrum, daily duties and deeds of weekly business as usual. There's a time for keeping the faith, for sharing the prayers, for hearing the Word, for doing what faithful people are supposed to do -- and that time is at least every Sunday of the church year. So the best time to get "Back to the Father's Business as Usual" is right now -- the first Sunday of the New Year! Today, the ordinary revelation of God's love returns after the extraordinary event of Christmas! (Today an ordinary child of God is baptized after the extraordinary birth of the babe of Bethlehem.) And today's gospel text says: THAT'S WHERE GOD IS WITH US -- not only at Bethlehem, but in the streets and offices and kitchens and sanctuaries of Toledo. True faithfulness is going to church on the first Sunday after Christmas even when you know you'll encounter the same old preacher rather than some new heavenly, angel chorus.

But being "Back to Business As Usual" gives us more than old traditions and predictable rituals. One of the great insights in today's text is that Jesus had been sitting among the rabbis for three days "listening to them and asking questions." It should be very obvious from this statement that those really committed to the Father's Business "still don't have all the answers." But they are constantly seeking new insights, new meanings and new answers for their lives. That's why we come here for more than Christmas and Easter!

Today, there are far too many churches that offer a "freeze dried faith" -- neat and tidy packages of absolute answers. Unlike Jesus himself, these churches have lost the spirit of open and forthright inquiry. The truly faithful are always looking for new answers. Donald Kennedy, president of Stanford University, offered an insight into university education that applies equally to religious education: (he said) "The great thing about education is that it should be UNFINISHED, that it should prod people ceaselessly to acquire more insight and more knowledge. I tend to respect institutions that raise more questions than they answer. That's what produces people who have a drive to know and to understand."

Jesus never stopped asking questions. He increased in wisdom and stature ... and in favor with God and man because he was constantly searching for the way, the life, and the truth. Ultimately, he found the greatest answer for his life he gave it FOR HIS FATHER'S SAKE on a cross. Most of us

haven't come anywhere near that answer of Jesus Christ. We still have much wisdom and stature to gain. But thankfully, we are beginning this New Year in the right place -- we are seeking and searching with Jesus' other faithful pupils. Yes, quite thankfully, no one here today has become lost amidst the social glitter and gluttony of Christmas OR New Year's Eve! We have come to grow in wisdom and stature ... to follow the everyday example of our Lord.

So where will this faithful pilgrimage take us in 1989? We don't know the exact destiny, do we? We don't know what the outcome of our faithfulness will be in 1989. We don't even know if we'll faithfully make it to 1990. But like Mary and Joseph - we do know one thing for certain: Jesus Christ will go with us every day of our journey; he will remain obedient unto us ... he will uplift us and heal us and make us the Father's children forever (just as he has done for Christopher Todd Lueck this morning).

Jesus is long gone from the manger and stable. Long ago he removed the swaddling cloths. His footsteps have far surpassed the city of Jerusalem and the hills of Galilee. He has climbed the Mount of Calvary in order that he might envision the needs of all of us. And now he abides for all of us from beyond the mountain top. Always and forever, Jesus goes BACK TO HIS FATHER'S BUSINESS AS USUAL -- the business of serving and suffering and forgiving and living his life as a ransom for others!

But how does that FATHER'S BUSINESS AS USUAL really make an impact upon you and me in 1989 or any year? How do we really know that Jesus understands our struggles, our sins, our disappointments and our hurts. How do we know that his Father's Business is not just a lot of pious words of love and compassion. That's always the question facing the preacher: how can we help people see that God has given us more than words, more than happy thoughts for a New Year? How can we help people realize that God knows us intimately ... that God really wants to fill our lives with his peace and hope ... with a fresh start for this new year??

Possibly, the only way that I can translate THE FATHER'S BUSINESS OF HEALING AND LOVING US is through a great English parable about an Anglican bishop. This bishop had been assigned to an amputee's ward in a British hospital following WWII. His congregation was hundreds of young men on stretchers or crutches, all minus one or more arms, legs, or both. It was the first Sunday of a new year ... and the bishop wanted this sermon to offer a NEW BEGINNING, A FRESH START, NEW HOPE to these men who had suffered greatly. The bishop preached about God's healing power -- that God truly heals both body and mind ... that God's love always transforms our infirmities and helps us overcome even the very worst of misery and deformity. It was obvious the bishop's love for Christ was very real and most fervent. But when he had finished, the faces of the armless and legless men told him he had not reached them. His words had not gotten through the barriers of their hopelessness and hurts.



So the bishop walked to the center of the chancel. He removed his stole and his alb, then he took off his shirt and his trousers. The young soldiers were shocked -- first, because the bishop had discarded his outer dignity. But the bishop had done more than take off his outer garments -- for now he revealed a body without a left arm or a right leg - in their places were sets of pulleys and belts and metal rods. Now the bishop had fully revealed that the love of God can truly transform both mind and body -- for standing before them was not only a bishop, but a wounded man who was fully sharing the peace, the hope, and the healing of God!!

The bishop raised his bare arms as he had done hundreds of times before; but this time there was a natural and a mechanical arm. This time the bishop's words were heard as they had never been heard before: "The peace of God which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in the healing power of Christ Jesus. AMEN."

(Alternate Ending)

Once and for all, Jesus healed and uplifted us just as we are. His everlasting journey with us reminds me of the story of a famous surgeon who always tied three knots in the suture that closed the incision. A young medical student watching him asked why he did it that way. After all, accepted surgical procedure required only one knot!

The surgeon replied: "I'll tell you a secret - that third knot is my 'sleeping knot.' Because after every surgery, I wake up in the middle of the night and think about the operation. I run through the whole thing in my mind, and my final thought is always the same: 'Did I tie the suture tight enough so the wound won't open?'" Then I remember, I tied three knots, so I turn over and go back to sleep." The surgeon concluded: "Son, let me share a great principle of life: if you always tie three knots where you're required to only tie one, you'll find a lot more fulfillment and happiness in life. And that's a principle of life that applies to everything!!"

Jesus tied all three knots for us on a tree in Golgatha. That's why you and I return here not only at Christmas and New Year's - but always! Because there's nothing like being BACK IN THE FATHER'S BUSINESS AS USUAL. God has given us no greater security than the three knots he tied for us through Jesus Christ! He asks us to get BACK TO THAT SAME BUSINESS AS USUAL IN 1989 ... tying the same knots for others that Jesus has already tied for us!! AMEN.

*Christmas II*  
*Glenwood Lutheran & Sunset House*  
*January 4, 1997*  
*Peter R. Martyn, Presiding Pastor & Chaplain*

## **“THERE’S NO PLACE LIKE HOME!”**

*See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind, the lame, those with child ... a great company, they shall return (home) here. Jer. 31:8 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, we have seen his glory, glory as of the father’s son, full of grace and truth. John 1:14*

How many times have you heard the powerful words from John’s gospel ... yet still wondered how God could actually create himself to be the very presence of himself on earth? The text says that he was with God from the beginning ... but God finally decided to show himself in the flesh to the whole world. John’s gospel is one of the most awesome statements of the New Testament, yet it is filled with incredible mystery.

I remember once after a funeral a young granddaughter confronted me with the same mystery about the resurrection. She believed in the resurrection -- yet she still had many questions about it. She told me that she knew her grandma was now living with God; she truly believed God’s promises about that. But she was yet puzzled by a greater mystery: “What kind of commode would grandma use in heaven??”

Only a child could pose such a question. How are we supposed to explain to a child that there is no need for commodes in heaven. After all, from her pt of view, grandma is now living with God and they both need to go to the bathroom occasionally. Yes, even though we adults know that “resurrected life” is very different from “physical life” -- there is still a great mystery about it. And equally, there is still a great mystery about the incarnation.

Why did God choose to be a baby? Why did He choose tiny Bethlehem? Why did He choose a persecuted, little Jewish nation? Why were only shepherds at the delivery room? We may think we have the Christmas answers, but there is still much mystery in the story. Just as there are mysteries about earthly people using heavenly bathrooms, there are mysteries about heavenly people becoming earthly saviors. But one reality is not a mystery: in choosing to become flesh, God chose to become “at home with us!” And “home” is where love becomes very real & personal: no longer a mystery ... no longer distant & detached in some other place ... no longer way off in some heavenly kingdom.

On this second Sunday after Christmas -- we celebrate a “homecoming” -- that God’s primary purpose for coming into the world was to “bring us back home” -- 1) to rescue us, 2) to restore us, and 3) to send us back into the world with his radiant countenance. And when people become lost or wayward -- whether Israel or us -- the primary assurance that we need is that **SOMEONE WILL BE THERE FOR US PERSONALLY!**

That's a basic assurance all humanity needs regardless of our journeys in life: that along the way, we will have the assurance of always finding ONE who will care for us personally -- face-to-face, up-close! In our media age of computers & tapes & terminals & tele-marketing -- we are often like the ancient Jews: exiled from our homeland ... detached from a face-to-face encounter with God's commitment and care. Recently, Sue taught a long-distance learning class at UT that was transmitted simultaneously to a class at Michigan State. A week ago, she gave her final to both sections. The finals were returned to her mixed up with only numbers - no students' names or universities. The students at U.T. essentially received A's & B's; the students at Mich. State: C's & D's. It's not a perfect analogy -- but it says that where there was a face-to-face encounter with "God's presence" -- students not only felt more secure, they even achieved better. "There's No Place Like Home" -- a face-to-face encounter with the presence of those who are committed to care for us.

But "home" is not only an up-close, personal encounter -- it is wherever the promises of love are kept. That's why so many people migrate 'home' for the holidays -- BECAUSE THAT'S WHERE THEY TRUST THE PROMISES OF LOVE WILL BE KEPT. Many years ago - a baby was left at the doorstep of a home in Georgetown, PA. A widow was head of that household, who had several other children. She took the baby into her small apartment and loved him like he was her own. Every night, she would read great books to all her children. This adopted, deserted baby developed a great taste for literature. That abandoned baby became one of American's most prolific writers, James Michener.

Michener's life was a triumph of unselfish love because a widow gave him a home -- a place where the promises of love were kept. Do we see the correlation to our life as a body of Christ?? This PLACE, the church, is where God's promises of love are to be kept!! That's why Jeremiah and many others could say "that there would now be rescue and restoration for the blind, the lame, the homeless, the poor, the naked, the unemployed, the lost." Because that's God's promise of love to all his children. Not merely a promise at Christmas time -but 365 days a year THIS IS WHERE GOD'S PROMISES OF LOVE ARE KEPT!

As one commentator has said about today's texts from Jeremiah and John -- "home' is where we focus upon the will and ways of God -- not upon the wilfulness and waywordness of God's people." We all know the ways of God's people: we wander, we drift, we run from this to that, we make promises only to break them, we speak and act hurtfully toward anyone who doesn't look or think like us. Like those ancient Israelites--we are still often wandering around looking for security. And God says: "I have come among you as the fullness of grace and truth ... I want to bring all of you back home where there will be no more weeping or stumbling around. Come on home ... where the young women will rejoice in dance ... and the young men and the old men will be merry!"

And how great it is when you and I finally have a face-to-face encounter with God again. It may be a friend, it may be a professional, it may even be a

stranger -- but whomever and wherever we experience the promise of love being kept ... that's where we again see God face-to-face!

Yet, like the very best of parents -- God doesn't let us linger forever in the cocoon of His embrace. Good parents let their kids come home -- where there is always that warm face-to-face assurance of care ... where there is always a promise that the kids will be loved forever no matter how much they wander! But good parents never cling onto their kids without letting them go! Likewise, God rescues and restores us for a purpose beyond "feeling-good-for-the-moment." Any home that only "smoozes" us with sentimental security doesn't prepare us to face the darkness of the world outside. And God's love is more than a "feel-good-for-the-moment-thing" -- where we get goose-bumps rather than courage to help ourselves & others overcome the darkness all around us.

Israel failed miserably ... and I regret to say ... she is still failing today to be a "light to all nations." When anyone thinks it's a privilege to be loved & graced by God rather than a responsibility -- then that people has lost sight of the light! Israel was too much like many Christians today -- she just wanted a "feel-good-religion"-- a religion that kept her safe & secure but didn't ask her to be responsible for anyone else!" So today's gospel clearly states: "He came to his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name - he gave the power to become children of God!"

*But...* God has given us the power to become like His Son. Our glory is not in our flesh, but in becoming full of His grace and truth. We don't come to church to "feel good" or to "look good," but to "be good" like the One we have seen here face-to-face. The one who came into the world to keep God's promises of love did not come to dwell in some holy sanctuary or perfect body: he came to dwell in our hearts and minds ... so that we might become his light in the world.

Whenever we come together as the body of Christ and leave believing that the light of Christ has re-energized our lives ... then we know that we have truly been back home and seen God face-to-face. Then we know that "There's No Place Like Home" -- not only on Christmas, but everyday of the year! So, thanks for coming "back home on January 4th!" And now that you've seen God up-close again ... and been assured that he has kept his promise to love you ... take His countenance of light ... and be about His business of overcoming the darkness of our world!!

AMEN.

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↓  
① GOD LOVES US DEEPLY HE WILL ALWAYS WELCOME US HOME HE WILL NEVER TURN HIS BACK ON US HE WILL ALWAYS LOVE + FORGIVE US FACE-TO-FACE!  
BUT GOD CALLS US TO BE MORE THAN FEEL-GOOD - CHRISTIANS.

*Christmas II  
Glenwood Lutheran, Toledo  
January 5, 1997  
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor*

## **“WANTED: GRACE & TRUTH!!”**

*“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” John 1:14*

Several years ago, Dionne Warwick recorded a hit entitled, *“What The World Needs Now Is Love Sweet Love.”* Obviously, no greater truth could be sung or said -- the world does need love, sweet love! But according to John’s gospel, before there can be true or sweet love in this world -- there must first be GRACE & TRUTH! According to the Bible and John’s gospel, when Grace & Truth are present, there will always be love. So what does the Bible mean with these terms, “Grace & Truth?”

GRACE is a GIFT OF PRESENCE ... a gift of sharing which always leads to the other’s dignity. Grace is always building up rather than tearing down. Grace offers hope & courage, without belittling or overlooking another’s pain or struggle. Grace always affirms, whether it’s given or received.

TRUTH is also a GIFT OF PRESENCE ... but it is a sharing of integrity. Truth reveals or opens up rather than keeping closed or hidden. By “opening up,” whether as a challenge or a comfort, truth always yields renewed fortitude, patience and understanding for all parties involved.

Need I say anymore as to WHY/HOW these qualities reveal true love?? Jesus Christ was the very Word of God in the flesh. And He came to reveal grace -- the presence of dignity ... the power that builds others up rather than tearing them down ... the heart that offers hope & courage even in the midst of suffering. Likewise, He came to show the truth -- the presence of integrity ... He was fully open, never seeking to hide behind falsehood or to cover up what might be challenging to his followers. And when anyone has such dignity and integrity, then we see the very essence of love on earth. And we have only seen such power & glory in one man on earth - namely, Jesus. Is it any wonder that we confess Him as the Messiah--as God with us: He was and still is the ultimate epitome of dignity and integrity ... of grace & truth - the very fullness of God!!

The question is: Are we living in a world “full of grace and truth??” Does our world aspire to His grace ... to a dignity which builds up rather than tears down?? I don’t know about you, but the popular TV programs that I hear people raving about are filled with violence, free-wheeling sex and constant one-liner put downs. Is that Grace?? Moreover, every one of us in this room knows how the media attracts viewers -- by attacking, by ridiculing or by sensationalizing something, usually related to sex or violence. Is that Grace? The trademark of one of our most popular family entertainers is to parade on stage grabbing his crotch. Is that Grace?? Sports heroes sign multi-million dollar contracts and then act like adolescents when playing on the field or the

court. Is that Grace?? Prejudice & racism are making a frightening comeback in our society. Is that Grace? Special interest groups -- even those who call themselves pro-life -- think their causes are so righteous that they have the gaul to kill anyone who disagrees. Is that Grace?? Have you noticed the rise in "ABUSE" -- whether child or elderly, sexual or emotional, verbal or physical?? Are these signs of Grace?? My dear friends, this world will never know the "sweet love of Jesus" if it does not first seek the Grace of Christ!!

And what about TRUTH?? Every week we hear communities clamoring for more crime control, better schools, more services, safer streets. less drugs, some even calling for more religious training. And yet we reject any politician or preacher who asks us to pay for these desires and dreams. Is that truth?? We all know how the Lottery told us that it would be our society's answer to financing better government and schools and at the same time decreasing poverty. Does anyone believe that such a lie could ever be called the truth?? When we go to the grocery store -- have we noticed the escalation of the tabloids at the check-out counters?? These rags rely on lies, half-truths, misrepresentations, innuendo and always seek to belittle and degrade whomever they talk about. Is this truth?? And why is it that more people are reading tabloids these days than the Bible?? Is anyone really seeking the truth?? We demand quality education, yet we allow music & the arts to be cut but never touch the sports' budget. In fact, if the sports' program is threatened, people will "pay-to-play" just to keep sports going. Is that truth?? TV news gives us 25-minutes of negativity & tragedy and then closes with a one-minute human interest story and wants us to believe that's the whole truth. We say we want to hear it the way it really is but we only listen to those who tell us what we want to hear. Is that truth?? My dear Christian friends, how can we ever know the "love of Jesus" when we have so much trouble telling and hearing the truth!?

Regretably, we have reached a point in civilization where we say the only answer to all our problems is more jobs, more education, more money, more technology, more health care, more police ...but never MORE GRACE & TRUTH!! Of course there are many who give Grace & Truth a flirt at Christmas and Easter -- but how can we be "full of grace and truth" like our Lord if we only live by HIS POWER on one or two festivals a year???

Well, there was only one way that Jesus Christ could be "full of grace and truth." There was only one Way that He could reveal the true dignity and integrity of God. He had to be willing to give up His Divinity and take on the flesh of humanity -- and then be even more willing to surrender that flesh to death in order to show that we all have access to His grace & truth. In Jesus Christ, God was willing to live life like us in order to show us the real version of GRACE & TRUTH ON EARTH. And He was willing to die for us to prove that real dignity and real integrity only happen when we willingly surrender to a power greater than ourselves -- His ultimate power of Grace & Truth ... the very essence of His love.

There is no better way to tell of God’s grace and truth than the story of a prince riding through a ragged and poor section of his kingdom. Looking through the curtain of his carriage, he saw the most beautiful maiden he had ever seen. For weeks, he asked his carriage driver to take him thru that section of town... always hoping he would see her ... always hoping for yet another glimpse. Before long, he was totally infatuated with her. He desperately desired only one thing -- to take her hand in marriage. But that would violate every rule of his kingdom. She was poor, common, and lowly; he was rich, regal and resplendant! No one would approve of such a relationship.

Of course, the prince had the option of royal command -- he could simply order her to become his wife. But that would not be GRACE --that would be force and intimidation. Grace allows the other to have free will -- to choose or refuse to be chosen. Again, he could also masquerade as a peasant. Then when he won her favor, he would pull off his mask and reveal his true identity. But that would not be TRUTH -- there is no integrity in life when we live our days behind some masquerade or false pretense of who we truly are. Without truth & true identity, there would only be resentment and rejection.

Finally, he hit upon the most noble solution of all. He would lay aside his kingly robe & honor & status & everything else. He would move to her neighborhood. He would then take up a vocation consistent with that area -- possibly a carpenter. He would live as she lived; he would get to know her friends and learn to talk her language. He would seek to become ONE in vision & spirit! Hopefully, over time, he would gain her respect and trust and admiration. And through this new lifestyle of grace & truth, eventually he would hope that she too would love him. And so he embarked on his mission. And after several years, he won her love ... and only then did he reveal his total identity.

This story reveals what the world needs now. Out of God’s loneliness for meaningful relationships, a world was born. Out of God’s love for that world, a Savior was born. And out of the fallenness of the people in that world -- when it was no longer possible for us to come to God -- God came to us in our flesh, on our terms, in our place, among our friends, speaking our language, and offering His dignity and integrity even to the point of His death. And that’s why the Bible and John say so clearly: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; and we have beheld that glory, a glory as of the only Son of the Father!” God help us to share the glory of His grace and Truth ... it is what the world needs right now!!

AMEN.