

CHRISTMAS EVE SERMON

First Lutheran Church

Aitkin, Minnesota

Luke 2:1-20

Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen

December 24, 2015

On behalf of this First Lutheran faith family, I would like to welcome all **guests, out-of-town family members** and people from the community who **felt called to come** here for Christmas Eve worship. My wife, Jennifer and I, are blessed to have our son, John, his wife, Maisi, and our grandson, Anders with us tonight. Our other two daughters, Leah and Sarah and Sarah's husband, John, are all far away living in South Carolina. **Tonight, just like every other night,** I am **going to entrust** myself, my wife, kids, grandson and the baby on the way **into the loving arms of Jesus.** I can't be in South Carolina. But Jesus can. Whether our kids know it, believe it or not, Jesus is there with them. Christmas.

It's been almost 2000 years. Jesus was born in Bethlehem when **Emperor Augustus** was ruling most of the known world. Tonight Christians gather all over the world to celebrate the coming of God's promised Messiah. This **ancient event** has moved people and nations ever since. **Is it true?** Is Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection an **ancient treasure worth hanging onto?** Is there still a **living hope** that comes to our world from Jesus? Does it all matter? **Is Jesus here tonight?** Or is this just another "**happy holiday**" for buying ourselves more stuff?

Some folks think of Christmas as a **cultural celebration** whose best attributes are **love, goodwill** and the **giving of gifts.** Some believe, like **Karl Marx,** that "**Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.**" You know what he means. People get pushed around by life and by the world, so they cling to anything that offers a little hope. There's nothing out there. You live your life. You die. That's it. You're in this world on your own. Jesus is just a childhood myth like the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy. Some people have been driven away from trusting in Jesus by all the crazy things that some Christians say and do. Some people think they can't believe in and follow Jesus because Christianity denies science. Or because they lost a loved one at too young of an age. Or because they were made to go to church by their parent, or divorced by their spouse or are too busy with life. What do you believe?

I can't prove that Jesus exists. No one can. I **can't prove that he ever did miracles** – water into wine at the wedding feast, feeding 5000 hungry

people with a few fish and loaves of bread, walking on water. I can't prove that Jesus **had great compassion** (guts poured out for them) – healing lepers, forgiving sins, welcoming strangers. I **didn't hear him speak** the great wisdom we find printed in the Gospels. I can't prove that he **died** for us, **rose** from the dead and is **here with us now**. I can't prove that Jesus is **moving**, even as we speak, to love, care for, forgive, heal and give new and abundant life to any who will have it. **But**, over the centuries, a lot of people have held firmly to the notion that **God entered our world through a young girl in a cow shed**. . . . A lot of people have lived and died trusting that **God became one of us** in order to love us to the death and beyond. That Jesus came with gentle power to lift burdens, break chains, bring **and bring** peace and to plant seeds of hope and life. And it **wasn't just head stuff**. It wasn't just "**help me to survive this miserable life**." It was God is loving and caring for me, so now I can love and care for other people. This world is God's gift to us. Christmas. God gives God self to us. Christmas.

Thousands of **Swedish Immigrants** came to this land, my grandparents among them. They traveled with a sea chest, a few crates of belongings and a Bible. They homesteaded farms, built houses, barns and then churches. That's where **Maria Chapel** and **First Lutheran in Aitkin** came from. That's where **Bethesda Hospital**, St. Paul, founded in 1883, came from. Our first child, Leah, was born there. And our forbearers built the largest non-governmental system of **nursing homes** in the country. That's where our **church colleges** came from too. There they teach philosophy, history, business, music and the most contemporary science.

In 1865 **Vasa Lutheran Church**, near Red Wing, started an orphanage for a family of children whose parents died. From this simple beginning came the now largest non-governmental social service agency in the country - **Lutheran Social Services**. Those poor farmers figured God challenged and helped them to do it. Lutheran farmers, teachers and factory workers are still supporting that mission which serves thousands of Minnesotans with adoption services, foster grandparents, homeless shelters, youth shelters, group homes, marriage counseling, senior nutrition programs. . .

Seeing the bombed out ruins of **Europe after World War II**, American Lutheran soldiers came home, organized and rallied to rescue thousands of refugees of war. Today that organization is known as **Lutheran World Relief**. It is one of the most highly respected relief organizations in the

world. For every dollar donated, **93%** goes directly to rescuing people from crisis and then to enabling them to become self-sufficient again.

Thousands of **Korean**, **Hmong** and **Somali** children and families fled for their lives from war in their homelands and have been successfully resettled right here in Minnesota by **Lutheran Refugee and Immigration Services**. Many congregations adopted individual families, found housing and jobs for them, without expectation of them becoming Lutheran or even Christian. Now we are receiving and giving hope to **Syrian refugees**. And this is controversial; nobody wants a terrorist living next door. But the church can't stop loving a host of war time victims because a few might be perpetrators. Do the best screening we can, but help families who just need a safe place to raise their children. The authorities said Jesus should be killed. Wise men and people in Egypt helped Jesus' family to survive.

We Lutherans have been **leaders in changing the understanding of alcoholism**. When I was a kid, someone whose life was badly impacted by alcohol was considered a drunk, a bad person, a sinner. Today we know that alcoholism, drug addiction, gambling addiction, addiction to pornography – that these are all illnesses, not unlike cancer or a heart attack. And that we can help to rescue and set people free. We have led in **advocating for homeless, abused, alienated, those who are discriminated against** . . . We claim as our hallmark the **grace of God** – the **undeserved love and forgiveness** which God freely offers to any and all who need it, want it, will have it . . . Jesus was criticized for hanging around with **sinners**, **tax collectors** and **prostitutes**. To this very day, the **Lord's Table** that we have the privilege of gathering around tonight stands open to any person who **longs for forgiveness**, **healing**, a **new start**, **hope** and **empowerment for daily and eternal living**. We meet here every week to share these God-given gifts together and with our world.

I don't have to prove the scriptural accounts of Jesus because God is still moving. God is the One who loves this world, loves this church and loves you. God is the One who is moving mightily to once again **plant faith** in your heart, my heart, my kids' hearts – this night and forever. **God is behind all the good things I mentioned**. First Lutheran, we're **Jesus' sisters and brothers**. We're **God's partners**.

I can't prove that Jesus is real and the source of true life. I can't prove that Jesus is your creator, sustainer, loving parent and best friend. But this is what your family:

- who brought you here tonight,
- who raised you,
- who still trusts in Jesus 2,000 years after his birth,
- who still worships and tries to follow Jesus every day,

This is what we believe.

We believe Jesus is alive and well and moving when we:

- Baptize and teach the children,
- Staff the food shelf, community meal and soup kitchen,
- Send our hard-earned money off to support campus ministry, the fight against malaria, the fight against world hunger,
- Pray for our law enforcement, the victims and the perpetrators,
- Pray for those who are like us and for those who are totally different from us – including our enemies,
- Bury our loved ones and entrust them safely into the loving arms of Jesus where they've really always been.

We worship the one who was heralded by angels, brought into this world by a teenage mom, cared for by an older fiancé, worshiped by the most common shepherds, sought out by the wealthiest astronomers, hunted by soldiers intent upon killing innocent babies, and who with his family fled as refugees for shelter in a foreign land. **This is not a cultural god who exists only in the minds of old women and children.** This is **Emmanuel, God with us.** This is the God who:

- Had you in mind before you were conceived,
- Brought you into this world,
- Claimed you as a child of God in the waters of your baptism,
- Died in order to make a place for you at the Lord's Table of forgiveness and life,
- Listened at your confirmation as you committed to follow Jesus,
- Attended your graduation,
- Blessed your marriage,
- Taught you to be a parent,
- **Walks with you now**, tonight, **know it or not, like it or not.**

Jesus, Babe born in a cow trough, **loves you, will always love you.**
Christmas. Welcome to the Lord's House and Table. **Bring God's love home** with you tonight, **keep it close** and **live well now and forever.**
Christmas. Thanks be to God. Amen. [and forever.](#) [Amen.](#)

