

CHRISTMAS EVE SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota

Luke 2:1-20
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
December 24, 2014

I received these silver bell Christmas ornaments in 2005 when my dad died and in 2006 when my mom died.

My wife, Jennifer, hangs the Christmas tree lights so that they look balanced, decent. I get to hang the ornaments because there are so many of them that you can't go wrong... This year was the same as always. Ornament by ornament, I unwrapped them and considered their stories. Many are homemade, from when our kids were little. Many were given to us and have names and dates on them. You know what I mean. **This was the year that...**

Jennifer made this Hardanger ornament in 1980 while we were in Outing. Leah made this ornament when we lived in Littlefork, 1985. This ornament was given to Leah at Sunday school in Littlefork, Christmas 1987. Barb Murray was her teacher and painted it by hand. This one shows a picture of the Littlefork altar, 1989. These were made for John and Sarah, in 1995, at Lord of Life in Baxter. Do you see what I mean? This is the ornament given to our Sunday School teachers, 2014, at First in Aitkin.

Just a couple of weeks ago, I was given this beautiful cross ornament. On the back is written, **"2014 9th Grade Confirmation Classes, And... Elaine and Becca."** At the moment I spotted it in my office mailbox, I was feeling a bit overwhelmed with all that I had to get done by Christmas. It came at a good time when I was worried about getting everything ready for everyone else's Christmas. This ornament reminded me that God wants to embrace **me** with Christmas joy as well. Thanks teachers and kids.

First Lutheran Church, 2014 – this is the first full year that Pastor Melissa has been here. This is the year that we remodeled the sanctuary. We started using Maria Chapel regularly during the summer of 2013. Old First Lutheran burned down in 1955. The original building on this site was built in 1957. Do you remember the first Christmas in the old sanctuary? The first addition, the present Fellowship Hall, was built in 1983. In 1994 the Food Shelf got started. In 2000 the Community Meal got going. It was back in 2003 that the new sanctuary was added. Do you remember these things that God has done among us?

First Lutheran Church, 2014, this is the year that death claimed John Paulson, Ambros Johnson, Martha Liljenquist, Karen Tibbetts and many more of our sisters and brothers in Christ...

What did God do in their lives, for them? How did God bless them? What did God do through their lives for us? How did God bless us?

First Lutheran Church, 2014, this is the year that God adopted Caden Nordick, Charlye Carmack, Elisabeth and Sarah McMillan, Alyssa Weston, Grayson Ophoven and many more, into God's faith family here through the sacrament of Holy Baptism. How many others have been baptized here over the years?

What might God have in mind for their lives? How might God bless them through us? How might God battle hard to protect and to hang onto them through us? How will they fare in this big, beautiful and troubled world? Will they believe us when we say, "**You are a child of God. God loves you. God will be with you every day, everywhere and God will never let you go?**"

This is the year that our **confirmands** delivered Christmas cookies to the shut-ins, cookies baked by the women of the church. This is the year that every family got to dress up like Mary and Joseph and the shepherds for the **Sunday School Advent Festival**. And the **Tiny Tots** road a train to visit Jesus in the manger. And the Senior Choir carried us into the Christmas spirit with their cantata, "**And Glory Shone Around**." And Andrew Carlstrom, Chris and Nick Hasskamp, Luke Oaks and a number of others were gone off **servng our country**. And Mary Ann and a bunch of others were fighting cancer. And some of us were in jail. And Taylor Smith sang in the Concordia Christmas Concert. And some of us are grieving the loved ones who will no longer be gathering with us around the Christmas tree. And some of us went on a mission trip to Jamaica. And some of us made a difference in the life of a neighbor.

And the world was rocked by Ebola, ISIS, refugees from violence, climate change, hunger, homelessness and horrific weather events...

2014, this is the year that God once again **adopted us into God's life-giving story of hope**. 2014, this is the year that God once again **entered**

into our story to give life and hope. Do you believe that? Has God been there for you in 2014?

I attended the Rippleside Kindergarten- Grade Three Christmas Program. I delighted in scanning the rows of kids. I was looking for the ones I recognize from First Lutheran. There was lots of excitement as the kids paraded in and took their turn singing wonderful songs with lots of motions to match.

God only knows the full joy that lifts those kids in anticipation of Christmas. God only knows the full burden that weighs them down. What about the little boy who has cancer? What about the little girl who is so sick with a cold and looking miserable? What about the Down's syndrome child who seems to know the words and the actions for the songs better than most anyone up there? What about the little girl who looks so malnourished? What about the little boy who sang with his head down and only occasionally snuck a peak at the people?

Our little elementary school kids, who knows what visions of sugar plums they have in their heads? Jesus. Who knows what fears they carry inside? Jesus. Who is moving to love and care for them every day? Jesus. Who is moving to love and care for you every day? Jesus.

I know some of the families of these kids, the ones that I see here in worship. **Lord only knows** what life is like inside each and all of those kids' homes. **And the Lord does know.** And Jesus is there, in every one of those homes whether they are believers or not.

What a silly, foolish God – choosing to come and be one with us in this crazy world. What a silly, foolish God – choosing to have you and me be the Christmas storytellers for our world. What a silly, foolish God – promising never to give up on us or let us go.

Can you remember Christmas Eve Candlelight services from years past? Do you have some memorable ornaments hanging on your tree at home? Maybe it was a service like this, or a special ornament or maybe a carol which sustained some of the POW folks back in World War I, or in Vietnam, or in Iraq... Maybe something here tonight might make a difference in your life in the year ahead. Maybe years from now you will remember that

Jesus showed up and told you that he loved you, really loved you. And, deep down in your heart, you believed it.

Do you remember some Christmas past? Do you remember a time when you felt that God was particularly close at hand? God remembers. God remembers all of the Christmases that have ever been. God won't forget. God will remember this night that we have spent together here at First Lutheran in Aitkin, Minnesota. And God will also remember and care about every moment of every day of your life. And forever. That's the promise God makes in Jesus, for you and for all of us. You can hang that promise on your tree. And on your heart. And if you do, you will also be hanging it on the heart of God... Can you imagine how many memorable ornaments God has hanging on God's tree. Yours is there. Thanks be to God. Amen.