

CHRISTMAS EVE

Luth Church of the Master
DEC. 24, 1975 - 7:30 PM

"READY OR NOT, HERE HE COMES"

Text: Luke 2:1-20

"Ready or not, here I come." How often I recall yelling this from my hide-and-seeK days. We all know what it means -- that the other kids had been given enough time to hide -- they should be prepared -- they should be ready.

So it is tonite. "READY OR NOT, HERE HE COMES." Obviously, this could be refering to Santa Claus. Many of us have surely been getting ready for his coming. But we'll save him for later. For our present celebration honors a different main character.

And Advent has given us the time to anticipate and get ready for his coming - and for tonite's celebration. And now, we are ready! Ready to receive the king - ready to announce his importance in our lives - ready to follow him -- yes, ready to make our lives the image of his.

What a fantastic night this is! For it is that one moment throughout the year that all Christians gather in a common spirit -- a readiness to hear the story re-told.

Whether tonite is the 1st time or the 60th time that you have worshipped in 1975, one thing can be assumed on this night -- each of you has come READY to receive the babe of Bethlehem as your Lord.

As incredible as the details of Luke's story are -- nevertheless, this is the one day out of 364 that the reborn, the committed, the curious - and even the doubters gather together -- seeking the same sign spoken of by the angel -- "you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

Is is any wonder that Christmas is a joyous moment? It is any wonder that we shout - "Glory

to God in the Highest - and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased." Yes - is it any wonder -- for at what other time do SO MANY PEOPLE gather in the church with such a UNITED VISION -- at what other time do we all see the same sign?

Yes - finally tonite -- after all the jostling and jams of Christmas shopping, we are all READY to UNANIMOUSLY receive the Lord of history. And here he comes -- the grandest gift of God in the simplest package -- a bare-naked little baby. Yes - the grandest, yet the simplest gift that can be given WAS AT THE TOP OF GOD'S gift list -- a person - a human, living, loving person.

And so before we leave tonite, maybe we'd better be sure that our sign of the Savior IS MORE than a nostalgic manger scene. More than goose bumps from beautiful music. As beautiful as the pastoral scene and music of Christmas are, let's be sure we see our Savior as he really is -- yes, let's be ready to see that our Savior is A VERY DOWN TO EARTH ONE, not some kind of gaudy representation of European nobility the way he's often pictured on Christmas card.

Yes - part of our readiness tonight and every Christmas - is to be sure that we're looking in the right places for our Savior. For we all know that influential people of Jesus' day missed the sign of him. They were typical wise men of the world looking for the promised king at the palace.

But God's sign of himself comes to us in down-to earth places and people - like a manger cradle in a barn. Not thru important political leaders, but given to shepherds. Not a sign that men often desire and expect, but a baby born to a common, 14-yr old, unwed mother.

Yes - part of our readiness for the Christ-child is to make sure that we are always expecting him in the most unlikely places -- not necessarily the palaces or grandiose parishes that we build claiming to be in his honor.

Maybe this point will make more sense if I retell the Christmas story in a modern framework. Let's give it a try.

It was the Spring of 1975, and the Lord God of Heaven assembled his archangels around the throne of light. "The world has forgotten me," he said, "Therefore I will send my Son to take on the flesh of my forgetful children. What report can you give me concerning conditions on earth?"

Archangel Michael, secretary of defense, spoke up: "Our troops are very thin, Lord. No matter where you place him, he will be badly outnumbered. Furthermore, the weapons which the enemy can turn against him are unparalleled in their ferocity."

Gabriel,

Archangel Gabriel, secretary of communications, stepped forward: "All communication media is in control of the enemy. We will never get a fair hearing. I can state positively that even this will not be reported accurately, but will ultimately be used for totally commercial purposes."

The Lord turned to Raphael, overseer of all production on earth. "I Must confess, Lord, there is hopeless confusion on Earth," Raphael said. "Among a very few there is profuse waste and greed, but the slimmest of pickings for all the rest. These are very uncertain times. Starvation may overtake the entire globe before the boy even has a chance to grow up."

The Lord replied, "Since such conditions prevail for the majority, my son will be born also in poverty."

But Raphael shook his head. "Such a step will get you nowhere, Lord. The people of influence have had just about all they can stand in talk about the poor. If we are to make any impression at all, we must take a more popular approach. People want something they can feel good about.

"He shall be born poor," the Lord restated. "And

furthermore, by the power of my Spirit, he will be born of a young virgin.

Gabriel hesitated, then blurted, "But my Lord, this is most unwise. The people of today are too sophisticated for that kind of thing. Some will laugh at it, while the more enlightened will suggest that it would be best for the girl's future if she would consent to an abortion.

The Lord retorted: "He shall be born of a virgin. He shall then go about as a wanderer and preach that men should seek first the kingdom of God. He shall teach that the rich shall share what they have with those who are poor."

Now Michael interrupted. "Such talk, Lord, will be interpreted as much too threatening. He will never make it. Those in power will charge him with conspiracy against their way of life. Before anyone knows what is happening, there will be a trial and he will be killed. In fact, they may even kill him without a trial."

The Lord answered: "But in dying he will die for the sins of those who are selfish, who despise the poor, who practice injustice, who live to satisfy their lusts and have no love in their hearts.

When they see what they have done to him, they will repent. When they see what he has done for them despite the darkness in their hearts, they will believe in him and they will ask him to change their hearts to be like his, and they will accept his forgiveness."

Gabriel shook his head. "Lord, we tried that before. Once again, it may help a few; but mark my word, the majority will soon manage to make this child's humility and sacrifice an excuse for their own pride and selfishness. Lord, you should know that from experience."

Yes - how much our Lord and God knows that from experience. How often we have turned his GIFT of humility and sacrifice in Jesus into our own pride and selfishness. We do it when we flaunt our way of piety - or when we give only when it's comfortable to do so - or when at Christmas we give gifts only to bolster our own pride.

Yes - how easy it is to turn the humility of the Christ child into human haughtiness.

But thanks be fore God. For no matter how much we pervert his gift -- Jesus Christ remains the same -- the same grand and humble gift from a loving Father. He is still the *greatest* ~~only~~ HUMAN SIGN of heaven on earth.

He is still the sign of life that angels, messengers, and all mankind say: "Be not afraid!" That's the gospel message of Christmas - in Christ, we need not fear. Our future is secure-- for with the love and forgiveness of God, there's nothing to fear.

And there's only one application of the signs and wonders made known on this night 2,000 yrs ago -- yes, only one way that we show that we're REALLY READY to proclaim good tidings of great joy -- and that's to do what our Father and his Father first did -- TO BRING HIS LOVE DOWN TO EARTH IN THE FORM OF HUMAN LOVE.

So it is - our readiness tonight is for more than cookies, Xmas card, Santa Claus or Canadian Club cheer. Tonight - we're ready to bring God's love down to earth, even in the most unlikely places. So, ready or not, here he comes.

AMEN

CHRISTMAS EVE

Lutheran Church of the Master, Troy
December 24, 1977 (Saturday evening)

OUT OF THE DARKNESS..."

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, *on whom has light shined.* For to us a child is born, to us a son is given... and his name will be called, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Isaiah 9:2,6

Night can be beautiful when dreams of sugar plums dance through you head. When worries have wandered away and left you relaxed. Then darkness comes like a billowy, blanket of down. What a great feeling to slip into the freshly, washed sheets for a long winter's nap. No doubt about it - night can be nice!!

But it is not always that cozy and comfortable. Night can be blacker than a hundred midnights in a southern swamp. Anxiety, fear, loneliness, and emptiness become like giant mosquitos attacking in hordes. You toss and turn and somehow the bed just doesn't seem to fit. The ticking of the clock sounds like a time-bomb ready to explode. But even as it ticks - time seems to be standing still. The darkness drags .. the fever rises ... the light flickers.

Such can be the darkness of night. But Isaiah was not only talking about insomnia. By "darkness" he was referring to the DESPAIR of the Jewish people -- a people who had been imprisoned thru foreign domination and captivity - a people molested by violence and death FAR WORSE than today's crime -- a people harrassed and scattered all over creation by their intruding oppressors. For the Jew BEFORE CHRIST, the questions was: when will we see the dawn? when will we be able to come out of this darkness??

Such were the circumstances on that night nearly 2000 years ago. And IMAGINE the darkness of that Christmas Eve for Mary and Joseph. Not only because they were Jews -- but here was a young couple -- a couple who had probably been rejected by their

friends because of this mysterious pregnancy. Here were just two people -- alone in the world - striking out for Bethlehem to have a baby. IMAGINE THE solitude of their journey - there was no royal court awaiting them -- their were no friends to stay with in Bethlehem -- there was no sterilized labor or delivery room to greet them -- there were no saddle-blocks or anesthesia to numb the birth pains.... there were no counselors to give them advice. Mary and Joseph encountered Christmas Eve QUITE ALONE -- they had each other, and God's promise to trust in.

How interesting that on this Christmas Eve night for years the appointed text is one which CONTRASTS darkness and light. What fitting images for Christmas Eve. For tonite, there is more than darkness in the sky -- and it was the same that first night. Yes - for on this night even amidst the radiance of Christmas tinsel and "Glorias" -- there is still much darkness for many people.

Obviously - I'm not only talking about athiests, agnostics, and non-believers. Even for many Christians, this night has much darkness. Because for some people it is a bleak reminder of lost relationships. And some even at this very moment are walking through the valley of the shadow of death. For hundreds more it is a night of cloudy confusion-- a night which beckons EVERYBODY to be joyful -- but for *these*, that joy might *only be* candy cover-up.

Let me illustrate. The front page of a fellow pastor's newsletter recently announced: " As many of you know, Jackie and I are separated. I have moved out of the parsonage. ... I request your continued prayers and support for all of us in this painful situation."

Yes - many of you know that pastor, because he was your first pastor here at the Master. So you can imagine how the clouds have darkened this Christmas for Bill and Jackie Pearson. And yet in talking to Bill recently, it was his Christian conviction which helped him make this decision.

And likewise - it's our Chrixtian conviction which beckons us to look at ourselves realistically -- to recognize that darkness is in us and all around us. To avoid darkness on Christmas Even is to do great injustice to the evening. Because it was UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF DARKNESS that God chose to enter human history. And it's that SAME DARKNESS that give's Jesus birth, life, death and resurrection IT'S REAL PURPOSE: to redeem the darkness. That didn't mean then - nor it doesn't mean today that ALL THE DARKNESS was wiped away with the birth of Jesus.

*Keep out
of
problems
100% face
factor*

God chose to enter human history when things weren't rosey TO SHOW THAT his power is needed in a dark world. God came to redeem the darkness. He chose to come through the back door of civilization -- there was no worldly fanfare when he entered -- humanity wasn't even cognizant of God's entry (AND MUCH OF HUMANITY STILL ISN'T INTELLIGENT ENOUGH TO SEE GOD'S PRESENCE.) God snuck up on a dark world - and behold - there was a new light in it - namely, Jesus, God in the flesh.

Yes - that first Chriwtmas found darkness filling every crevice. Men had lost hope. Centuries had passed and it seemed as though the God of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob had gone into hiding. ... But then it happened. Just a bright star in the sky -- that was the only spotlight. But its light beckoned people from ALL CORNERS of darkness. Hope was given in the midst of darkness - and that's the way God has always done his thing.

Yes - two things need to be said about God's invasion of light INTO THE WORLD. And these things especially have to be said TO THOSE OF YOU who are still choosing darkness.

First, God's light often seems dim and distant. Many times it seems out of reach. I'm certain that's the way the shepherds and wise men felt at first. But they did not quit -- they endured. They persisted to follow that light -- and their lives were enriched because of it.

Jesus himself was often in the same boat. At Gethsemanee, I'm sure God's light seem pretty dim to Jesus. But he hung in there -- TRUSTING IN GOD'S LOVE -- until he finally could say with VICTORY ON HIS LIPS -- "it is finished!"

God has never promised that the pilgrimage along the highway of life will be without suffering, separation, and solitude. But he has promised that if we keep our eyes on his light (namely, Jesus Christ), we will be led out of our present darkness INTO HIS ETERNAL LIGHT.

So my friends - we have a choice -- either we choose the Prince of Peace as our guiding light in life -- or we rely upon the Prince of Darkness, who is ever ready to make today's troubles a reason to give up our tomorrows. Christians have always chosen the Prince of Peace - knowing that there will still be darkness even after making that choice.

Secondly -- once you recognize the light of Christ, you cannot afford to sit still. YOU HAVE TO GRAB HOLD OF IT WITH GUSTO. You have to clutch that LOVE OF GOD and make it your own.

If the shepherds and wisemen and sat around simply WATCHING the star -- all of us would still be waiting for the Messiah. And that's the problem today -- toomany people are standing around gazing into the stars -- thinking there's some kind of power in the stars themselves.

Their worshipping the creation - not the creator. He has come to earth -- and he has shown GRAPHICALLY HIS POWER OF LOVE. You've got to grab hold of it if you want it to redeem your life.

I'm always amazed at people who are always looking for self-pity. They want to be loved so much -- but they never grab hold of it when it's offered. They go crying around feeling all alone and rejected -- when their families and friends are often HEAPING love upon them.

Yes - thank God that those shepherd and wise men didn't just sit around star-gazing. Thank God that

million of saints have TOLD - and RETOLD tonite's story. Because those words and deeds over nearly 2000 years have continued to BRING THE LIGHT OF GOD into the midst of our darkness.

Incredible as it was - God's love had to be humanized before it became real for people. And so it began with a babe in Behtlehem. And his infancy was not much different from yours or mine -- but in his manhood, he **was** the light of God on earth. Darkness never overcame this man.

And that's the light we celebrate tonite -- even in the midst of our own forms of darkness. We celebrate his light, this life of Jesus - because with his life in us, darkness will never defeat us. It may creep all over us -- but it will never defeat us.

That's the light of Christmas Eve -- that's the light that shines tonite and every night and breaks down all darkness. And believe me - that light is worth living and dying for!!

*God has led us -
out of the dark "*

AMEN

CHRISTMAS EVE
Hope Lutheran Church
Toledo, Ohio 43606
December 24, 1981 11 p.m.

"A SIGN OF HEAVEN ON EARTH"

(The Son) reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power ...

Hebrews 1:3

For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called, "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Isaiah 9:6

It has begun like all other Christmas Eves before it. Not much sleep last night -- up very early this morning to put the finishing touches on the sermon. Hurry & scurry around to make the last shut-in calls; rush home to spend a few minutes with the family; get everyone ready for church; make the trip to church. The ritual has been the same for several years. But this year -- there has been one major difference -- there is a new sign of heaven on earth among us.

This Christmas the Martyn family is no longer a threesome; it is now four. After seven years of waiting and wondering and hoping and sometimes even despairing -- finally, a new sign of heaven appeared on earth some seven months ago.

So there's still the rush and the hustle and the bustle and the short-temper and the excitement of other Christmas Eves this year -- But God has blessed this Christmas Eve with an even greater manifestation of his power; he has brought a new child into the world ... and he has done this same thing for another 25 families in this congregation this same year. And these children - like the holy child of Bethlehem -- each of them is a very special sign of heaven on earth.

This Christmas Eve for us - and possibly for those other 25 families -- there need not be any other gifts under the tree. Of course, the gifts are there. But how insignificant they are COMPARED TO GOD'S GIFT OF LIFE IN THE FLESH! In the birth of a child, God gives his greatest family gift -- a sign from heaven ... a sign of his power on earth ... a child of his, to love and be loved. No greater gift can God give to a mother and father who have waited and wondered.

Please forgive the personal emphasis. I hope you can see the deeper meaning in the parallel to the birth of the infant Jesus. For Mary and Joseph had done much waiting and wondering -- what would this child be like? What kind of sign of heaven on earth would he possess. And lo and behold -- he entered the world not much different from the 25 babies born here at Hope this year. Obviously - a much more crude delivery -- but the same cuddly, adoreable, fleshy child of humanity.

And yet he was not just your average sign of heaven on earth -- he was THE SIGN OF HEAVEN ON EARTH -- he was to become the most glorious sign of heaven ever seen on the earth.

Is it any wonder that the world has celebrated this night for nearly 2000 years. It's one thing to celebrate the flesh and blood of your child or mine -- but it's earth-shattering to celebrate the flesh and blood of God himself on earth! Is it any wonder that the writer of Hebrews proclaimed that "Jesus reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature." God on earth was incredible and still is. And the Hallelujahs have been sung ever since that first night in Bethlehem CONFIRMING THIS SIGN OF HEAVEN ON EARTH!

But we must stop here dare we wrap up Jesus in swaddling cloths forever. Our temptation is to keep God's love focused in Bethlehem and not in Poland or Tanzania or Toledo. We

work and prepare very hard to keep Jesus alive as a baby in Bethlehem but oftentimes seem indifferent to his power and presence in our lives or the world situations around us. After all, the manger scene is so pleasing -- so much like any good newborn scene. And so we construct ornate creches ... -- and we ooh and aaah over them and make them into Christmas idols.

But the truth of the story is that it did not end with the sheep and cows and stable in Bethlehem. In fact at the very time of his birth, powerful leaders were already plotting to get rid of him. Because these people knew that very soon this child would grow up and become the fullness of God's glory on earth.

So on this night God says to us -- rejoice over the fact that I became a baby. Give thanks for the fact that I love human flesh and came into the world as a child. But don't stand over the manger forever ... or worse yet, don't desert me at the manger bed.

Tonite, like no other night of the year, God is telling us that he wants us to get to know him in the fulness of his glory. Or as Isaiah says, God wants us to know him by his adult nature and names: for he shall be called the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

These are not descriptions of a baby in a manger. These are the names of God's self-identification -- these are the names and nature of God that we are to COME AND ADORE HIM FOR.

Tonite we embrace more than a manger baby in Bethlehem. Tonite we embrace the Lord Jesus who is the Wonderful Counselor. That sounds so nice, but what does it mean? Does it mean he's some kind of a sugary psychologist??

As we all know - there are all kinds of Counselors in this world -- pastors, priests,

lawyers, therapists, psychiatrists, statesmen, psychologists, and analysts of many varieties. But there has been and is only one who has been named the Wonderful Counselor. Because there has been and is only one who possesses the stamp of God's very nature. And that counseling nature is one which full of compassion yet not permissive -- a nature which is fully loving and accepting yet forever pointing to new heights where we sin no more. Jesus never left people where he found them -- he transformed them to be signs of heaven on earth.

Jesus always lifted our human nature to heavenly levels. When he counseled the woman caught in adultery -- he not only rescued and forgave her, but he told her to be "born anew" -- to give up her sinful life and start all over again. He told her she was now free -- that is, free to live her life at a more heavenly level.

To be a wonderful Counselor is to be that one who comes into this world to free people from sin and guilt -- and then give them the power and permission to live at God's heavenly level of love.

That's the good news of Christmas -- that heaven has invaded earth in order that earth might shine more like heaven. God wants to change the darkness of this world into the radiance of his own nature and personality. And so he comes into the world as one of us -- to show us the preciousness of life and human relationships -- whether in Bethlehem, Poland, or Toledo.

And as he comes into the world he SHOWS himself as a child, as a Son, and as an Ever-lasting Father. He wants us to care about human relationships as a loving Father treats his child. A loving father never goes to war with his child nor seeks to destroy the human flesh of another father & mother. As has already been stated -- the human flesh of one's child is the most precious gift of God -- whether the flesh of

Jesus, the flesh my child or yours, or the flesh of a child of China or Poland or Russia.

God is very concerned about the headlines that accompany his birth announcement tonite. They are not headlines which sanctify human life. They are not headlines which reflect the reality of heaven on earth. The headlines are not trumpeting the birth of Christ, but sounding the preparations for war.

The news from Israel has not proclaimed the holy birth in Bethlehem but rather potential battles in the Golan Heights. The cries from the middle east do not reflect the new life of Jesus but instead are the babble of oil barons. Instead of shepherds gainfully watching their flocks, the holy family is sharing the stable this year with a vast multitude of unemployed laborers. In short - the world is much like it was the night he was born -- it is a world desparately in need of a sign of heaven on earth -- a world still searching for the Prince of Peace.

Our presence here tonite affirms the fact that we know where the Prince of Peace can be found. We wouldn't be here if in some way we hadn't been touched by the Babe of Bethlehem. We know that his birth is a sign of heaven on earth. We know that his life reflects the glory of God ... and bears the very stamp of God's nature.

But our glorias and joyfulness tonite are given not only for the baby Jesus -- they are given because he has shown us what we can become through him: we can become signs of heaven on earth.

God became flesh not for the purpose of remaining a baby in a manger. He came to be our Wonderful Counselor and Prince of Peace. He came to lift us out of our indifferent and guilty human nature TO NEW HEIGHTS OF HIS LOVE

CHRISTMAS EVE
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 24, 1982 11 p.m.
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in the land of deep darkness, on them has light shined;... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given;... and his name shall be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Is 9:2,5

If you have been in a toy store or toy department this Christmas -- then there's one reality of Christmas 1982 that was impossible to avoid: THIS LITTLE, WIERD, OTHER-WORLDLY CREATURE KNOWN AS E.T. - the Extra Terrestrial. Every Christmas for children seems to have its fascination -- but the E.T. fascination has seemingly caught on for both children and adults.

The movie has been running for months here in Toledo -- adults have been as enthralled with it as children.

As already mentioned - toy departments are jammed with E.T. paraphernalia -- and sales have been equally great!

Even a mutual pastor-friend of Pastor Camlin and mine sent our families a Christmas letter with E.T. as the theme of his family's life this past year.

To be truthful and candid, I'm afraid that E.T. has had a much more prominent billing in our culture this year than J.C.

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There may be many of us here tonite who could care less about all this E.T. phenomenon. We have surely not come here tonite to give E.T. any more significance that he has already claimed in the cinema and stores. And yet E.T.'s earthly rendezvous has some profound parallels to God's incarnation in that little town of Bethlehem. There is a mysterious and yet majestic correlary between E.T.'s story and the narrative of that Holy Night in Bethlehem's barn. On this Holy Night 2000 years later -- we need to look more carefully at the parallels of E.T. and J.C.'s world.

Jesus came to a people in darkness -- a people who were living in despair, brokenness, division, and desparate for renewal and restoration. Interestingly -- E.T. finds the

earth people in much the same condition. His earth companion, Elliot, comes from a broken home where the reality of loneliness and the need for renewed love are symbolic of his day. Elliot has not found satisfactory love and support through his earthly relationships -- so he seeks that fulfillment from his extra-terrestrial friend... and a loving relationship is BORN!

It is through an extra-terrestrial event that Elliot finds new light for his life. Likewise, it was through an extra-terrestrial event that God gave new light to a people living in darkness 2000 years ago.

But that is not the only parallel. With the coming of Jesus into the world -- there was a mixture of majestic glorias yet huddled silence -- the angels sang but the world remained baffled in silent awe!! E.T.'s invasion of this earthly habitation causes the same mixture of tearful joy yet reverent silence!

That mixture is best reflected in the goosebump feelings that all of us have on Christmas Eve. As we sing the carols amidst the beauty of candlelight and choirs -- we feel the yearning from within for this savior who has come to bring peace on earth. Like no other time -- we reach out and search for that truth on Christmas Eve.

Could that possibly be the reason for E.T.'s phenomenal success?? Could it be that in this story we have the same setting of those people living in darkness 2000 years ago?? We have people yearning and searching and reaching out for a deeper relationship of love ... for an other-worly kind of peace that is void of war and heartache ... for a resurrection kind of hope that is seen in E.T.'s coming to life again??

There can be little doubt. At least at one level, E.T. represents our human search for God on earth. E.T. symbolizes our desire to have the other-worldly inhabit our hemisphere. E.T. dramatizes the never-ending need of humanity for peace on earth ... and good will to all mankind. E.T. confirms the truth of scriptures that we know in our hearts that we cannot do it all alone -- we need the help and reassurance of a power beyond ourselves -- we need God himself to come among us!!

And the facts are that God has already come to fill the void - to fill our total human need. In Jesus Christ -- he has come to fulfill the prophetic dream of Isaiah and all of us -- he has come TO BE THE WONDERFUL COUNSELOR -- THE MIGHTY GOD -- THE EVERLASTING FATHER -- AND THE PRINCE OF PEACE!!

Those are qualities that will never find fulfillment by a strange, little alien extra-terrestrial. Although we may love E.T. much as we love our pet dog or stuffed animal -- E.T. will never give us more than a good cinematographic high! (movie high!) Although some may find E.T. adorable, the faithful of God have come to adore a king of kings and Lord of Lords WHO BECAME ONE OF US!

That is the never-ending ecstasy of Christmas Eve -- that our God not only came to this planet as a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace -- BUT THAT HE CAME AS ONE OF US!! He came not as a wrinkled, goose-necked alien --- not as a fat, bronze Bhdhda -- not as an invisible puff of spiritual smoke -- BUT AS ONE WHO KNEW THE POSSIBILITIES AND PITFALLS OF BEING HUMAN!

That's why we sing - "O Come Let Us Adore Him -- because this Wonderful Counselor told stories about samaritans, and prodigal sons, and lost sheep, and rich fools, and wise stewards -- and all these parables clearly told that here was not only a man of peace and good will, but here was God himself!

Likewise - we sing "Glory to the newborn King" because this little babe became more than a man -- he became a Mighty God -- not meaning a vengeful, vindictive God -- but a God who never gives up, who never quits, who always offers unconditional love, who continues to call us back to his forgiving embrace NOT ONLY ON CHRISTMAS -- but every day!

Equally so -- we sing "Joy to the World" because the whole world has been embraced by the love of God the Father: God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son -- not just the United States, but Jesus Christ embraces the whole world as the Everlasting Father. He is the one Father who never stops giving his children attention and affection -- he has come into this world to stay forever ... not just a few days and then head back to some unknown galaxy.

Finally, we sing "Silent Night, Holy Night" because the peace of heaven has invaded the earth -- the Prince of Peace has come. In Jesus Christ - we have a leader who came into this world to break down the walls of separation between classes, races and political structures. As we gather around the table of this prince of peace -- there can no longer be discord, division, and darkness. This Savior known as Christ the Lord has come into our present darkness to put an end to our petty differences and trifling tempers. We leave this Lord's table singing the glorias of the angels on high.

Yes - we feel goosebumps and shivers on this evening not because we have encountered an Extra Terrestrial -- but because ON CHRISTMAS EVE (if at no other time) we truly have an ENCOUNTER WITH GOD HIMSELF!

But dare we forget -- our adoration, our glorias, our harking and our radiant beams will mean nothing IF WE HAVE THIS ENCOUNTER and then forget about it. God gives us himself in order that we might give Him to others. That's the whole meaning behind gift-giving. We give, because God has first given!!

God gave us himself as a baby in a manger and an adult on a cross. He becomes a Wonderful Counselor, a Mighty God, an Everlasting Father, and a Prince of Peace AS WE GIVE OURSELVES IN LOVE AND JOY TO ONE ANOTHER. So, my Christian friends -- God be with you, God be in you, and God's peace which passes human understanding be yours to share.

AMEN

AND PEACE AND JUSTICE ON EARTH. He came to be more than a sentimental sign from heaven --

he came to become a powerful sign of heavenly peace and justice on earth --

he came that we might share the maturity of his love and peace and thereby become signs of his heavenly good will on earth.

AMEN

CHRISTMAS EVE

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

December 24, 1983 7:30 & 11:00 P.M.

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"CHRISTMAS HYPE OR HOPE?"

And the angel said, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:10-11

'Tis the season of great hype ... and equally great hope. We've been experiencing the hype -- the marketing and merchandising of Christmas now for six to eight weeks ... and at last it's time to share and celebrate the HOPE of Christmas.

As dedicated churchmen, our tendency sometimes is to be somewhat critical of all the Christmas hype. But we should be cautious in our criticism. The hype has a way of making this days more exciting ... it gets us above the doldrums of our ordinary days ... it gives the whole Christmas festival a greater air of ecstasy! And yet as we all know - the hype can become an end in itself -- totally negating or diminishing the real hope of our Christmas celebrations

Possibly that is well illustrated in the story of the young pastor who wanted his first Christmas Eve service to ring with great eloquence and long-lasting remembrance. He chose as his focus the "Star of Bethlehem" - the significance of that light in the world. And to be certain that his parishoners would remember -- he developed a major point for each of the four letters of the word "STAR."

He then secured four large pieces of posterboard -- and he painted a large letter on each board -- s-t-a-r. Then he smeared Elmer's glue over the letters and affixed silver glitter onto the glue. Finally - he enlisted four beautiful little girls. He had them dress as angels with glittery gold wings. And each one of the little angels was to hold one posterboard letter.

Christmas Eve came. And the little angels entered the chancel on the last verse of the sermon hymn. As instructed, they lined up along the front chancel step facing opposite the congregation. As he looked down from the pulpit -- all

was perfect. From his left to his right -- they were smiling angelically, each with a letter -- S - T - A - R. So he began. First there was "S" -- the star of Bethlehem was a sign of SALVATION. The first little girl turned on cue!

Then there was a long point on "T" -- the star of Bethlehem signified a TRANSFORMATION in the world. And that little girl turned to the congregation. Then there was "A" -- the star was announcing the ALMIGHTY coming into the world. And finally -- there was the "R" -- the star was assuring sign that REDEMPTION was now given to all mankind.

Regretably -- in all the hype of this production -- the pastor had overlooked one major problem. As long as the girls were facing him -- everything was well with the STAR OF BETHLEHEM. But as they had turned to the congregation -- the "Star of Bethlehem had been transformed into a new word -- when the final little "R" angel turned -- the congregation now saw "RATS" -- and now "STAR".

And that's exactly what hype can lead to at Christmas -- feeling like RATS! All the production, all the expectation, all the energy, all the hustling and bustling especially on a sub-zero day -- IT CAN ALL MAKE US FEEL LIKE THIS CHRISTMAS THING IS JUST FOR THE RATS!

Whether inside or outside of the church -- that is the great temptation of these Christmas/Advent days; to allow ourselves to get so hyped-up with things and activity that we end up experiencing NO JOY, NO RENEWAL, NO HOPE FOR THE DAYS TO COME!

For instance -- this year's hype has been the Cabbage Patch Kids. But we all know the reality of tonite or tomorrow morning for many girls and boys. When all those gifts are opened -- there will be several children who will say: "RATS - where is my Cabbage Patch Kid -- I didn't get what I wanted!" For our children this year - the whole essence of Christmas has been marketed and wrapped as a Cabbage Patch Kid--- not as a child in a manger!!

Again - I'm not trying to say that all the hype of the holidays is ALL bad. Even the Cabbage Patch Kid reality has helped to give a spirit of expectation to Christmas. But the danger of all this hype is that it promises nothing lasting nothing of real substance ... no real hope.

It was E.T. last year -- it has been the Cabbage Patch Kids this year -- and who knows what inanimate object will tickle next year's fickle fancy?!?

It's like those Christmas letters that we all receive from family and friends each year. For Sue and me -- we have always enjoyed those newsy notes from our friends over the years. But sometimes those letters tend to convey only the hype rather than the hope of Christmas.

It was like the letter that we received this year from old friends who, like many of our couple-friends, each write a part of their Christmas letter. One partner had written on-and-on in the letter about all the things they had acquired and the exciting places they had toured over the year. The other partner focused in upon their families, their friendships, and the significant events of their lives. The letter beautifully illustrated the difference between THE HYPE and THE HOPE of Christmas.

Christmas HOPE is not found in material things or extravagant trips. Obviously - there is nothing immoral about material things or fancy excursions. But these will never give us lasting pleasure and security. Christmas HOPE is found in a relationship ... a friendship .. in a significant life event!!

Obviously - such hope is found in sharing the relationships, friendships, and life events of our families. Many of you have been doing that tonite -- or will be doing it soon. But the real Hope of Christmas is found in our relationship and friendship with Jesus Christ -- because that is the only significant life event THAT NEVER CHANGES. It will not break... it will not be replaced by a new fad next year... and above all, that relationship and friendship will not die WHEN WE OURSELVES FACE DEATH!

Needless to say -- the relationship and friendship with Christ that I am talking about is more than a sentimental trip down memory lane to a manger scene. To call Christmas a significant life event means we must get beyond the nostalgic sentimentality of a babe in a crib, angels hovering over a barn, or any other gospel according to Hallmark. There is little hope for anyone if we only see the Christ as a baby in a manger!

The hope and significance of his birth IS THAT HE NEVER CHANGED HIS FOCUS OF MINISTRY THROUGHOUT HIS ENTIRE LIFE!!!!

He entered the world in bitter humility to show that God's mission is and always will be one of humility!! This King came NOT TO IDENTIFY ONLY WITH THE RICH & POWERFUL & POLITICALLY PRESTIGIOUS! But quite to the contrary -- this Prince of Peace came especially for the poor and ordinary of humankind!

Here was a God coming into the world at the bottom of the heap -- and here was the same God who would never forget the insignificant, the little guy, the ordinary people he grew up with. Here was a God whose ministry was constantly to the POOR and SICK, to the LEPERS, TAX COLLECTORS, and OTHER OUTCASTS, to the SAMARITANS AND SINNERS, to WOMEN and CHILDREN, to all mankind ----- but especially TO THOSE KINDS of people who were usually by-passed by the political establishment and religious professionals of the day!!

Here was a God who had come into the world to give a new definition to His Kingdom -- a mission of mercy, of love, of forgiveness TO ALL PEOPLE -- not only to the exclusively rich, powerful, or pious!!

And that HOPE was not made known merely through a manger in Bethlehem. As Professor Carl Braaten comments in his Christmas commentary: "Christ's beginning without the end would not be the whole story.... All the beautiful talk about Christmas, the incarnation in the royal city, the heart-warming stories of wisemen, shepherds and angels, would be nothing but fairy-tales without the crisis and catastrophe of the cross."

Only as we combine the humility of God in the manger with the humiliation of God on the cross DO WE SEE THE FULL IMPACT OF OUR RELATIONSHIP & FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD!! Christianity is not a religion of sentimental escape -- it is a faith of suffering servanthood!!

As one of our children asked me recently: "Why do we make so much of a birth of a baby?? Isn't the real significance of Jesus' life in remembering his death?!? That little girl did not realize the profoundness of her question!!

The manger scene is a beautiful symbol of our Christmas Hope. It is a powerful reminder of God's willingness to become an ordinary person like you and me. Whether in ceramic or wood-carved figures -- we dare never forget this part of our traditional ritual.

But God has come into the world to give us more than symbolism

and ritual -- more than Christmas sentimentalism and hype -- more than Sunday School pageantry and play-acting. God came into the world to give us a HOLY HOPE -- a promise of a friendship and relationship THAT WILL NEVER BE TAKEN AWAY!!

We do not find that relationship to ~~white~~ by merely processing solemnly to a manger crib. Because God is no longer there! The manger is empty! Likewise, the cross is empty! Similarly, the tomb is empty! Because the Lord of heaven and earth is no longer a baby nor is he dead! He grew up! He lived! He taught God's truth and healed the sick! He forgave the sinner! He died! And he rose again! AND he has returned to BE WITH US -- HIS REAL PRESENCE IS HERE RIGHT NOW!!

Not in a wooden manger bed -- not on a tree-trunk or golden cross -- not in a cold tomb or garden cemetery -- BUT IN HIS WORD AND THROUGH HIS SACRAMENTS!!

"For to us A child is born -- to us a Son is given!" Jesus Christ enters into our hearts, our minds, our bodies, our daily lives THROUGH HIS SPOKEN WORD AND HIS TOUCHABLE SACRAMENTS!! The Living Lord comes within us -- inhabits our humanity every time we hear his Word and receive His Sacrament! And it is in that hearing and receiving THAT WE HAVE HOPE OF A LOVING RELATIONSHIP & FRIENDSHIP FOR ALL ETERNITY!!

That is not mere hype of Christmas -- that is the HOPE OF CHRISTMAS! Possibly it is best illustrated in the story of those young American soldiers about to go overseas during World War II. It was Christmas Eve -- and they had been invited to a Christmas Eve party. There was a lot of nervous activity and hollow laughter as everyone tried to block out the awful fact that these young men would soon be leaving ... and may never return again. Finally - someone asked: "Hey guys, what would you like as a special Christmas gift before you leave???"

There was a long, awkward silence. Then one of the men said: "We'll be leaving this week -- and we may never see you again. Is there anyone here who can lead us in singing: "My Faith Looks Up To thee -- Thou Lamb of Calvary, Savior Divine!" That's Christmas HOPE!!

AMEN

CHRISTMAS EVE, 1984
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 24, 1984
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"AN EXTRA SPECIAL GIFT"

And the angel said, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. . . . And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased." Luke 2:10-11,13-14

"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 of the Father." John 1:14

Gift giving in America has almost become a national pasttime. For the commercial enterprise, new days are constantly being created for gift-giving -- there's boss' day, and sweetest day, and secretary's day, along with all the other traditional ones. The greeting card industry has likewise created all kinds of new occasions for giving that special card or gift. In fact, for most of us it's really tough to decide what to buy for our loved ones -- for how can you possibly buy that "special gift" for someone "who already has everything." No doubt about it -- gift-giving in America is no easy purchase. It's no wonder that fads like gobots, and robotics, and cabbage-patch kids, and computer games become so successful.

Still, there are special gifts of real value that people never get enough of. Take the story of the young woman who was recently let go from her corporate position just before the holiday. She had a critical choice in light of her funds -- she could buy her family a few small gifts, or she could purchase an airline ticket and be home with them for the holiday. She chose the latter.

However, when she got home, she really had a dilemma. Everyone else would be exchanging gifts; she had none to share on Christmas morning. She would be mortified under such circumstances. Then she had an idea. Associated with each of her family members, she recalled a specific incident which had inspired her to greater growth and wholeness. She decided that her gift would be to recount these incidents.

Christmas morning came. When the family exchanged gifts, she had each member stand. She read aloud her written-down recollection of the event that had greatly influenced her life. Then she presented the written-down thoughts to that family member, hugged and kissed them, and

shared a very warm thank-you. That was her EXTRA SPECIAL GIFT on Christmas. And it was her gifts, and her gifts alone that made that Christmas A VERY EXTRA SPECIAL ONE for her family.

Tonite we gather with much the same purpose in mind -- to share AN EXTRA SPECIAL GIFT. And much like that young woman, we have no wrapped packages to offer. The fads, the gobots, the gimmicks, the cabbage-patch kids, the star-lights and star-brights will not be found in this place tonite. Much like that young woman, all the church has to offer on Christmas is A VERY SPECIAL STORY ... a very influential STORY OF LOVE ... a LOVE STORY which has helped all of us toward growth and wholeness ... a LOVE STORY which we never tire of telling again and again. We call this story THE GOOD NEWS.

Good News to be good news needs someone to talk and someone to listen. People have often asked me, "Peter, why did you become a pastor?" For many years, I had a hard time answering that question honestly. But now in my old age I've gotten over my shyness. I became a pastor because I like to talk.

In seminary, our professors of pastoral care always told us -- "you guys need to become better listeners. Keep quiet and let your counselees do the talking." That was really very good advice. More than one person has accused his pastor of having "diarrhea of the mouth." And as you all know, I succeed in often qualifying for that honor.

But lately I've come to think that silence may even be a greater temptation. In such a complex and confusing world, how can anyone presume to speak with authority? Our temptation is to say -- "better defer, better not speak, better not say anything for I may say the wrong thing, better just be quiet, better just wait & see." To all that God says: "hogwash!" He has good news to share NOW -- and he wants his messengers to share it NOW!

I preach because I believe that someone, namely God, has given me a message to share. That God has given me the authority to speak. And tonite he beckons the preacher among us to talk and everyone else to listen. Tonite he asks the preacher among us to offer his EXTRA SPECIAL GIFT -- his Word that became flesh and dwelt among us. Tonite God says, "tell them that I have come into the darkness of this night to give them a new light to live by."

This is the one night that God wants someone to break the silence with a trumpet blast, with the flutter of wings, with a voice saying: "Be not afraid, I bring you good news of great joy. For unto you a Savior is born, to you a son is given; and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

When God speaks, things happen. With God, words are not as good as deeds -- they are his deeds. Words and deeds are one. When God speaks, creation happens. When God wanted to say something about what God was all about, and what we are all about, and what life is all about -- it wasn't a sound that was heard. It was a man that emerged. His name was Jesus. He came just like you and me -- as a baby. But there has never been nor will there ever be a more EXTRA SPECIAL GIFT given on Christmas.

A friend of mine sent me a poem to the effect that when God wants a job done neither earthquakes nor thunderbolts are sent. Rather, a helpless baby is given. And then God puts an idea into the mother's mind and that idea is transmitted to the child. And then God waits. God waits for his love to blossom and grow and flourish. God's greatest forces are not thunderbolts but babies.

As Martin Luther himself said: "What can be sweeter than a Baby? Look at this child, knowing nothing. Yet all that is belongs to him. Watch him springing in the lap of the maiden. Laugh with him. Look upon this Lord of peace and your spirit will be at peace.

See how God invites you," continues Luther. "He places before you a Baby with whom you can take refuge. You cannot fear him, for nothing is more appealing to a man than a baby. Are you afraid? Then come to him, lying in the lap of this fairest maid. To me there is no greater consolation given to mankind than this -- that Christ became a man, a child, a baby, playing in the lap and sucking at the breasts of his most gracious mother. Now is overcome the power of sin, death, hell, conscience, guilt -- when you come to this gurgling Babe and believe that he is come, not to judge, but to save you."

That's the Good News of this and every Christmas -- that's the EXTRA SPECIAL GIFT that we have come here to share. Possibly far better than this preacher, there was another great Danish preacher by the name of Soren Kierkegaard. His extra special story for this night is a parable which truly captures the essence of Christmas's EXTRA SPECIAL GIFT.

There was a prince who was riding one day through a very ragged and poor section of a city in his kingdom. Looking through the curtains of his royal carriage, he caught a glimpse of the most beautiful maiden he had ever seen. For weeks following, he asked his carriage driver to go through that section of town -- always hoping he would see her, always hoping for yet another glimpse of this maiden. Before long, he was totally infatuated with her. He desperately desired only one thing -- to take her hand in marriage. But how could this be done? She was poor, common; he was rich and royal. Absolutely no one would approve.

Of course, the prince had the option of royal command -- he could simply order her to be his wife. But what kind of marriage would that be; and furthermore, no one would rejoice in it. Again, he thought he could masquerade as a peasant. Then when he won her interest, he would pull off his mask and reveal his true identity. But such trickery would only cause her to deeply resent him.

Finally, he hit upon the most noble solution of all. He would lay aside his kingly robe and honor and status and everything else. He would move to her neighborhood. And there he would take up a vocation consistent with the 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 totally one with her. Hopefully then, over the course of time, he would gain her respect and trust and admiration and possibly even her love. This the prince did. And finally, he won her love. And only after months of sharing their relationship did she finally come to know his true identity.

Is this not the EXTRA SPECIAL GIFT OF CHRISTMAS? Out of the loneliness of God a world is born. Out of the love of God a Savior is born. And out of the fallenness of man, when it was no longer possible for us to come to God, God came to us on our own terms, in our own place, among our own friends, speaking our own language. "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."

Let us never stop sharing this EXTRA SPECIAL GIFT of Christmas!

AMEN

CHRISTMAS EVE
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 24, 1985
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"KEEPING CHRISTMAS!"

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ... And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.'"

"Night has fallen; the clear, bright stars are sparkling in the cold air; noisy voices rise to the ear from the city, voices of revelers of this world who celebrate with merrymaking the poverty of their Savior. Come, come Jesus, I await you.

Mary and Joseph, knowing the hour is near, are turned away by the townsfolk and go out into the fields to look for a shelter. I am a poor shepherd; I have only a wretched stable, a small manger, some wisps of straw. I offer all these to you; be pleased to come into my poor hovel. I offer you my heart; my soul is poor and bare of virtues, the straws of so many imperfections will prick you and make you weep. But Lord, what can you expect? This little is all I have. Jesus, honor my soul with your presence, adorn it with your graces. Burn this straw and change it into a soft couch for your holy body.

Jesus I am here waiting for your coming. Wicked men have driven you out, and the wind is like ice. I am a poor man, but I will warm you as well as I can. At least be pleased that I wish to welcome you warmly, to love you and sacrifice myself for you.

But in your own way you are so rich, because you see my needs better than I. You are uncreated holiness, and you will fill me with those graces which give new life to the soul. Oh, Jesus, come, I have so much to tell you, so many sorrows to confide, so many desires to share ... so many promises ... so many hopes. ..."

The words of this meditation were written 83 years ago by a young Italian named Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli. He was studying for the priesthood, and two years later he received his doctorate of theology and was ordained. You and I remember him best as Pope John XXIII.

His thoughts are reflective of many of our thoughts here tonite. Whether we are skeptics or born-again believers ... whether we are part of the faithful fold or the fallen-away flock, we all come here tonite with the same mysterious yearning. Like Pope John XXIII, we desire

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that this Christ-child will come deeply into our hearts. We yearn to believe, to trust, to follow, to pray with the former Pope: "Come, Jesus, come, for we have so much to tell you, so many sorrows to confide, so many desires to share, so many promises and so many hopes yet to be fulfilled.

Christmas Eve. The one night that almost the entire world is open, receptive to the good news of the Christ child. The one night that millions upon millions are KEEPING CHRISTMAS.

All the changes in the world ... all the technology ... all the sophistication ... all the plurality and relativity have not yet touched this night. We will not let anything invade the goodness of Christmas Eve. This is one night that the old message supercedes all computer print-outs and the media message ... this is the one night that only the old message rings true:

For to us a child is born ... to us a son is given ... And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ... ~~And there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.~~

Maybe like me, some of you received some of those modernistic cards with the pretty rural snow scenes or the birds hovering over some flowers. For me, they just don't do it -- do they? They just don't ring true. They may be very suave and expensive, yet they are so cheap. So untrue ... so far from the real message of this night.

What still rings true for me is that scene of the cattle lowing, the sheep grazing, the shepherds tending, the angels hovering, and Joseph standing over Mary and the babe, and the old message from the angel boldly announcing:

Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

That's the message of truth of this night. It can't be said any better than it was first said. It's the old message that has brought millions to their knees on Christmas Eve. KEEPING CHRISTMAS is still keeping that old message at the center of this celebration. And what's that message all about? It's about what we all need -- not only tonite, but every day of every week of every year. That message is about THE SPIRIT OF LOVE, THE SPIRIT OF GIVING,

and THE SPIRIT OF PEACE. That's KEEPING CHRISTMAS -- keeping love and giving and peace at the center of everything. That's what God-in-the-flesh is all about -- the spirit of love and giving and peace.

I hope that doesn't sound too easy -- because the spirit of God's love is never easy. It's so often like the little eleven year old boy who was missing one year in L.A. just before Christmas. His mother was frantic; she described the boy as last seen wearing a blue flannel shirt and blue jeans.

At 10:45 p.m. that night, the patrol officers made a routine check at headquarters. And there he was with flannel shirt and blue jeans. Under his arm he clutched a package; he was scared and close to tears. It all looked like the typical story: Working mother, no father, tough kid running around with other tough kids in a tough neighborhood, mother now panicky and paranoid. All so typical of big city stories.

But this case was not typical at all. The boy was yelling at the desk sergeant: "No, I won't let you see what's in my package." The sergeant kept trying to yank it away. "No, you can't have it ... I'll tell you what's in it. It's a necklace and earrings for my mom. She saw them last Easter, but couldn't afford them. So I've been paying on them for eight months. Today, I walked all the way to the Boulevard because I needed the bus fare to make the final payment. I was almost home -- when this cop hauled me in here. And if you tell my mom (fighting back the tears)--it's the only Christmas surprise she'll get this year.

The desk sergeant called the jewelry store. The owner said: "That kid's been coming into my place with nickels and dimes and quarters since last April."

The police took the boy home. And everyone at the precinct was a little changed that night. Everyone thought: "Imagine, ~~that crazy kid~~, buying his mom's Christmas present at Easter." But of course, that's KEEPING CHRISTMAS, isn't it? Because the love of God did not merely appear on December 25th; it's a sacrificial love that must be shared from Easter to Christmas and back to Easter again. It's the love of a poor little boy who sacrificed his nickels and dimes and quarters for months TO SHOW THAT CHRISTMAS LOVE IS SOMETHING THAT BEGINS LONG BEFORE DECEMBER 25TH.

But of course, KEEPING CHRISTMAS is not only this spirit of love -- it is especially the spirit of giving. One author has said, "we're born with the spirit of getting, but we must forever learn the spirit of giving."

That's why the old message of Christmas rings so true to me and you: **BECAUSE NOTHING MORE DRAMATICALLY REMINDS ME THAT GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIMSELF!** That's where our gift-giving comes from ... that's why our trees are loaded tonite ... it's possibly the only time that we give without any strings attached. But God's gift is even greater than ours. The value of any gift is its ability to change the one who receives it. That's why God gave himself -- not merely to bless us, but to change us. In order that we might make a difference in his world.

So what is the greatest gift we can give? Ourselves. It is a gift that costs both everything and nothing. It is hopefully what is behind every gift under our trees -- the desire to give ourselves to others ... in order to change their lives ... to be the Christ-child for them. That's **KEEPING CHRISTMAS!**

But ~~KEEPING CHRISTMAS~~ ^{people!} is even more than the spirit of loving and giving. It is above all the spirit of peace and good will to all. The peace of the Lord is so much more than a peaceful feeling on Christmas Eve.

Possibly - the only way to really see Christ's peace is to again look at the old message carefully. Jesus entered the world amidst the hopeless and helpless. His compatriots were the shepherds and sheep and cattle and a poverty-stricken couple.

God did not choose to enter the world amidst pomp and circumstance ... amidst charm and good times. He started life on this earth just like most of us -- as another mouth to feed, with no choirs singing, no halo around his head, as just another resident of the no-hope land of Israel. He entered the world "in crisis" -- he was a member of a family that had been rejected and abused by the culturally elite and powerful.

He started with the lost and the lonely and the abandoned of the world. Might there be a real message in this Christmas story for us? Might we see that our mission as Christians is to the lonely, the lost, the abandoned of the world. Our mission is to those suffering hunger and tragedy ... those feeling rejection and abuse ... those people living in the darkness, who are longing for forgiving light. That's the real peace of the Lord -- not a mere peaceful feeling, but the peace of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the lonely, comforting the sick and dying, sharing our wealth with the poor, ... giving and giving and giving some more, because that's the spirit of God's peace that passes all human understanding.

KEEPING CHRISTMAS is this kind of peace on earth and good will to all men. It's a peace that remembers that

Jesus was not born in light and warmth and happiness and good times, but was born in darkness and cold and despair and poverty -- and his birth changed all that into hope. THAT'S THE SPIRIT OF THE PEACE OF CHRISTMAS.

For many of us, KEEPING CHRISTMAS is bringing out the old creche and setting it up in a prominent place. Like the the family who did this for 36 years. You know, they had one of those manger scenes that folded out like an accordion -- and all the characters popped up when you folded it out -- sheep, shepherds, cows, wise men, angels, Joseph/Mary and the babe. It was one of those old sentimental cardboard creches.

When the manger scene was folded up -- the whole scene folded flatly into the stable area. But this year when the family brought it out of the box, there was a large hole cut in the back of the stable. They couldn't believe that someone had tried to destroy their creche. Finally, after much investigation, the culprit was found: little 4-yr old Jimmy had done it. He took his little scissors and cut the whole just before it was stored the previous year.

Grampa was picked to confront Jimmy. But Jimmy's explanation was simple yet profound: "With the manger scene all folded up like that, there was no way for Jesus to get out into the world. So, I cut a door for him in the back of the stable so he could get out.

KEEPING CHRISTMAS is just exactly that -- cutting a door for Jesus to enter into our daily lives. For far too often we keep Jesus trapped in the Christmas creche. It's time to let him out. Come let us adore him, by living his spirit of love, his spirit of giving, and his power of peace. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

AMEN.

"ALL TOGETHER AGAIN!"

"And the angel said, "Be not afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ... And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: `Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.'" Luke 2:10-11;13-14

Many of you have heard the famous Christmas story - one which I've told before - about the little boy in the Sunday School Christmas pageant. He was very excited to be the leading angel. And he had just that one important sentence to say: "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy!" After the rehearsal, he asked his mom what "tidings" meant. She told him it meant "news," - "good news." The day of the program came, and the little boy was scared to death before the large audience. In fact, he was so frightened that he forgot his one line. But just as he stepped forward, he remembered his mother's words and blurted out: "Hey, I got good news for you!"

That's what this night is all about -- "good news." It's been told, and told, and told again -- but we never get tired of hearing it. From December 26th until the next December 24th -- we are bombarded with "bad news." During those 364 days, we hear over and over and over again how humanity misses the mark -- how we fall short of the glory of God! The news for 364 days tells us stories of fragmentation between rich and poor -- of hatred between black and white -- of disputes between labor and management -- of distrust between urban and suburban -- of the heartache and sickness of division, despair, and disappointments that are the daily events of life.

But on this one night ... for ever so brief a time ... God PUTS IT ALL TOGETHER AGAIN! God makes it whole once more! Christmas is the new genesis of life -- it is the story of creation told all over again WITH ITS ORIGINAL INTENT! It is God again saying as he first said: "Ah, it is good! Yes, it is very good again!" Tonite for several moments in the world, we catch the vision of the way God wanted it from the very beginning. Tonite we can say with God, "it is very good," because peace ... harmony ... good will DO ALL REIGN EVER SO BRIEFLY in the hearts and minds of humanity. For these brief moments, the human puzzle is ALL TOGETHER AGAIN. The missing pieces have been found.. All because of an event in which God became a child and entered fully into human history. Tonite we can again say, "It is good!" because God has entered into our broken and fragmented world AND PUT IT ALL TOGETHER AGAIN!

than being together in this place.. The news of this night was told nearly 2000 years ago -- and again on this night that news has again come true for us. That's why we're really here! Because on this night ... like no other night of the year ... we finally FULFILL GOD'S HOPE FOR US!!

Yes, on this night -- like no other night of the year -- we finally make room for him in our busy lives! The innkeeper did not have any physical room for Mary and Joseph -- but he did have emotional space for them. He had compassion on them -- he knew they needed a resting place, so he offered all he had left - his stable.

Finally, on Christmas night, we make emotional space for the lost and the lonely and the least of the world. That's why Christmas is SO GOOD! Because we finally get in touch with God's spirit on this night -- we finally let go of our selfish, egotistical spirits! We finally realize that God came into this world to help the heartbroken and homeless, the hungry and hurting. We finally realize that we are to live in that image of God -- that this is the way God created us to be. We finally MAKE ROOM for those that we would normally despise -- like the poor, the shepherds, the dirty, the so-called trash of society. For a short time on this night, the whole created world is in harmony again.

That's why this night is SO GOOD! And that's why Christmas is so special and uplifting for me. It's the one time that I can do God's will ... that I can help the needy without some church-tightwad asking me all those selfish questions. It's the one time that God's people are finally MAKING ROOM for the poor and the despised of the earth. Is it any wonder that 9000 foodbaskets were distributed this week in Toledo? Is it any wonder that hundreds of hungry are finally getting a full meal? It's Christmas again! And that's good news! In fact, it's very good!

But tonite we not only MAKE ROOM TO SERVE LIKE CHRIST -- like no other night, we live tonite without fear! Tonite no matter how dark our lives have become, there is a light shining through the darkness. The angel said, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy!" Tonite, like no other night, we finally receive the good news of God's forgiveness in a concrete way! It finally is felt and lived in our lives!

Possibly that's best illustrated by the story of the homeowner who put in a new concrete driveway. He did all the work himself. He removed all the old stones, the weeds, the old broken blacktop -- he totally prepared the way. Then he

Finally, he cleaned up and took his wife out to dinner.

When he returned, he found children carving their initials and making hand prints in his fresh concrete. He jumped from the car and chased them away with threats and ugly curses. As he returned to the car, his wife commented, "Honey, I thought you loved children."

He responded: "I do love children in the abstract, but not in the concrete."

God became flesh and dwelt among us, because he did not want to be an abstract God. He wanted a concrete relationship with each of us. God totally prepares the way for us. He makes all the preparations for our lives on earth. He lays the beautiful, life-giving foundation. But instead of chasing us away when we mess it up, he embraces us and forgives us. That's why we proclaim that Christ is a light shining in the darkness of this world.

That's why we "Do not fear!" It's like the story of the father and son who had just returned from the funeral of his wife and the son's mother. As they went to bed that night, the little boy, now in bed with his dad, began asking questions: "Daddy, where is mommy? How are we going to live without her? Daddy, what's going to happen to us now?" The father lay quiet - he had no answers to give to his son. Finally, after a while, the little boy reached over and touched his father's face and asked: "Daddy, is your face toward me? If your face is toward me, then I know I can go to sleep." Being assured that his father's face was toward him, he became quiet and fell asleep.

In the midst of that darkness, the man prayed: "Oh God, it's dark and I cannot see my own way through the days ahead. But if you'll keep your face toward me, I know I will be able to endure the darkness!"

That's why this night is WITHOUT FEAR. Because Christmas is God's assurance of coming to us FACE-TO-FACE. He assures us that his face will always be toward us. He will never turn his back on us. He has come into this world to help us through the darkness of our lives. Again, not to take away the darkness -- but to help us through the darkness. And that's good news! Yes, it is very good!!

Yes - tonite we have MADE ROOM FOR CHRIST ... AND WE HAVE DONE SO WITHOUT ANY FEAR. SO finally it is a night in which we sing praises like we have never sung before! Like no other night - not even Easter - this night brings millions

Christmas night, God gets the glory in this world.

But there are still some among us who can't quite come to this ecstasy. There are still some like my good friend, Bill. Bill's a very good person. He is a thoughtful and loving husband and father. He is a considerate and kind neighbor. He is a deeply devoted and highly successful businessman. But the idea of "God becoming human" is just too much. He would like to "pretend" for the sake of his children, but integrity will not permit such falsehood. So on this night, when his whole family is here with us, Bill is at home alone -- watching T.V., stoking the fireplace, and trying not admit the pain of his isolation.

All of you know Bill. He can be found in your neighborhoods tonite just like mine. But tonite, something different happened to Bill. He was dozing in the overstuffed chair near the fireplace when he heard a strange noise. He listened intently - and then passed it off as falling snow from the roof. But then he heard it again. It sounded like scratching on the front door. He thought one of his neighbors might be playing a Santa spoof on him. But then he heard it again. At the front door, he found three little kittens, huddled together, and shaking in the cold. Someone had merely dropped them off -- as an unexpected gift.

He was reluctant to bring them in, but he could see that they were cold, frightened and hungry. So he carried them next to the fireplace and went to find some milk. When he returned, they were gone. But he could hear them scampering in adjoining rooms. They were not playing; they were afraid of Bill.

He tried to entice them with food. He tried to ignore them, hoping they would soon trust his distance. He tried to get them to play with a ball of yarn. Finally he tried to chase them around the house. But nothing worked. He finally sat down, exhausted and frustrated.

He thought to himself: "If only I could speak to them -- identify fully with them. I want to tell them that I care about them ... I want to show them I desire the very best for them. What can I do to convince them to trust me?"

Just then, the chimes from the church began to roll and proclaim the birth of Christ. And Bill sat on the living room floor staring at six scared eyes -- and for the first time, he understood why THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US FULL OF GRACE AND TRUTH.

our level, in our terms, with the same struggles and needs that are common to all of us.

Possibly it's best said on the card whose Christmas greeting goes: "If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent a scientist. If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent an entertainer. But since our greatest need was forgiveness, God sent himself ... as Christ our Savior."

Hey, now, that's good news! It is very good! Because God has PUT ALL THINGS TOGETHER AGAIN!

AMEN.

SO LET US KEEP THEM
TOGETHER FOR MORE THAN
THIS HOLY NIGHT!

CHRISTMAS EVE
Hope Lutheran Church
December 24, 1988
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"T H E G R E A T E S T G I F T"

"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 of the Father."
John 1:14

How many times have you heard the Christmas story from Luke? Maybe 50 ... over a hundred ... maybe even more than 250 times? Has it become any less powerful? Wasn't it just as majestic as read by Pastor Michaels tonite? We still thrill when the angel says: "Be not afraid, for behold I bring you good news of great joy ...". We regularly reverberate with the multitude of hosts as they sing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased." This is one night we all want to "make haste" with the shepherds to Bethlehem town. And like those shepherds, we will all go home tonite "glorifying and praising God for all that we have seen and heard."

But no matter how well we know the images ... no matter how correctly we can quote the Christmas characters around the creche ... no matter how sentimental each Christmas Eve pilgrimages has become -- there is still much mystery surrounding this night. It reminds me of the mystery of the little girl whom I talked to after her father died this past year. Like few little cherubs, this little angel believed deeply in the resurrection. She told me without question that she knew her daddy was now living with God. She had no resurrection doubts; yet she still had some resurrection mysteries. When I finally asked her if she had any unanswered questions about life, death or resurrection, she said: "Well, there's one thing: what kind of bathrooms does God have in heaven?"

Just as there is mystery with our bodily resurrection, there is also mystery with God's bodily incarnation. We ask, why did God purpose to bless the EARTH with his flesh? And why did he become FLESH of all things? Why did he choose earth and not some other PLANET? And why did he choose LITTLE Judea -- TINY Bethlehem -- and that SMALL nation of Jews? Why did only SHEPHERDS, SHEEP, AND DONKEYS show up for the visitation party? Why of all things did he come as an INFANT? After all, he had the power to become whatever ... any age, any size, any status!

We sometimes think we have all the answers - but like the little girl with heavenly bathrooms ... there are equal mysteries with heavenly births on earth! But there is one reality that is not mystery tonite: GOD HAS MADE A PERSONAL APPEARANCE!! THAT'S NOT CHRISTMAS MYSTERY - THAT'S CHRISTMAS REALITY! God didn't beam himself to earth on a TV tube! He didn't speak in wierd tongues or use lightning bolts to get attention! He didn't remain revmoved and detached in some other worldly kingdom above the clouds! God became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth!

What GREATER GIFT could be revealed to humanity on Christmas Eve than a personal appearance by none other than God himself! Christmas Eve announces that our God is more than some obtuse, philosophical concept ... more than some supernatural phenomenon of holy essence ... more than several books of the law for good kosher living ... more than some wise sayings for intellectual edification and meditation. On Christmas Eve, God BECAME AUTHENTICALLY HUMAN as well as INFINITELY DIVINE. And what GREATER GIFT could we come to adore than the very essence of God IN THE FLESH!?!.

Let's face it -- there's nothing we love more than someone who's willing to make a PERSONAL APPEARANCE! In this media age of computers and tapes and terminals and tele-marketing, where life is sometimes no more than mediated electronics, what greater news could we share than that God Almighty wanted to have bodily, physical contact with his people! On Christmas Eve, God proclaims "Let's get physical!" God did something totally unheard of, totally contrary to all other gods! He became just like you and me! No longer would he rule from the distant heavens or behind the pages of the Torah; God would now personally experience our joys and frustrations; our ecstasies and agonies!

Is there anyone here tonite that would dispute the incarnation as God's GREATEST GIFT to humanity!?! That's why saintly sinners pack the pews this night! Because no matter how much mystery still shrouds this birth, humanity can't restrain itself on Christmas Eve from celebrating the reality of God in the flesh!

Sadly for some, the reality of God become flesh lasts only one night! Or said differently, some people never get beyond the manger scene! Somehow these people have forgotten that God's GREATEST GIFT was not a manger, but a cross! Without the cross, without Christ's death - little baby Jesus is just another misguided messiah. God never intended to leave us spectating at Bethlehem. He had bigger and better plans for us!

Christmas Eve not only announces that GOD HAS COME DOWN TO INHABIT OUR FLESH; but Christmas Eve proclaims that HUMANITY HAS BEEN LIFTED UP TO BECOME LIKE GOD!! God did not finish his love for us in a stable; he completed his love for us on the hill of Calvary. It was on Golgatha that Jesus said, "It is finished." God did not finish his gift for us on Christmas Eve! Tonite is just the beginning! So, as we come to adore this Christ-child, we come as more than spectators -- we come as the greatest recipients of loving grace ever gifted! For the same Christ child who cried in the crib was crucified on the cross IN ORDER TO RAISE US UP TO HIS LEVEL OF LOVE! God did not want us to stay on our knees at his crib. He wanted more than Christmas spectators; he wanted EVERYDAY, DEDICATED DISCIPLES!!

That image graphically reminds me of a great Christmas story. For many years a Lutheran Church in downtown Milwaukee had erected a still-life creche. Finally, one year the Decorations Committee decided to use live animals. Everything

was going fine on Christmas Eve until the donkey decided to wander down the street where he ended up in one of the hundreds of Milwaukee bars. A Christmas Eve customer, who had obviously been embiding for many hours, began to think that his "Miller lights" had gone to his head when he saw the donkey at the end of the bar. He motioned excitedly to the bartender: "Look, look, a donkey!" The bartender responded: "Oh, Joe, don't let that jackass bother you; he belongs to the Lutheran Church down the street." At that point, Joe became totally rattled: he left the bar immediately.

Well, as we all know, that donkey was not the only jackass in the Lutheran Church. Without specifically intending it, this story illustrates that every church has its fair share of jackasses. In fact, that's the real "grace and truth" of God at Christmas -- the Christ-child helps us to see ourselves for what we often can be: dumb donkeys. We all wander and stray from the Christ-child ... many times ending up in places or conditions which can only do us harm. But Good Friday announces a new twist to the good news of Christmas; it announces that God accepts us just as we are -- sometimes as little more than jackasses. But God never leaves us in that state: Easter proclaims that he raises us to new levels. He dies for us in order that we might become MORE LIKE HIM -- sacrificial servants rather than dumb, self-serving donkeys.

Yes, God's GREATEST GIFT came down to us on Christmas Eve. And that same GREATEST GIFT lifted us up to be like Him on Good Friday & Easter Sunday. The Good News tonite is that the babe of Bethlehem only gets his full stature as the Suffering Savior for all mankind in Holy Week!

So, what does that mean for you and me on this Christmas Eve and every other day of our lives?? Only one simple thing: YOU AND I MUST NOW ALLOW THAT CHRIST TO BE BORN IN US AND TO LIVE THROUGH US! On Christmas Eve God announces the first phase of his game plan: "NO LONGER DO I WANT FOLLOWERS WHO ARE MERE SPECTATORS OF MY GREATEST GIFT OF LIFE." No longer can you and I merely be recipients of God's GREATEST GIFT. To really experience the GREATEST GIFT OF CHRISTMAS -- we must become like the very flesh and blood of the babe of Bethlehem. The Word must become a part of our flesh and blood!!

No one could possibly better illustrate that "Word become flesh" ... that GREATEST GIFT than a man named Bill. For all I know, Bill may be sitting here this very evening. Because Bill can be found in Toledo, Ohio just as he is found in every large city of our country on Christmas Eve.

The Bill I knew came from Detroit, MI. He lived with his family of "street buddies" near St. Thomas Parish. Their family home was an abandoned railway station. The City Council had opened the station for Bill's people - esp. because an old city steam line went right through the building. So at no cost to anyone, Bill and his friends stayed warm every night at the station.

The story I knew about Bill took place on Christmas Eve. He was carrying two boxes and a shopping bag filled with gifts for his railway "family." Bill was the only one in the station that could afford any gifts; he had been given a part-time job for the previous 30 days. The gifts that Bill carried home that night were nothing special to you and me -- but they were all he could afford ... and very special to him and his family. There was a tube of lipstick for Mary; a tin of tobacco for Harry; a comb & brush for Ellen; a pack of disposable razors for Ellen's friend, Frank; a pair of wool socks for Joe. In all, there were 12 gifts.

But the greatest gift he carried that night was from the kitchen of the department store where he was employed. All that Xmas Eve day, his friend, the cook, had set aside the uneaten & untouched food returned to the kitchen. Almost two full boxes of untouched food had been saved; and the cook also added the food that had not sold that day. For the first time in months, Bill and his friends would have a great feast ... a feast of victory -- a real Christmas feast!!

Exhausted from the demands of his part-time job, Bill was on his way to share THE GREATEST GIFT he would ever give. He was about to enter the terminal bldg ... when he was overcome by a heavy burden. Tears began running down his cheeks. Since it was Christmas Eve, the one thing that meant the most to Bill in the whole world had just been taken away from him. You see, Bill was hired by Hudson's as their Santa Claus. And now on Christmas Eve, Bill (like every other Santa) had lost his job. Santa Bill would no longer be needed; Bill was once again among the unemployed street people of our society.

But Bill would not allow his personal loss to change the true character of his heart. For thirty days, he had scrimped and saved to fulfill his Xmas mission. But it was more than a Xmas mission - it was the very mission of Christ himself in the flesh of Bill. One by one, he handed out the gifts; and one by one, they gave him the only gift they could give -- a warm embrace, a loving kiss, a whispered "thank you."

In the depth of his poverty, his joblessness, his homelessness, Bill still offered THE GREATEST GIFT of Christmas -- love in the flesh and a few simple gifts. Bill didn't do this for himself; he didn't do it for self-praise and admiration -- he did it for the one who was born in a place not much different than an abandoned railway station. Bill had been empowered by another homeless child -- by a child born of poverty stricken parents. In essence, Bill had now become the flesh and blood of the Christ-child born to another street family named, Mary and Joseph. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth."

That's still THE GREATEST GIFT -- when the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ NOT ONLY COMES DOWN ... NOT ONLY LIFTS US UP ... BUT COMES ALIVE WITHIN US -- WHEN we become his flesh and blood full of grace and truth for others!!

AMEN.

CHRISTMAS EVE - 1989

Sunday, December 24, 1989 7:30 & 11:00 p.m.

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"REASON FOR REJOICING!"

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. (Isaiah 9:2) For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:11) 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. (John 1:4-5)

Is there any greater REASON FOR REJOICING than the birth of a baby? Which one of us doesn't remember the exuberance of that moment? The hospital picture in the wall that was constantly flashed to every man, woman, and child with such great pride -- hoping to hear them say, "Wow, what a beautiful baby!"

How well I remember Angela's birth and the large sign that I draped over our Birmingham, MI front porch: "It's a Girl!" And with Sarah's birth -- many of you may remember the front sign marquee at Hope Church -- NOT ONLY "IT'S A GIRL," but all the vital statistics as well. One does not keep quiet about the birth of a baby! Cigars or pencils are passed out; telephone calls are made; announcements are sent out; the whole world hears the details of height, weight, sex, name, color of eyes and hair! There's no greater REASON FOR REJOICING!

Is it any wonder that we are here tonight REJOICING?!? A babe was born in Bethlehem this night! It was not just any old Martyn or Smith or Jones -- this was Emmanuel, God with Us! God came down from the heavens to take on our flesh and blood -- now that's REASON FOR REJOICING! Is it any wonder that the world never tires of hearing and seeing the vital statistics of this birth. God sent his announcement to the only people who were awake that night -- "shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night." Which one of us isn't startled in the middle of the night when some heavenly messenger shakes us and says: "The time has come - be not afraid - for unto you a child is being born!" Is it any wonder that the heavenly hosts were out by the hundreds singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those with whom he is pleased." Nothing less than a cosmic telegram of praise would be satisfactory for this birth!!

Just as we have great REASON FOR REJOICING with our babies, we have even greater REASON FOR REJOICING with the birth of the Christ Child. Because - at last - the fulness of God is now revealed on earth. No longer was God merely demanding that we become like him, now he becomes like us so that we might fully live in the flesh of his image on earth. No longer would God be seen as a burning bush, or stone tablets, or a raging flood, or some other impossible dream or unreachable star. Now he had come as one of us -- as a common human being amidst smelly hay and snorting animals. Now he was taking the

greatest risk that God could ever take -- he was revealing his love in the form of human passion and vulnerable flesh.

God's coming at Christmas is like the young woodworker who had longed for a certain young woman, but was uncertain of her love for him. So before Christmas, this craftsman worked diligently to create a most exquisite music box. Hours were spent on creating the perfect design and then flawlessly bringing it to life. Each raw piece of wood was examined in detail for compatibility of grain with the matching piece. Every joint was measured, cut, sanded, and fit with precision. Contrasting wood was meticulously inlaid in the top of the box. The worker's whole heart and soul was in the creation of this box.

On Christmas morning, with trembling hands, he presented the box to his heart's desire. In the giving of this gift he risked his true passion for her. But would she see it for what it was?? Would she see this was his creation of love? Would she notice his labor of love and craftsmanship -- or would it just be another music box to her??

In Jesus Christ, God reveals the depth of his love and craftsmanship for us. God has never made a more intricate creation of humanity! In Jesus Christ, the ultimate divinity becomes perfect humanity! In Jesus Christ, every human emotion, mood, motive, and mental state was measured and fit with precision. In this Babe of Bethlehem - God's perfect labor of love was given to his heart's desire ... to you and me. No longer was God loving us from a distance like some detached totalitarian king. Now God was intimately and vulnerably flesh - just like you and me. Now God could be hurt and humiliated on a cross -- just so that we might receive him rather than fear him. Now God could minister to people where they really were -- to grieve with the grieving, challenge the wayward, confront the misguided, comfort the sick, give sight to the blind, bring coherence to the crazed. There has never been a greater reason for rejoicing than the GOOD NEWS THAT GOD HAS COME DOWN TO BE BORN AMONG US AND TO DWELL IN THE HOUSE OF HUMANITY!

But babies must move beyond birthing rooms and stinky stables. Most babies finally do come home, whether that home is Nazareth or North Toledo. And like the song goes, "there's no place like home for the holidays." It's at home that we find the second real reason for rejoicing at Christmas!

Why is it that everyone migrates back home for the holidays? Did you know that Christmas leads birthdays by 3 to 1 for people being back home? It leads 4th of July by 5 to 1. What's the real reason for this rejoicing "in being back home?"

The German poet, Holderin, says that within all humanity, there is an essential "homelessness." None of us really feels completely at home where we are. There is a longing, a yearning for something more, for something beyond what we have,

for the untouchable truth of existence. "It's this homelessness that haunts the greatest writers, musicians, theologians, and artists. THE YEARNING TO REALLY BE "AT HOME."

At Christmas, God gives us the answer to this mysterious search for the meaning and truth of "being at home." God gives us our ultimate home - Emmanuel, God with us. HOME is not a physical or geographical place - home is wherever the promises of love are kept! That's why so many people migrate home for the holidays -- BECAUSE THAT'S WHERE THEY REMEMBER THE PROMISES OF LOVE WERE KEPT! Wherever you have experienced the promises of love being kept -- that's your home for the holidays!!

A baby was left at the doorstep many years ago of a home in Georgetown, PA. A widow was the head of that household -- a widow with several other children. But she took in that baby and loved it like her own. In the evenings she would read great books to her children. And this adopted, deserted baby developed a great taste for literature. Today, that abandoned baby is America's most prolific writer, James Michener.

Michener's life is a triumph of unselfish love because a widow gave him a home -- a place where the promises of love were kept. Why is it that churches in America and other countries are packed on Christmas Eve? Because on Christmas, God calls us back home -- back to where the promises of love are kept. Why is it that the homeless, the poor, the naked, the unemployed, the lost and the least turn to the church not only on Christmas -- but every day of the year?? BECAUSE AT CHRISTMAS AND EVERY DAY OF THE WHOLE YEAR -- this is where the promises of love are kept!!

Yes - it was that first Christmas Eve that God gave all types of humanity the real reason for rejoicing. Because on Christmas Eve - God gave us our ultimate home, not a place - but a person who keeps the promise of God's love! That's why the whole creation sings tonite - "O Come Let Us Adore Him, Christ the Lord!" On Christmas Eve - we come HOME to be with the one Father, the one Son, and the one Spirit who always keep the promise of love!

But babies grow up! They can't stay at home forever! There comes a time for everyone to enter into the darkness of the world. When Isaiah talks about " the people who walked in darkness," he is talking about a Jewish nation that was imprisoned by foreign domination and captivity -- a people molested by violence and death -- a remnant harrassed and scattered over creation by oppressive rulers from within and without!

The light of Christ that came into the world on Christmas Eve does not take away the darkness of despair and oppression happening right now in Panama, Romania, El Salvador, and hundreds of other places. Mailbox bombs are still dramatic reminders of the darkness of racism and death in this world. The darkness of grief for those lost on Pan Am Flight #103

is still being felt by their survivors a year later. The flicker of light in Russia and East Germany cannot take away the deeper darkness of depression for others throughout the world still suffering violence, homelessness, domination, unemployment, etc. We want the glorias, the exuberance, the wonder, the hosannas to shine so bright this night - but sometimes it just doesn't go the way we planned it.

In 20 years of parish ministry - I have not yet found a better story to illustrate the light and darkness of this night. It's the story of an Associate Pastor -- possibly even Peter Martyn -- and his first Christmas Eve at his first church. He wanted this first Christmas Eve to be the most glorious Christmas ever celebrated by that congregation. He wanted the light of Christ to really shine in the darkness of that night!

So he thoroughly prepared every detail of the service. He had even recruited an extra acolyte for that service who had but one single job: when the pastor chanted this phrase in the gospel - "AND THE GLORY SHONE AROUND THEM" - the little boy was to light the Christ candle. And so the service proceeded with perfection. Finally the dramatic moment arrived. In perfect pitch the pastor chanted: "And the glory shone around them!" He waited - but nothing happened. He cleared his throat, and again chanted: "And the glory shone around them." Again - no movement from the sacristy. So finally he really belted out a chant: "AND THE GLORY SHONE AROUND THEM!" At that moment, the sacristy door opened a crack -- the little boy's nose peeked out the door - and in perfect pitch he chanted back to the pastor: "And the cat peed on the matches."

God comes into the world to give us REASON FOR REJOICING -- he lights up the darkness of the world with the forgiving, compassionate and gracious light of Christ. But there's always a Noreiga or someone else in the world who is taking a leak on God's light! But God will not be defeated by the Noriega's or any other stinking cats in this world. As John says: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. This light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

God asks us to do more than become nostalgic on Christmas Eve -- more than light a Christ candle and sing about his peace and glory on earth. Our reason for rejoicing tonight is that Christ has not come to dwell in some holy place -- but to dwell in our hearts and minds.

Our greatest temptation on Christmas Eve is to blow out the candles when we leave this holy place. But because Christmas Eve reminds us that God is now with us -- because he has made his home in our hearts and minds -- he challenges us to take his light with us INTO THE WORLD.

Tonite's REASON FOR REJOICING is plan and simple: WE POSSESS THE LIGHT OF CHRIST AND THE DARKNESS WILL NOT OVERCOME IT! Tonite we will take his light home with us. And tomorrow

we will share its splendour with our children and families. And the next day we will take HIS light to our offices and shopping malls and sports events. And next week we will take HIS light to New Year's celebrations and then back to school with us. And week after week, we will return to recharge HIS light - so that the darkness of racism and hatred and violence will not overcome the light of God's most intricate creation: HIS LOVE IN THE FLESH OF JESUS CHRIST!

Yes on Christmas Eve - we are born again to be the light of Christ in the world. Could we be given a more radiant opportunity on this night and all year long: TO MAKE CERTAIN THAT THE DARKNESS OF THIS WORLD DOES NOT OVERCOME THE LIGHT OF GOD'S LOVE IN CHRIST. There is no better REASON FOR REJOICING tonite or any other time!

AMEN.

CHRISTMAS EVE - 1990
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 24, 1990 7:30 & 11:00 p.m.
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"NO LONGER WATCHING FROM A DISTANCE!"

(This sermon opens with Bette Middler singing "From A Distance." Following recording, the sermon begins):

Bette Midler has done it again - she has belted out another mystical, musical beauty! Again - she has crooned a tune of majestic melody, but a tune of atrocious theology. Like so many modern melodies - a tune can be engrossingly captivating while its lyrics offer little more than outright lies. 2,000 years of Christian history, millions of Christmas sermons, and the world is still singing about a "god watching us from a distance."

Count Maurice Maeterlink of Belgium once imagined that he saw God smiling down from a sunny mountain, high above the fog of things, looking down unconcernedly upon his troubled world ... no more disturbed by it and its dark problems than we are by a group of puppies playfully romping over one another. I get the distinct impression that Count Maeterlink must have been the inspiration for the producers and writers of Bette Midler's latest smashing hit!

It's amazing that the secular world has not changed much in 20 centuries. In that 1st century, nobody really took much notice of Jesus' birth except a few shepherds and some cattle. Luke doesn't even report any wisemen. The powerful, the prestigious, those who shared the spotlight of the Roman empire totally missed the miracle of Christmas Eve. Like today, they were probably too busy doing their own political things. In the empire's archives, no mention was made of a baby Jesus born to a peasant couple named Mary and Joseph who were enrolled in the little town of Bethlehem. Only Luke records this event for posterity.

Here we are 20 centuries later, and the powerful, prestigious, and prominent in Washington and Hollywood are still missing the miracle. In Washington, the major preparation is for war; the pentagon is hardly promoting any Prince of Peace. And in Hollywood, they have produced another one for the top-of-the-charts which simply portrays a "god who is watching from a distance."

And the similarities don't stop there. 2,000 years ago, when Rome spoke, it was always with trumpet fanfare and pompous parading. And likewise, when the powerful speak today it's always in multiplex stereo or multifaceted microphones with great galaries of reporters. And what's the news from these powerful and pompous?? Usually it's the same old incessant darkness. In the 1st century, it was the dreaded census - which put the burden of increased taxation upon the poor to a foreign regime. In the 16th century, it was the intensified darkness of indulgences and the fear of purgatory. And in the 20th century, the darkness continues

to spread through corporate raiding and escalating unemployment, through an astronomical federal debt that looms over this nation unable to be struck down by any strategic defense system, and through terrorism turned into a global power struggle in the middle east. And what does Hollywood have to say about all this -- it reinforces the darkness by singing about a "god who merely watches from a distance."

Just as Caesar Augustus's voice offered only a temporary peace in the 1st century - so the voice of Bette Midler tonite reveals a mere fantasy of peace and hope FROM A DISTANCE. She sings of a world which "from a distance" seems to be "in full harmony ... a world where all have enough and no one is in need - a world of no guns, no bombs, no disease, and no hungry mouths to feed."

Is it any wonder that so many want to "watch (the world) only from a distance?" It's so much safer that way ... so much less sacrificial and involving ... so much easier to convince ourselves that all is well - that there is no REAL DARKNESS in this world. So it is that we watch the middle east FROM A DISTANCE ... we watch 3rd world countries FROM A DISTANCE ... we watch our inner cities and the homeless FROM A DISTANCE ... we sometimes even watch our own families FROM A DISTANCE. It's the old rationale called "sin" - as long as we can keep our distance, we can avoid the real darkness and despair of those places ... we can also avoid any real spiritual commitment to change things. Thankfully, God had a much better idea for his world. He would not allow such a fantasy to go unchecked in his world. To end all hatred, violence, and separation, he had the infinite wisdom to take the necessary first step ... he recognized the human need for someone to reach out, to mend broken spirits, to heal old wounds, to reconcile the distance.

So it is that we hear the voices of St. Luke and St. John on Christmas Eve. And their voices tell a much different story from the voice of Bette Midler. They tell of a God who willingly and personally took the initiative -- who entered this world to take on the forces of darkness. They tell of a God who continues to get his hands blistered and bloodied to show how close he'll get.

Yes, most importantly, they tell of a God who was not content to "smile down from a sunny mountain, high above the fog and darkness of things." They tell of a God who would never be satisfied "to watch from a distance" as his world groaned in travail like a mother in childbirth. For John and Luke, the God who is God does not concoct some kind of secular, sentimental, "Santa Claus" fantasy. They tell that that which makes God, God, is his willingness to come among us in the darkness. That which makes God, God, is his humility which stoops far lower than any normal man/woman would ever stoop. That which makes God, God, is a patient kindness which bears on and on, long after every human heart would have been frustrated into angry rage. That which makes God, God, is an unselfishness and forgiving spirit so huge,

that it sweeps away our most powerful worldly voices and declares them hopefully inadequate!

And that's why you and I are here again tonite - to reclaim and confess our faith in a God who is not "watching from a distance," but who became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. We have come here to sing praises to this God who continues to come to a people who walk in darkness - the darkness of grief, of guilt, of greed, and of groping for new direction. And this God has come as a light in the midst of all this darkness - to shine for us as a Wonderful Counselor, a Mighty God, an Everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace.

Yes, tonite we do not sing the praises of Bette Midler about a "God who is watching from a distance." Tonite we sing "O Come Let Us Adore Him," because this Wonderful Counselor told stories of samaritans, and prodigal sons, and lost sheep, and rich fools, and wise stewards. He told stories about you and me -- and in his story-telling about us, he showed us he was not only a man of peace and good will - he revealed himself as a God who was a Wonderful Counselor of peace and good will.

And tonite we sing "Glory to this Newborn King" because this little babe became more than a grown up man. He became a "Mighty God" - not a vengeful, vindictive, vitriolic sniper in the distant sky - but a down-to-earth "mighty God" ... a Godly man who never gives up, who never quits, who continues year after year to call us back to his forgiving embrace NOT ONLY ON CHRISTMAS, but every week - every day - every hour.

Likewise, tonite we sing "Joy to the World" because the whole world has been embraced by the love of this God, this Everlasting Father. Here is the only Father of humankind who never stops giving his children attention and affection. Here is the only Father who stays close longer than a short weekend before he has to run off to that far off galaxy of the business world.

Finally, tonite we sing "Silent Night, Holy Night" because at last the peace of heaven has invaded the chaos of earth. In Jesus Christ, we finally see the real personality of the Prince of Peace -- the one who is totally committed to breaking down all walls of class, of race, of politics, and of other penultimate powers. Tonite, we come to the table of this Prince of Peace ... at last to put an end to human discord, division, or any darkness that still lurks in our hearts. This Savior, who is Christ the Lord, has come into our present darkness to put an end to all petty differences and triffling tempers. We leave his table and his tabernacle not singing about some "god watching from a distance," but singing the glorias of the angels who have been touched by his glory ... glory as of the only son of the Father ... glory which now radiates from our hearts and our minds ON THIS EARTH!

Christmas Eve rectifies the world's mistaken identity of a God who is merely watching from a distance. The God whom we worship and adore is one who came to laugh and suffer with us in the flesh ... so that he might truly understand our walk in the darkness ... and might thereby LIGHT THE WAY for us to overcome this darkness once and for all ... BY HAVING US become the incarnation of his love on earth.

AMEN.

"FROM A DISTANCE" by Bette Midler (Atlantic)

From a distance
the world looks blue and green
and the snow-capped mountains white.

From a distance
the ocean meets the stream
and the eagle takes to flight.

From a distance
there is harmony
and it echoes through the land
it's the voice of hope ...
it's the voice of peace ...
it's the voice of peace ...
it's the voice of every man.

From a distance
we all have enough,
and no one is in need;
and there are no guns, no bombs, no disease -
no hungry mouths to feed.

From a distance
we are instruments marching in a common band
playing songs of hope ...
playing songs of peace,
they're the songs of every man.

GOD IS WATCHING US ...
GOD IS WATCHING US ...
GOD IS WATCHING US ... FROM A DISTANCE.

From a distance
you look like my friend
even though we are at war;

From a distance
I just cannot comprehend
what all this fighting is for ...

From a distance
there is harmony and it echoes through the land
it's the hope of hopes
it's the love of loves
it's the heart of every man (repeat)
/ (2) this is the song of every man._/

GOD IS WATCHING US ...
GOD IS WATCHING US ...
GOD IS WATCHING US ... FROM A DISTANCE. (REPEAT)

CHRISTMAS EVE - 1991
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 24, 1991 - 7:30 & 11:00 p.m.
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"AT LAST - HEAVEN ON EARTH!"

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who have dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined." (Isaiah 9:2) "For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:11)

Recently a theologian acquaintance was having breakfast at a restaurant. As he was finishing his coffee, the man at the next table was punctuating his reading of the morning paper with deep groans and grunts of discouragement. Each page of current nat'l and internat'l news brought a more intense and provocative sigh of exasperation.

A lovely young waitress became quite concerned as she tried desperately to satisfy this man with coffee and polite service. Finally she inquired: "Is everything all right, sir? You seem to be very upset about something in here this morning?"

"You bet I'm upset Haven't you seen the morning paper. I'm sick to death with all this bad news of unemployment, recession, foreign domination, domestic crime, and cries of rape & harrassment."

Finally, but with a warm willingness to cheer him up, she responded: "You've just got to have hope, sir!!"

The man's response was classic. As his blood vessels began to protrude from his temples, he cleared his throat and with bristling anger and frustration fumed: "Hope!! You say 'HOPE!' How can you have HOPE in a world like this!?"

Which of us in this room in 1991 has not either said or been tempted to say the very same thing - esp. as we ponder last week's announcement from G.M?? Thankfully, my theologian friend could no longer remain silent (sounds like a typical pastor, doesn't it?). He leaned over and said, "Excuse me, sir -- I fully agree with you - you certainly can't find any lasting HOPE IN THIS WORLD. But you can receive everlasting HOPE from beyond this world when you allow A LITTLE HEAVEN TO BECOME A PART OF YOUR LIFE ON EARTH.

Dear friends, that's what this Holy night announces to the darkness of this world: THERE IS HOPE FOR ALL OF US BECAUSE A LITTLE HEAVEN HAS COME DOWN TO EARTH AND MADE AN EVERLASTING HOME AMONG US. That's why we rejoice & sing, "Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." "Yes, Come and Worship! Come and Worship! Worship Christ the Newborn King!"

On this night ... for ever so brief a time ... HEAVEN HAS INVADED THE EARTH for the umpteenth millionth time ... and the people of planet earth have finally made room for God to come again in the flesh. At last, on Christmas, we let God be God ... we let God make life whole again. Christmas becomes the new genesis of life -- it is the story of Creation told over again with the original intent. It is God saying through this babe in the manger: "At last, it is good; yes, it is very good again!" Tonite, for several moments in this world, we catch a vision of the way God wanted it from the very beginning to the very end! Tonite, if only for a few hours, we can say with God, "it is very good," because PEACE ... HARMONY ... GOOD WILL AGAIN REIGN IN THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF HUMANITY.

For these brief moments the puzzle of creation has been put back together again! The missing piece has at last been found -- and it is not Boris Yeltsin, Mikhail Gorbachev, or George Bush; nor is it some economic reform or rebate offer, nor a new jobs program, nor any other promise of paradise thru voodoo technology or economics. The missing piece is none other than God himself, born of a peasant girl, in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord! At last - HEAVEN ON EARTH ... AND IT IS VERY GOOD!

And what impact has this little piece of heaven on earth had upon this world? Well, it has brought us all back together again in this one place ... and that alone "is very good!" But far greater - this expression of heaven on earth has finally fulfilled God's hope for us. Because on this night - like no other day or night of the year, incl Easter -- on this night, WE FINALLY MAKE ROOM IN OUR HEARTS AND MINDS AND BUSY LIVES FOR THE FULLNESS OF HEAVEN ON EARTH! The innkeeper did not have any physical space for Mary and Joseph - but he did have emotional room for them. He had compassion on them - he knew they needed a resting place, so he offered all he had -- a crude stable.

And so it is for us. At last at Christmas - we personify the spirit of God -- we make emotional space for the lost and the least and the lonely of this world. At last, we get in touch with God's spirit of making heaven on earth -- of letting go of our selfish, egotistical, petty possessiveness! At last, we seek to reflect the image of God -- to make room for those we normally despise - the poor, the shepherds, the dirty, the so-called trash of society.

That's why this night is so VERY GOOD! And that's why Christmas is so special and uplifting for me (and I hope for you!)! It's the one time of the year that you and I can DO GOD'S WILL ON EARTH ... that we can help the needy without some tightwad or cheapskate asking us all those selfserving and bigoted questions. It's the one time that GOD'S PEOPLE finally MAKE ROOM FOR HEAVEN ON EARTH - for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the grief-stricken, and the despised of the world. Is it any wonder that 12,000 foodbaskets were distributed in Toledo; and that 27 baskets came right here from Hope Lutheran Church!

Is it any wonder that we proclaim with such gusto tonite:
"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince
of Peace - because at last, like this wonderful counselor and
prince of peace ... we are feeding the hungry and making room
for the hurting & rejected. At last, GOOD NEWS replaces BAD
NEWS in this world. At last, HEAVEN COMES DOWN TO EARTH in a
very concrete way!!

And that can only bring back to mind one of my favorite
stories. It's about the homeowner who put in a new concrete
driveway. Like God at Christmas, he prepared the way all by
himself. He removed all the old stones, the weeds, and the
old, broken blacktop. He went out and bought the bags of
cement, he mixed it, and he poured and leveled it all alone.
Now, any of us who have ever done that deed alone knows what a
back-braking process it is to build your own roadway. At
last, he finished - he cleand up - and then took his wife out
for a relaxing dinner.

When he returned, he found the neighborhood kids carving
their initials and making handprints in his fresh concrete.
He jumped from his car and screamed bloody murder in a series
of ugly curses. Then he collected his cool, he returned to
his car, and there his wife calmly reminded him: "Honey, I
thought you loved the neighborhood children!"

He quickly retorted, "Yes, dear, I do. I love those
children in the abstract, but not in the concrete."

God became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and
truth BECAUSE HE DID NOT WANT TO BE AN ABSTRACT GOD. He
wanted a concrete relationship with each of us. Like the
homeowner, God prepared the whole way all by himself. He laid
the beautiful, life-giving foundation. He provided all the
essential ingredients and substances for MAKING EVERYTHING
VERY GOOD. But instead of chasing us away when we messed it
up, God came in the flesh TO EMBRACE US AND FORGIVE US. And
that's why we proclaim that Jesus Christ is God's light
shining in the darkness of this world.

That's why we never get tired of telling or hearing this
story. Because there just is no other time WHEN HEAVEN COMES
DOWN TO EARTH & transforms the darkness of greed, bitterness,
jealousy and hopelessness into the light of God's forgiving
and merciful grace. Again, what does that LIGHT shining in
the darkness look like in real, concrete terms??

It looks like the transformed life of Russell Love from
Houston, Texas. You read about him a couple of years ago.
His mother was Betty Elliot, also from Houston. She had not
seen her son, Russell, for four years; nor talked to him for
over two years. All she knew was that he was living among the
"homeless" somewhere in Los Angelos County.

She contacted the FBI and the L.A. Police, but they told

her there was no way they could help. Finally she ran the following personal ad in the L.A. Times for twelve straight days: "Russell L. Love from Houston or anyone knowing where he lives, please call your mother collect: 713-447-5968. Russell, your mother will never forget you. She dearly loves you." Betty hoped someone would see the ad and make the connection. And someone finally did.

Ralph Campbell had spent 25 years living on the streets of L.A. and had given some sandwiches to a friend one day. That friend turned to another friend and said: "Hey Russ, you want a sandwich?" With just that hunch, Campbell phoned the newspaper. He led a reporter to the shipping containers in a parking lot on Western Avenue. There they found bedrolls and concluded that this might be where Russell was sleeping.

Very early the next morning the reporter returned to the Western Ave. shipping containers. A young, blond man was asleep, rolled up in a bright yellow blanket. When he awoke, the reporter asked if he was Russell Love. He said he was. The reporter, showing him the ad, said his mother had been running it for several days and wanted him to call collect. Russell rolled up his bedroll and walked down Western Ave. with abandon. A few weeks later, after much red tape with cashing checks and verifying identification, mother and son were reunited in Houston. At last, the months of bitterness, anger and misunderstanding of the past had been reconciled -- because heaven came down to earth one night in Los Angeles County. God in the flesh of another street person and L.A. reporter had rescued Russell from the trash heap of Western Avenue. At last, even in the midst of the dark streets and alleys of Los Angeles, the everlasting light of God's heaven on earth was shining. The hopes and fears of the last four years were met in Him that night.

That's what we seek and celebrate here and everywhere tonite. And that's what we hope will continue to shine in the darkness for many days and nights to come. That wherever alienation, hopelessness, bitterness and frustration shout out in anger at restaurant counters or kitchen tables or assembly lines -- that someone will be there to proclaim a hope from beyond this world ... that a little of heaven will touch the earth ... that you and I will continue to make room for him who was heaven sent.

Because on this night, we have finally proclaimed Jesus Christ as the Savior of the World. At last, we have professed that He is the only expression of HEAVEN ON EARTH that will ever bring assurance of peace in this world ... and the promise of good will to all people. Possibly that's why the greatest Christmas card ever sent says it this way: "If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent an educator; if our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent a scientist; if our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent an entertainer. But since our greatest need was forgiveness - God sent himself, as Christ the Savior of the World! AT LAST, HEAVEN ON EARTH.

AMEN.

CHRISTMAS EVE - 1992 (11:00 P.M. SERVICE)
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 24, 1992
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"TO US A CHILD IS GIVEN!"

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Is. 9:6

Other than trees, what is the most decorated item of Christmas? Surveys say, "Windows." I don't know whether these are official surveys or not, but we need not look much farther than this sanctuary to see our fascination with decorated windows. I remember as a child how I would often cut out white snowflakes, red bells and green Xmas trees -- and then I would scotch tape them to all the windows in the house. Then each year, usually the week before Christmas and the week after, the Martyn family would pile into our 1948 Studebaker and just drive up & down the streets of Oshkosh to take in the home and window decorations. And mom would always tell dad to drive slower so she could see through the windows to the lighted Xmas trees. Speaking of windows, did you ever stop to wonder if that stable in Bethlehem had any windows??

Well, whether there were real windows or not, on that Holy Night in Bethlehem God finally cut a window for the world so that the fresh air of his forgiving love and the radiant light of his gracious will could be SMELLED & TOUCHED & SEEN BY EVERYONE! He cut a window for the world because we human beings had plastered ourselves behind walls of separation, sin & doubt! So on Christmas Eve, God chiseled a window into time and space and entered into our human consciousness as a child. AND WHAT'S HIS POINT: HE DIDN'T WANT ANYONE CHILDLESS IN THIS WORLD; WE HAVE ALL BEEN GIVEN THE CHIRST CHILD!!

Of course, there are many among us tonite who remain UNRECEPTIVE OF THIS CHILD. Such people remind me of little six-yr-old Michelle who found herself on Xmas Eve with a new baby brother. Her teacher said: "Michelle, I hear you have a new member in your family! Aren't you excited?" Michelle responded: "Yeah." "Well what's the matter, Michelle? Aren't you happy with your little baby brother?!" "I guess I am," muttered Michelle, "but there are a lot of other things we needed more!" Can't you imagine that same scene 2000 years ago with the angel's announcement: "Be not afraid; for behold I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord!" With the exception of a few shepherds and lowly cattle, like Michelle, most of Israel's people said: "That's sweet of you, good God, but there are a lot of other things we needed more!" God gives us the light of his countenance, and we ask for Super Nintendos, Salad Shooters, CD Players, new fur coats, and lots of other things that we think we need more! When will we learn that Christmas is not a celebration of things, but a glorification of God's personhood in a child?!

Yes, on Christmas Eve we see more than window decorations and tinsel and lights and all the other things that we think we need more. We peek through a crude, open, undecorated window into a now-sacred stable and we see THE CHILD that has divided all history from B.C. to A.D. A newborn child takes center stage. And what else would we expect -- newborn babies have always claimed the center of attention. A lot of religious folks lament and lampoon that Christmas has become too childrenized, too commercialized, too culturalized, too Santa Claus-ized! I don't think God is too surprised or too disappointed with all this attention to children. How clever of Him to enter this world so naturally and normally. No big fanfare that would make it all too obvious or too easy to believe. How clever of God to have allowed, maybe even planned, that his entry should be happily joined with a pagan festival of the returning light at Winter Solstice. Yes, Christmas Eve puts a CHILD at the center of the stage. God comes this way so that every time we see a newborn child and consider all the promise and hope that new life brings - we shall remember this birth, this child, this longed-for Messiah, this promised Prince of Peace, this Christ who thru a cross conquered death itself and brought to light the miraculous possibility of life beyond the dingy stables, dark streets, and frozen graveyards of this world.

TO US A CHILD IS GIVEN, and things have never been the same since! But is this really a Word of grace & truth, or is it just the wishful and romanticized thinking of Xmas Eve?? I think that Bret Harte has given us a glimpse of THE REAL TRUTH in his famous short story, The Luck of Roaring Camp. You will recall that there was quite a commotion in Roaring Camp. Cherokee Sal, an Indian squa and the only woman in this rough, tough mining settlement, had just died after giving birth to a son whose father was unknown. Around the crude cabin where this newborn child lay helpless & crying, the hundred, hard-bitten goldrush miners gathered in curiosity & concern. Death was common at Roaring Camp; but birth was a whole new experience.

Stumpy, a fugitive of justice on charges of bigamy, had by common consent taken charge of the little one's arrival. He allowed the miners to view the baby, but at the same time asked all of them to make a contribution for the helpless little orphan. So they filed in -- taking off their hats in the presence of this miracle and putting their gifts at the baby's side: a revolver, a diamond ring (probably stolen), a sling shot, and a silver spoon.

But now what? The next day the inhabitants of Roaring Camp met in serious deliberation, without the usual slugging, brawling or swearing. Stumpy was designated guardian, with a female mule as his first assistant. Strange to say, the little one thrived under his care at Roaring Camp. And equally strange was the effect on the Camp. The little infant was named, "Tommy Luck." His cabin had been a filthy mess before his birth; but now it was scrupulously cleaned,

whitewashed, and all tidied up. A cradle had been packed in by the mule - that made the rest of the furniture look so shabby that the whole place had to be done over.

In turn, the local gambling joint and bar, the so-called grocery store, had to be spruced up to keep suit with little Luck's cabin. Before long, the whole settlement followed suit. And because Stumpy wouldn't let anyone hold little Luck unless he was spotlessly clean, shaven & shorn -- the miners' appearances were miraculously transformed at Roaring Camp. Likewise, there was a change in conduct. Shouting within sound of Tommy's cabin was strictly forbidden -- and the usual profanity was practically given up as not right for a little baby boy to hear. Roaring Camp, the once ugly, drunken frontier settlement, became as one Cockney criminal put it: "a kind of 'eaven on earth!" Word got out from pony express riders that streets in Roaring Camp had vines & flowers round their cabins, & they wash themselves twice a day; and it's all because they worship this little Injun baby named Tommy Luck.

Now if this could happen because of an Injun baby named Tommy Luck, could we not expect even greater miracles from a child named Emmanuel, "God with Us?!" It has been said that when a wrong wants righting, or a truth wants presenting, or a continent wants opening, God sends a baby into the world to do it. You say you still aren't a believer?!? Well, you better believe that those pictures of starving babies in Somalia had a lot to do with our Humanitarian Military Relief Effort recently ordered. It wasn't politics, it was babies! When a wrong wants righting, or a truth wants presenting, or a continent needs changing/compassion - God opens the window and reveals a baby for the world in order to get the job done!

It was 1809 when Napoleon stood over much of the western world as a Colossus, military giant. From Spain to the Near East, kings and popes did his bidding or suffered the consequences. The only cries heard in those parts were cries of battle and the clamour of Napoleon's wars.

But in that same year in a crude cabin in Kentucky a child named Abraham Lincoln was born. And that same year in Massachusetts, Oliver Wendel Holmes came into this world. And in Liverpool, a baby named William Gladstone was born that year. And near Somersby, Alfred Tennyson was coming to birth. In Germany, it was Felix Mendelssohn born in 1809. And in Poland, it was Louis Braille. And other babies including Cyrus McCormick and Charles Darwin became flesh and dwelt among us that year. Within six years of 1809, Napoleon was through and his empire shattered. But Lincoln's addresses, and Tennyson's poetry, and Mendelssohn's music, and Braille's humanitarianism, and McCormick's invention, and Gladstone's vision, and Darwin's ideas are still bearing fruit and reaching more lives than ever before. "When a wrong wants righting, or a truth wants presenting, or a continent needs changing or compassion, God sends a baby into the world to get the job done!"

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Christmas celebrates that day when God wanted wrongs righted and truths presented and continents changed - he became REAL in the flesh of a child and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. And just as he has shown us - from that first day also, he showed his Son that to become REAL in this world YOU DEVOTE YOURSELF TO LOVE OTHER PEOPLE. "Laying down your life for others" is not something you decide to do one fine day when the sun is shining - it's something that happens to you every single day once you've decided to love as God has first loved you.

But on Xmas Eve maybe only a toy horse from the Velveteen Rabbit could possibly best summarize the meaning of being a REAL CHRISTMAS CHILD in this world:

*Real is a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long time—not just to play with, but really loves you—then you become Real. Does it hurt? Sometimes—but when you're Real, you don't mind being hurt. Does it happen all at once or bit by bit? It doesn't happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges or have to be so carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, your eyes *begin dropping* out, you get loose at the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all. Because once you're Real, you can't be ugly—except to people who don't understand.*

So, once again on Christmas Eve God chisels open HIS WINDOW thru the wallboard of this world. And we see a CHILD and say: "Jesus, Child of God, welcome again into this cold and cruel world. There's nothing we need more than your REAL, CHILD-LIKE LOVE!

AMEN.

CHRISTMAS EVE - 1993
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 24, 1993 11:00 p.m.
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"THE NEVER-ENDING STORY"

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. ... Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end." Isaiah 9:2;7

We want our Christmas celebrations to be perfect, pure and painless. Many of us even have the mistaken notion that such was the situation that first Holy Night. It usually only takes a good Sunday School pageant to remind us that there is no such thing as a perfect, pure & painless Christmas celebration. Robert Fulghum tells of one such pageant. As is often the motivation - his church was trying to outdo previous pageants. So this year they had decided to rent a donkey upon which Mary would ride.

The day of the pageant came. The congregation sang beautifully all the appointed Christmas carols; the angel choir, complete with haloes, even got through its first big number "almost on key and almost in unison." The time came for the grand entrance of Mary and Joseph, with Mary riding the donkey. Then it happened.

The donkey took two hesitant steps into the nave, took a look at the huge crowd, and then locked his legs. And no matter how much they yanked at him ... no matter how hard Mary kicked at him ... the donkey had decided that the procession would come to a halt at the entrance.

Just then the president of the congregation and DCE, who were seated in the front pew dressed in their best, rose to the rescue. With the president pulling on the halter and the DCE pushing at the donkey's behind -- slowly they slid the donkey down the polished cement aisle up to the chancel. At that moment, the choir director turned on a tape-recording of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's "Hallelujah Chorus." That loud music caused the donkey more fear and he then began a loud chorus of "Hee Hawing." By this time, the whole sanctuary had broken into hysterical laughter; and the planners vowed never again to do a Christmas pageant with live animals.

What was organized to be a "perfect pageant with a touch of reality" turned out to be a "miserably embarrassing joke." I experienced that same mood of misery at one of the new Meijer's stores this past week. In her haste, the clerk had incorrectly rung up my Master Charge. The line behind me was already ten deep at the time. Now she was on the phone trying to rectify her error ... and all the time watching the line behind me grow. When she finally got it all corrected, she half-smiled at me and said: "Isn't it miserable what's happened to Christmas?"

We all know what she meant by that saying: "Isn't it miserable what's happened to Christmas?" The birth of Jesus Christ; the coming into our world of the Word become flesh; the strains of "peace on earth among those with whom God is pleased" -- at times, all this seems to be missing from our rush of buying and wrapping, our fighting traffic, our standing in lines, and our beating the deadline at the post office. Too often today "Glory to God in the highest" is just background "musik" over department store loud speakers as the cash registers keep on ringing. "Isn't it miserable," she sighed "what's happened to Christmas?!"

In one sense she was saying "If only we could get back to the real meaning of Christmas ... if only we could get back to the pure & perfect celebration of Christ's birth ... if only we could get back to the real joy & grace & peace of Christmas ... if only we could get back to the real religious convictions and spiritual truths and Christmas as a holy day. This clerk was yearning just like many of us have sometimes yearned and just like the planners of that Xmas pageant YEARNED to "go back to the real story of Christmas."

But Thomas Long in his commentary says that "whenever we think this way, whenever we YEARN to have a Christmas as pure and as holy and as innocent as the scenes on our Christmas cards, then we run the risk of missing the whole point of Christmas. For the writer of Luke was very careful to remind us that the very first Christmas, the day of Jesus' birth, was not a holy day, but a working day. Jesus was not born during a worship service, but during a tax census. The day when Jesus was born was a time, so to speak, of ringing cash registers, of filing 1040 returns, of people standing in long lines to beat the tax deadline, of huge crowds so thick that there were no rooms available at the local inn. When the angels announced Jesus' birth, it was not to priests lighting candles in the temple; it was to shepherds earning their livelihood in the fields.

This is the NEVER-ENDING STORY OF CHRISTMAS. God did not enter a holy and pure and perfect and orderly and antiseptic world without any pains, problems or darkness. God did not choose to enter a safe world of silent sanctuaries and hallowed spaces; instead he chose the rough and tumble workaday world of people with jobs to do, with fields to tend, with more anxiety than they knew how to deal with, and with the government breathing down their backs at tax time.

If the NEVER-ENDING STORY OF CHRISTMAS is only fit for the religion page of the Blade, then IT HAS NO POWER; its impact is restricted to only a small compartment of life. But Luke wants us to know that the birth of this child takes place in the middle of life's swirl ... and that makes the STORY news to be heralded in every section of the paper: the politics page, the business page, the front page, even the sports' page. The promise of Christmas, as Isaiah put it, is that the oppressor's rod will be broken, the government will be upon his shoulder, and his rule will be a time of peace

and justice THAT NEVER ENDS. That's the NEVER-ENDING STORY -- that the Christ child doesn't come into a pure and perfect holy world. Quite to the contrary, he came into a world of darkness and despair with the hope that his his light & love might be able to break through and save it!!

That's why John proclaimed that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son" to die for it. He loved the world so much that he could not keep himself closeted in heaven. He had to come to earth to rescue us, to experience every aspect of human existence. He had to know temptation and face the hellish cunning of the devil. He had to meet moments of hunger and homelessness to know the plight of such people today. He had to sweat in a carpenter's shop, to endure the sorrow of his son's death, to know the anguish of a family briefly disturbed by his mission. He had to confront apathy among the religious, arrogance among his own "called" servants, and legalism transformed into an art rather than an expression of love for God & others. He had to visit the sick and disturbed, the frightened & the fearsome; he had to meet thieves & murderers, believers & unbelievers, the righteous & the unrighteous, the monied & the bankrupt. All of these Jesus had to see with his own eyes, up close and personal.

And because he saw these things up close and personal, His NEVER-ENDING STORY reveals that he will not settle for THINGS THE WAY THEY ARE! He made crystal clear through Isaiah and later through Luke and John that he will not allow darkness to have dominance in this world. That's why I was especially intrigued with both Pastor Silleck's and Pastor Michael's sermons the past two Sundays. Both pastors reminded us that "too often we conform" to the way things are. We commiserate over murders and rapes and muggings and molestings and drugs -- but then we just shake our heads and don't do anything to change them. As Pastor Silleck stated: "we stop expecting a better world!" As Pastor Michaels stated: "we stop expecting to be surprised!"

Well, the NEVER-ENDING STORY of this night couldn't say it more clearly: PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST NEVER STOP EXPECTING A BETTER WORLD; PEOPLE WHO ADORE THE CHRIST CHILD NEVER STOP EXPECTING TO BE SURPRISED. That's why God sent his only Son into this world: to literally lay down his life for every person so that this world might become a better place for everyone. The Christian motto is NOT: see what the world has come to, BUT RATHER: see what has come into the world! That's the call of every Christian every Christmas: TO SHOW THAT CHRIST HAS COME INTO THE WORLD ... TO BE READY TO LAY DOWN OUR LIVES WHENEVER WE SEE ANYTHING WHICH BETRAYS THE SPIRIT OF THIS CHRIST-CHILD. We are God's "Shepherds of Surprise" -- always willing to advocate for the lost, hungry or wounded sheep; but also willing to give hell to any wolves who would kill or steal or beat down others in this world.

This past Tuesday, 20 of the 35 people at Lunches with Luther told their versions of the NEVER-ENDING STORY of God's grace and truth. I cannot possibly capture the transforming impact of their stories tonight. But I can tell you that the grace and truth of Christ came to these people in simple things like a loaf of Tastee bread, or sitting on his mom's lap as a 160# boy, or having two other widows come to your house just hours after your husband died, or hearing your child read you the Christmas stories that you once read him. The NEVER-ENDING STORY of Christmas is any time that the love and grace of Christ comes into this world to turn a moment of darkness into a moment of hope and new light.

That moment was captured by Ruth Harnden in her classic: "Let Nothing You Dismay!" This story reveals an absent-minded, old woman becoming horrified when she realizes that she switched two Christmas gifts and sent them to the wrong people. The thick, woolen socks she had made for her friend, Hilda, had been sent to her college-age granddaughter instead. And the sexy lace and satin nightgown that she had purchased for her granddaughter had been sent to Hilda. The old woman was mortified because her friend Hilda was poor, plain, & simple--and had never once adorned herself in life. Such a nightgown would certainly seem a mockery to Hilda's plainness.

But a few days after Christmas, the old woman received two letters. Her granddaughter went on and on thanking her for the coolest and most perfect ski socks that she ever got at Xmas; she was going to cherish them on her Xmas break ski trip. The second letter came from an ecstatically grateful Hilda. Hilda told the old woman that no one had ever given her anything so lavish, sexy and beautiful. Hilda wrote that every night she puts on the satin nightgown and goes dancing across her rough, wooden floors as if for the first time in her life she finally knows what it's like to be Cinderella. At last, someone had made her feel pretty!

That's the NEVER-ENDING STORY OF CHRISTMAS: that God continues to touch us and gift us so that we are freed from our mistaken identities. No longer do we see ourselves as trapped by sin or any other ugliness or darkneses of life. Now we know that we are forever loved and forgiven! And because of the real presence of Christ in this world, like the shepherds of old... we will give glory to God in the highest by bringing His countenance of light into every corner of darkness in this world. AMEN

CHRISTMAS EVE - 1993
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 24, 1993 - 5 p.m.
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

The Greatest Story Ever Re-told

(Invite all children to come down to first four pews) Is there anything missing up here tonite? The creche or manger is empty. Is that the way it was on the first Christmas? No way! What are we going to do about it?? Well, the way the manger gets filled every year is by RE-TELLING THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD. So tonite, all of you are going to help me RE-TELL THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD.

So - here's the story: Luke 2:1-20. Now, what's the first thing that's missing in the manger scene (be careful - you have to remember that the manger was in a stable or barn; so what's the first thing we need to put into the barn: ANIMALS.) Even before Joseph and Mary - we have animals in the Christmas story.

Then after the animals - what's next. We're told that Joseph had to be registered in the city of his ancestry - Bethlehem. (Read Luke 2:4-5) So, Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem. And where did they stay? In a barn, because there was no room in the inn (2:7b Holiday Inn). So, we need to put Mary & Joseph in the barn. While we're doing that -- who can tell me about Mary & Joseph?? Were they rich? Were they powerful? Were they chosen by God because they were super religious? No - they were just simple, down-home folks; in fact, Mary was still a young teenager.

So already - we're learning something important about THE GREATEST STORY EVER RETOLD: it's not great because of the people that God chose to be Jesus' parents; it's great because God chose to come into this world as a baby.

Now - who came after Mary & Joseph? THE BABY JESUS! So often in our Christmas pageants - we wait til the end to bring in baby Jesus. But THE GREATEST STORY tells us that Jesus was born shortly after Mary & Joseph got to Bethlehem.

Then after Jesus CAME THE MOST IMPORTANT PEOPLE OF ALL ON THAT FIRST CHRISTMAS: THE SHEPHERDS. (Read 2:8) And who tells the shepherds about the birth? AN ANGEL - really just means a messenger of God (often shown with wings) (Read 2:9f) Then who came after the angel? A MULTITUDE OF THE HEAVENLY HOST. (Read 2:13-14) That means that what the shepherds heard was like a loud cheering crowd at a football game -- so let's cheer!! (Hand out noisemakers)

Then the most significant thing happens: THE SHEPHERDS LEAVE THEIR FLOCKS AND GO TO SEE THE BABY JESUS! (Read 2:15-16) Now that was unheard of: shepherds never left their flocks for anything. So this must have been a most stupendous event!! And can you imagine those shepherds coming to Mary & Joseph--dirty, weather-beaten, poor and awkward. Yet - for 2000 years this is the scene that has been reported: There were no kings, or presidents, or rabbis, or governors or pastors or top executives that came to see Jesus. Just the shepherds. In fact, we are told that the shepherds not only came -- but they were the ones that FIRST TOLD THE STORY (Read 2:17-18,20) Just think--without the shepherds, THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD would not have been told ...

What if they had gone back to their flocks and said nothing: THE GREATEST STORY might still be a mystery! We would not have Christmas! We would not have this special night! We wouldn't even have Santa Claus, because he was first inspired by this GREATEST STORY!!

Well -- were there any others that came to the stable that night??? NONE!! Sometimes we tell about some wise men or kings from the east! But look at the story: THERE IS NOTHING ABOUT WISE MEN FROM THE EAST. That part of the story comes from the gospel of Matthew; and great people who have studied the Bible tell us that the wise men probably came at least six months TO two years after Jesus' birth -- that's why Herod ordered that all little boys two years old or younger were to be killed. So you can see that if you have an authentic manger scene ... the wise men never came to the stable; Matthew tells us they visited Jesus later in a house.

But there's one important group that we have not yet mentioned that are part of this GREATEST STORY EVER RE-TOLD: you and me! Without you and me, the story dies. That's why God wants everybody in church on Christmas Eve: TO HELP RE-TELL THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD. Like the shepherds, most of us here tonight are not the greatest people that God could have chosen. But God doesn't choose us because of who we are or what we do -- he simply chooses us to tell the whole world THAT HE BECAME JUST LIKE US ... SO THAT WE KNOW GOD HAS EXPERIENCED ALL THE EARTHLY TROUBLES AND PAINS THAT WE HAVE EXPERIENCED. Above all, he came on Christmas to tell us that we are to live like him: NOT LETTING THE DARKNESS OVERCOME THE LIGHT OF HIS LOVE. WE ARE TO SHINE THROUGH THE DARKNESS. So, let's sing THE XMAS VERSION of the greatest song ever taught to children about the light of the baby Jesus: THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE!! AMEN.

CHRISTMAS EVE - DEC. 24, 1994 - 5 P.M.
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

CHRISTMAS IN CANDY CANES

Does anyone know why I brought a candy cane to church with me on Christmas Eve? (That's right - Candy Canes have a long tradition of being a very important symbol of Christmas.)

Some say the candy cane tradition **began in Europe as a decoration for Xmas trees**. Others say that the meaning for candy canes began in a **candymaker's shop in Indiana**. I don't know which story is the most accurate -- but it really doesn't matter because both tell the same thing about candy canes.

First - why is the **candy cane white**? Because it symbolizes the life of Jesus -- that he was pure and sinless ... and that he was conceived by God through the Mary.

And why are **candy canes hard**? Because they symbolize that Jesus is the foundation of our faith in God; he is the Solid Rock to which we anchor our faith ... and his promises are firm and true - they can be trusted.

Now let's look at the **shape of this candy cane**? First, let's turn it upside down and then you tell me what you see? **It's a "J"** isn't it - the candy cane represents the first letter of Jesus' name. So it **reminds us of the name of the Savior of the World: Jesus**.

But the candy cane also looks **like a shepherd's staff**: because Jesus was known as the Good Shepherd. I've brought two real shepherd's staffs with me. What do you think shepherds did with their staffs.

1) They **pulled sheep out of the ditch**. So the candy cane reminds us of one of our duties as shepherds: to help people who are in trouble or hurt.

2) But what else could shepherds do with the staff? They could **prod the sheep to get moving or get back on the trail** when they were wandering away. Do we need to be prodded by Jesus when we wander away from God?

3) Another thing the staff did was to **help the Shepherd keep his balance in rough terrain and to find the right paths** over which to lead the sheep. That's something we expect from Good Shepherds -- we want them to remain balanced and strong ... and to lead us in the right Ways that God wants us to go ... the Ways of goodness and truth.

Now what else do you notice is always on candy canes: the **red stripes**. What might these stripes stand for? The **small ones represent the lashes** that Jesus received before he was crucified. And the **large stripe represents his sacrifice** of his life for us to show God's love for us.

And esp. **in Europe**, Xmas trees are decorated with candy canes to remind children at Christmas of **the whole story of Jesus - not just his birth, but his life and his death**. **Because it was only after Jesus died for us that we really came to realize the importance of his birth**. Isn't that the way it is with many of us? Michael Jordan was a nobody at his birth. But once he established himself as the greatest BB player in America -- then all of a sudden his birthplace and age and even his early years became very important in his life. Jesus birth became very important because of his Godly life and total obedience to God by surrendering his life on the cross.

So tonite we celebrate Christmas in Candy Canes -- **to remind one another that no purer or greater love was ever given to the world than the love of Jesus, the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep**. Remember the next time you eat a candy cane, that you are "taking Jesus' life into your very body!" Every time we eat a candy cane, Jesus becomes a very special part of our lives!

CHRISTMAS EVE - DECEMBER 24, 1994 - 7:30 & 11 p.m.
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"A NIGHT WITH MORE THAN TOLEDO SPARKLES"

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined." Is. 9:2 "In him was life, and the life was the light of all persons; that light shines into the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." Jn 1:4-5 "And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.'" Luke 2:13-14

The third sentence of the Bible in the book of Genesis reveals that God said: "Let there be light; and there was light." God intended us to live in the brilliance of his light. Even before the Bible reveals God's creation of humanity, he had already created light. His intention was very clear: he wanted His light to overcome the darkness of this world.

But somehow humanity botched it up! In defiance of God's intention, we chose to be infiltrated by darkness. And this darkness has concealed the beauty and goodness of our human nature. So, instead of life being a reflection of goodness and light, it too often becomes just the opposite: warfare, wackiness and woundedness. And much like Adam tried to conceal his disobedience with a loin cloth, we often try to do the same with our tinsel, glitter and sparkling lights of Christmas which we think will surely overcome the inner darkness of our lives.

Certainly my aim tonight is not to put down Toledo Sparkles or any other trimmings that have sought to make this a more festive time. (After spending six hours on an 18 ft ladder trimming these trees - you certainly all know that I love trimmings & glitter.) As much as the commercial side of Xmas benefits from the glitter & glow of this season, so does the spiritual side. But the danger is that we sometimes overlook the darkness and make our own glitter and glow the whole reason for the season. We make Christmas into a time of "looking good and feeling good" for ourselves - but forgetting that Christmas was God's agenda -- his time to again come into the world to re-establish his first act of creation: "that his Light would transform our darkness & gloom into his goodness and glory."

Nothing has illustrated that reality better than a story told to me by one of our members of her conversation with some women friends. They were talking about what they would be doing on Christmas Day. One of them said without flinching, "Well, I'll definitely be going to church that morning." Without hesitation, another of her friends responded: "You mean you're going to let church SPOIL your Christmas!?"

Listen to that response again: "You mean you're going to let Church SPOIL your Christmas!" Notice first of all that the respondent says "your Christmas!" Instead of pointing to God and his Light, this person has made

Christmas a total possession of humanity. She has made Christmas into an emotional, human feeling totally apart from any divine gifted goodness. And we wonder why the darkness is overcoming the light? Then this person takes it to the ridiculous when she professes that "the church" is in the business of spoiling Christmas. The one institution charged with the responsibility of reflecting the Light of Christ into all corners of the world is now accused of "spoiling the sparkle of Christmas." Certainly Christmas should "feel good," but THIS NIGHT is so much more than some gushy human feelings of twinkle lights in a downtown Toledo park ... or any other human tradition that we have made more important than the Coming of Christ into the darkness of this world.

This woman's attitude about Christmas and life in general is one of the reasons that darkness has again dominated the world: too many people today (incl Christians) think their real inner darkness can be covered over with superficial decorations or twinkle lights. The Toledo Sparkles display certainly deserves a round of applause for its positive impact on Toledo, but it can't cover up the fact that downtown Toledo is facing some serious future threats of doom and darkness. There is a greater power of Light than twinkle lights needed in Toledo if it ever intends to overcome its self-defeating attitude. And all the recent shootings and other gang grudges are hardly helping to overcome this image of darkness. How I wish I could share only gushy feelings of happiness & goodness on this Christmas Eve, but that would not be true to the spirit of darkness that seeks to crucify God's Light on this Night.

For the darkness is not only out there in places like Palo Alto, California, where the School Board recently considered buying life insurance for every student in order to pay the funeral costs of so many poor students who have been caught in the crossfire of gang warfare. The darkness of greed and jealousy and bitterness have invaded the holy places where God's presence and Light are to transform gloom & doom. This past week I learned of three dedicated and Christ-centered church servants all from Toledo who must now resign because their flocks have turned from sheep into wolves. And added to these who are innocently persecuted - week after week we read where so-called Christian parents slaughter their own children in worse fashion than ever thought of by Herod. I know of several couples in this congregation who would give more than their life savings to just have one of these innocently aborted or crucified children. As one commentator recently said, "After a thousand years of sophistication, western civilization has now advanced to the point where we bolt our doors and nail our windows shut at night while jungle natives sleep in open huts in the 3rd World."

I hope by now that both believers and skeptics are convinced that this NIGHT NEEDS MORE THAN TOLEDO SPARKLES. If Christmas for Christians is little more than gushy feelings of being home for the holidays or cashing in on a new computer, then "Glory to God in the highest" is one of the biggest jokes of the season. But if this night reflects a deep yearning for more than twinkle lights and pretty presents, then God finally has a chance to enter our

hearts and re-connect us to the glowing goodness of that Babe who became the Light of the world.

As many of us know from raising our children, it is not the size of a light that offers security and reassurance to a child who is afraid in the dark. Most of us remember that it was only one little bulb like this that enabled a fearful child to relax and go to sleep. It is not necessary for the light to overcome the darkness, just to dispel it and give assurance that the darkness is not totally overcoming the light. Thus, it was a Child -- a small and insignificant light to many -- that has made the difference for millions of people ever since his birth around 6 or 7 BC.

Just like tonight, we are graphically aware of the darkness, the hurt, and the pain in this world. But we are also aware that the Light of that Child is still shining ... and the darkness has not overcome it. Our presence here proclaims that we are yearning to be in His Light ... to be more a reflection of His Light ... to make His Light a greater part of our daily lives. Our presence here reminds me of the Irish tradition of yearning for the presence of Christ's life & light during their deepest days of darkness.

The custom of placing lighted candles in our sanctuary or house windows was brought to America by the Irish. When religion was suppressed in Ireland during the English persecution, the people had no churches. Priests hid in forests and caves and secretly visited farms & homes to offer Mass during the darkness of the night. Every Irish family prayed and hoped that once in their lifetime a priest would arrive on Christmas Eve to celebrate the Mass on the holiest of nights in their own home. When Christmas came, they left their doors unlocked and placed burning candles in the windows hoping that "the Light" would guide the priests to their homes through the dark.

To justify this practice in the eyes of the English soldiers, the Irish told them they were burning candles and keeping their doors unlocked hoping that Mary and Joseph would find the way to their home and be welcomed with open doors and open hearts. The English authorities, finding this Irish "superstition" harmless, allowed it to go on. And so it is - that the candles have remained in many of our windows even when we may have forgotten that they are symbols of yearning for Christ's presence "to enter in and be born again as Lights of his generous forgiving and compassionate power."

Dear Christmas friends - whether candles in our windows or Toledo Sparkles downtown -- these lights are all symbols of our yearning for Christ's presence to once again enter our dark & dismal world. Whether in our homes or in our sanctuaries - where the church is truly faithful to Christ's presence it never seeks to SPOIL Christmas or persecute anyone, but only to make His Light shine brighter in all our lives. As the great preacher, W. A. Poovey once said, "Christ provides the Light, but he does not force anyone to accept Him as that light. ... He forces no one to do his will; every person ultimately reacts either

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affirmatively or negatively to His coming into the world. So, no one could then, nor can anyone now remain neutral! The Bible and its gospels know of only two classes of people: the children of God and the children of darkness.

My hope and my prayer is that your presence here this night testifies that **now and always** you will be among THE CHILDREN OF GOD.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

AMEN.

Christmas Eve - 1996
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 24, 1996
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“DO IT AGAIN!!”

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given ... and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Might God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Is. 9:4
Be not afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy ... for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Luke 2:10-11*

A famous preacher once said, *“Because children have such abounding vitality and in spirit are free, they want things always repeated and repeated ... never changed. They always say, ‘Do it again ... don’t stop now, Do it again!’”*

I first experienced this abounding vitality soon after our two girls were born. About the time they were able to walk and run, I rigged up rope swings in our back yards for both of them. It was one of the most special ways that I could rejoice with them as their dad. And to this day, my most special memories are hearing both of them say as I swung them: *“Do it again, Dad! Don’t stop now! Do it again”* And dad would do it for another 15 minutes only to hear them yell that much louder: *“Do it again, Dad!”*

Repetition, redundance, reiteration, restatement--these are the things that are celebrated in a child’s world. But there is one time that children and adults are on the same wave length; there is one night that we are both yelling, *“Do it again, Do it again!”* That moment is Christmas Eve! Just like Angie and Sarah on rope swings, none of us ever gets tired of hearing: *“Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy!”* To that news, we say to God: *“Do it again ... Do it again!!”*

That’s why churches are bulging tonite with the faithful and the fickle ... with the committed and the casual. Because tonite, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health - we love and cherish the message and moment of Christmas. We yearn deep down for God to **DO CHRISTMAS OVER AND OVER AGAIN, EVERY DAY!!** Because like no other moment of the year -- Christmas reminds us of WHAT WE CAN BE ... AND WHAT WE WANT TO BE FOREVER! And because we finally see our real potential on this night -- we never get tired of the same story, the same songs, the same surroundings, the same family gatherings, the same decorations. This is the one time that we can’t wait to **DO ALL THIS SAMENESS AGAIN AND AGAIN!**

But why do we tolerate this SAMENESS tonight? Why do we tell God to **DO IT AGAIN AND AGAIN TONITE?** What makes this night so different from all other nights?!? Well -- nothing could be greater than to recognize that God **CAME DOWN** rather than staying up there or wherever we had put him before Christmas!! And what’s so great about God **COMING DOWN?**

Everything! COMING DOWN shows that God cares, God cries, God sweats, God wets, God hurts, God helps, God laughs, God labors, and above all -- God feels the way it really feels to be human!

Christmas finally reminds us of the true nature of God -- that He seeks us out and finds us wherever we are. God does not ask us to clean ourselves up and straighten ourselves out. He knows only too well how futile it is to expect such perfection. Rather, God simply comes to us at times possibly of our worst pain and greatest separation. He came to the woman at the well; he came to Matthew while serving as a greedy tax collector; he came to Zacheus in a tree; he came to two thieves already condemned on crosses.

I remember as a fifth grader, my teacher always said, "God only helps those who help themselves!" No message could be more contrary to Christmas or to the birth of Jesus Christ. What a tragic theology to impose upon innocent 5th graders!! God came into the world because he knew better than anyone that we couldn't help ourselves. We were lost and separated from Him!! We needed a savior; we needed a Lord, we needed help badly; we needed to know that he could be one of us who would help us become what He knew we could be! So, He CAME DOWN to be an ordinary God with us. He heard us yell: "Hey God, come on down and feel what life is really like!" And he CAME DOWN IN THE FLESH ... to be our LIGHT OF GRACE & TRUTH!

Yes, that's the second reason we DO CHRISTMAS AGAIN AND AGAIN -- we live in a land of deep shadows and we desperately need a LIGHT! We live in a world that desperately cries out for the dawn of a new beginning! In the dark, deep shadows ... we lock our doors, we chain our bikes, we move to the suburbs, we name one another by vulgar terms, we hide in our churches behind stained-glass windows rather than being God's light for our neighbors. Ours is not a peaceable kingdom. One out of every nine jobs in the U.S. is related to the Dept of Defense. More than half our national budget is related to defending ourselves against war. Leslie Weatherhead says too many of us "bury Jesus in past experiences" ... testifying to when Jesus came into our lives but not having Him present any longer. Thank God, finally on Christmas Eve -- we get the message: Christ is not waving from our personal pasts but is in front of us beckoning us to new experiences, new birth, new adventures of HIS LIGHT!

Is it any wonder that we want to DO CHRISTMAS AGAIN AND AGAIN?!? It's one of the few times that we allow God's light to shine bright enough to overcome global darkness. Even the most crotchety people seem to finally lift up God's light at Christmas!! My dear Christian friends -- what a tragedy that we only let HIS LIGHT shine for 24 hours ... and it's back to the dark, dismal, demeaning, decadent, disobedient and destructive living on December 26th. Have you heard that visitors to Alaska say that a single candle properly reflected that heat an igloo from below freezing to 45^ F. Not only is this good advice for travel -- but one tiny baby ... one tiny light came

into this world to be the life saving power over our destructiveness. I appeal to each of you tonite: **LET THE LIGHT OF THAT CHRIST CHILD BURN LONGER THAN ONE DAY!** Let's truly say tonite: "I will let His light shine again ... and will do it again and again and again in 1997!!"

And that's obviously the third reason **WE DO CHRISTMAS AGAIN AND AGAIN:** because the light is not only to shine, but it is to shine upon those who have dwelt longest in the dark!! God did not go to the great cities of Palestine with his Light. God went to the little village of Nazareth ... to little people like Mary and Joseph ... to humble fishermen & even former prostitutes like Mary Magdalene. Like no other event in history, Christmas establishes on earth "God's power of justice and righteousness." Finally, like no other time in the year, the Light of God's Presence at Christmas brings the whole human family of different races & religions & ranks together as **One Holy People Under the Power of God Almighty!!** Tell me, what other day of the year is the whole human race singing *"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace!"*

Finally, at Christmas God came down to exalt the lowly and the unloved: to restore human love and self-esteem as God intended us to be from the very beginning. Maybe the story of Mrs. Rosenberg tells us better than any I have ever told. She was stranded on Xmas Eve at a fashionable resort on Cape Cod, a resort which excluded Jews & Blacks. Upon inquiring at the desk the clerk told her "I'm sorry, mam, but our hotel is full." But she responded, "But your sign says you have 'vacancies.'" After stammering & trying to cover his tracks, the clerk said, "I'm sorry, mam, but we don't register Jews here! You'll have to try the next town."

Mrs. Rosenberg stiffened & said, "Young man, I am a converted Jew!" "I see," said the clerk, "and what do you know about Jesus?" Mrs. R. said, "He was born of a virgin Mary in a little Jewish town of Bethlehem." The clerk said, "Very good, tell me more!" Mrs. R. went on, "He was born in a manger." Again, the clerk said, "Excellent, and why was he born in a manger?" To that Mrs. R. immediately responded: "Because a jerk like you in a hotel like this wouldn't give a young Jewish lady a room for the night!"

My beloved friends, how can we tell God **TO DO CHRISTMAS AGAIN** and then turn around and "shut out" people who are different from us! God deliver us from being "Jesus Jerks!" Christmas tells us like no other story that God came into this world to affirm the least and the lowly. Too often the church has only made room for "the great and the glorified" -- those who have only proven themselves by worldly standards. The facts are -- we have all fallen short of God's standards -- regardless of race, color or creed ... we are all among the least, the lowly and the little people in God's eyes. And that's why we love to **DO CHRISTMAS AGAIN AND AGAIN ... because like no other time, we know for a fact that God comes down for each of us on this night!!**

Is it any wonder that we never get tired of Christmas?? Like two little girls in my back yard -- this is one night we yell: "Do it again, God!! Do it again and again and again!!" And God answers: "YOU DO IT AGAIN! YOU DO IT TONITE ... AND YOU DO IT TOMORROW... AND YOU DO IT THE NEXT DAY ... AND YOU DO IT NEXT YEAR! Make all your days Christmas celebrations. *"Come on down ... be a light that overcomes darkness ... for since I have exalted you above all others ... go now and exalt the least and the lowly ... and Do It Again, and Again ... and Again!!"*

AMEN.

*Christmas Eve - 1997
Sunset House & Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 24, 1997
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor*

“THE FACE OF GRACE!”

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.” Titus 2:11

Is there any other time like Christmas Eve for a Christian?? And if each of you gets hyper on Christmas Eve -- can you imagine what it's like for the average pastor?? Especially for a pastor like Peter -- who tends to be hyper most of the time?!? Well - one of my favorite Christmas stories is about a pastor friend of mine who is even more hyper than me. I've told it before (to some of you) -- but it's like the Luke story: I never get tired of telling it ... and most people don't get tired of hearing it.

My friend was totally hyper and it was his first Christmas in the parish in rural PA. He wanted a majestic experience in this new congregation; he wanted the members to leave the sanctuary saying - “WOW - we saw the face of God tonite!” So -- he added drama and lights to the reading of Luke's gospel. When he read about the shepherds ... “... and the glory of the Lord shone around them ...” he had instructed the acolyte to light the Christ candle. (Tell the story)

Yes - Christmas Eve is one night every pastor forbids cats from entering the sanctuary. From Dec. 26th until the next Dec. 24th -- we are bombarded with “bad news.” During those 364 days - we hear over and over again how humanity has missed the mark -- how we fall short of the glory of God. The news for 364 days tells stories of fragmentation between rich & poor ... between black & white ... between young & old! Finally - on Christmas Eve we are all yearning for the good news ... we want to hear that the light has overcome the darkness.

It's like the Sunday School kid who was practicing for the pagament. He had only one sentence to say: “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy!” He asked his mom -- “What are ‘tidings?’” His mom said tidings was simply “good news!” The pagament day came ... and the little boy was so scared in front of the congregation that he forgot his one line. Then he remembered his mom's advice ... so he blurted out: “Hey, I've got good news for you!”

That's THE FACE OF GRACE for Christmas Eve! It's the “Face of Grace” because it's hearing God say again what he said aeons ago in creation -- “It is good ... it is very good!” It is “very good” because on the night of this child's birth -- there is a momentary restoration of peace ... and harmony ... and good will between all brothers and sisters on earth. And that is “very good!” That is the way God intended it from the beginning. That's the “The Face of Grace!”

On this day (night) like none other - the child in us takes over. We've heard the story hundreds of times ... but it still sounds invitingly fresh. Like a little child, we say: “Tell it again!” We find ourselves waiting outside the delivery room of

a Bethlehem stable. And we become privy to seeing the very face of God in a newborn child ... and in that babe, we see The Face of Grace.

And what does the "Face of Grace" really look like?? It's a child's wide-eyed astonishment as he or she sees the presents under the tree. It's the face of a homeless man who finally gets a square meal without somebody making judgments about him. It's the face of a faithful member with tears rolling down his/her cheeks as he/she hears "O Holy Night!" It's the face which has been touched by the mystical goodness of God ... and that face now shows joy and hope ... and a desire to lift up those who are lonely or lost.

Some years ago "The Face of Grace" was best described by Victor Daly, an Australian poet. He was dying in a hospital. On a more lucid day, he invited the nuns to gather around his bed so he could express his appreciation to them for their diligent care. After thanking them with well-chosen words - the mother superior said to him: "Victor, you shouldn't thank us -- you should thank the grace of God." *With the insight of a true poet, he said: "But aren't you the grace of God?!?"*

The "Grace of God" always expresses itself through human faces. God put on a human face in a crude manger some 2000 years ago in Bethlehem because he realized that was the only way we could comprehend grace -- through another human face. Because after all -- *"grace is being treated better than we deserve;"* it's what we've all received from God in the Christ-child but nobody deserves or has earned.

God's face first came to shepherds in the fields watching over their flocks. Do we understand why "shepherds" were the first to see God's face?? Shepherds were of the lowest of rank - they were regarded as those who couldn't even get "decent work" -- they were perceived as liars and degenerates. Their testimony was not admissible in court; many towns had ordinances barring shepherds from the city limits. It was to these whom God first showed his face.

Now what's the message in that?? It's a message of "grace." Christmas celebrates God's mercy and goodness for all people -- orphans & widows, divorced & remarried, gay & lesbian, the homeless, the grieving, the powerless and the prisoner. The message of Christmas is "that those who have walked in darkness have finally seen a great light." There is hope in the mercy and love of the Christ child. Christmas announces "good news" -- that God has made room for all people in his kingdom ... even the "degenerate shepherds" have received God's stamp of acceptance.

But God's "Face of Grace" not only tells us there's room for everyone at his table; His face looks into ours and says, "Do not be afraid ... my light will help you overcome your darkness." It's like the story of the father and son who had just returned from burying their wife & mother. Upon going to bed with his dad that night, the little boy began to ask questions: "Daddy, where is mommy?"

How are we going to go on without her? What's going to happen to us??? Lying quietly, the father had no answers to give to his son. Finally - the little boy reached over & touched his dad's face & asked: "Daddy, is your face toward me? If your face is toward me, then I know I can go to sleep ... and we will make it." Being assured that his father's face was toward him, he fell fast asleep.

That's the face of grace -- God's assurance of remaining face-to-face with us -- never turning his back on us. He doesn't promise that we will never encounter darkness -- but he does promise that he will be there FACE-TO-FACE with us through all the darkness of our lives. And that's good news! In fact, it is very good!

Christmas has many faces. But the first face of Christmas was that of a little dark-eyed Jewish baby born in a Bethlehem stable. And if that little baby had been able to speak immediately, he would have said: "Hey, I've got good news for you!" That is THE FACE OF GRACE ... a face which always seeks to bring wholeness and harmony to that which is divided ... a face which never tires of offering peace and understanding to those in deep darkness ... a face which glows with the warmth of a *"love which is patient and kind ... not jealous or boastful ... not arrogant or rude ... a love which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. A love which never ends!"* Obviously, that kind of love is what the Bible & Christians call the salvation of the world; it's known on Christmas Eve as THE FACE OF GRACE!

AMEN.

*Christmas Eve Day
Sunset House
December 24, 1998
10:30 a.m. - The Activities Center*

*For unto us is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.
Luke 2:11*

Christmas beckons the preacher to be profound & significant ... at Xmas, preachers are supposed to uplift the powerful themes of the incarnation.

So - today, I could lift up the theme of Jesus' birth as the greatest gift given to humanity. Could anything be more profound than God becoming human and identifying with our life and struggles ... yet promising us and showing us that he will overcome every struggle, including death.

Or today -- I could tell (as many preachers will) that the birth of Jesus of Nazareth is the greatest human reason for rejoicing -- because as the angel said ... *"Finally God assures us that we will never have anything to fear ... he knows what it's like to be human, and he will not allow our human faults & frailties to win the ultimate battle."*

Or today -- we could spend the next ten minutes talking about how God's birth in the flesh assures us that God desires more than anything for us to be ONE WITH HIM FOREVER. No God would ever allow himself to be born as a human unless He wanted us one day to share His divinity.

Or we could focus upon the NEVER-ENDING STORY that gets told and told and told ... and yet every year people want to hear it all over again. For centuries -- skeptics, cynics and agnostics have tried to say it's just a fairy tale -- but millions continue to believe that God actually entered this world as a child in order to make this world more like Him forever.

Or we could bask in the great theological mystery that only Christianity has a God who not only becomes human like us -- but He also dies to assure us that we will never be separated from Him. This is a God who risks everything for those he loves.

Or finally -- we could uplift the great theme that humanity has finally graphically seen what it means to have heaven on earth. No longer do we have to speculate as to what God is like -- he has now brought heaven

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down to earth ... and what other god in all human history has ever made that commitment to his followers.

So - there you have it -- a half a dozen of the greatest themes of Christmas that have ever been preached. But what most of us want at Christmas -- is not a great Christmas theology -- we just want a Christmas that makes sense ... a meaningful and even a little emotional rationale for why everybody is still moved by this Holy Night.

So -- today I'm going to make it simple. I'm going to say -- Christmas is all wrapped up in a Candy Cane. The candy cane ... almost more than any other symbol -- tells the significance of Christ's birth and more.

And the greatest meaning of the candy cane is that it not only tells us that Jesus was born -- but that ONLY THRU A LIFE OF SACRIFICE ... DID HIS BIRTH REALLY HAVE PROFOUND MEANING. Only as we look at the light in the empty tomb ... only then does the star of Bethlehem have great significance. Because Jesus did what no other human has ever done -- he remained obedient to his Father for his entire lifetime. And that's why he's not just any old baby born into the world -- he is Christ the Lord ... the Messiah ... who came to show us that there is no purer or greater love ever given than the love of Jesus - - The Good Shepherd -- who laid down his life for his sheep.

Every time you unwrap a candy cane -- I hope you will remember what we just shared this Christmas Eve. God has come into this world to make certain that you know you are blessed by His love forever!!

amen.