

CHRISTMAS EVE SERMON 2017
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota

John 1:1-14
Luke 2:1-20
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen

I will always have the childhood memory of riding over the river and through the woods on the night of Christmas Eve. First, we would go to Grandmas and Grandpas' houses, or to the home of one of my many aunts and uncles. Later, it would be to Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Albion, Minnesota, for the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service. People were tougher then. Worship was at 11:00 p.m.

Once inside the church, the first thing to catch your eye would be the painting above the altar of **Jesus walking with a little lamb in his arms**. The church was often cold. Winters were tougher then too. The small oil stove in the back of the sanctuary would be working hard to heat things up. Half way through the service, everyone would be warm and comfortable. Especially those close to the stove.

There would be lots of singing accompanied by the old pump organ, candles lit and the Christmas story told. Somewhere along in there, one Christmas Eve, **Emil Nordean** fell asleep. Emil, his wife and family had come in a little late. His wife and kids found places in the pews, but there was no room for Emil. He sat in the last open seat, a chair standing alone along the back wall next to the oil stove. Half way through the service, Emil dozed off. Before long, Emil's snoring was louder than the pastor's sermon. Much to his wife's consternation, there was no one by his side to nudge him. The pastor smiled and the service went on anyway. Emil woke up by the end.

Dr. Gerhard Frost tells a childhood story of his sister. She went to their pastor father to confess, "**Father, when I am saying my prayers at bedtime, I sometimes fall asleep before I finish**." She probably expected her father to lecture her about kneeling when she prayed, rather than praying once under the covers. Instead, he responded, "**What better way is there to go to sleep than in the loving arms of Jesus**." Loving and trusting God enough to fall asleep while praying is not such a bad thing.

When I was a child, my parents taught me to pray each night, “**Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen.**” They wanted me to know that **even if I died, God would take care of me forever** in heaven. Jennifer and I taught our kids to pray, “**Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And God bless Mommy, Daddy, Grandmas and Grandpas, Leah, John and Sarah. Amen.**” We tried to teach our children to **trust their lives safely into God’s keeping too.**

At mealtime, when I was a child, we prayed, “**Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest. And let this food to us be blessed. Amen.**” My wife’s family prayed, “**Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest. And let this food to us be blessed. By thy hand may we be led. Thank you, Lord, for daily bread. Amen.**” This is all **childhood stuff** – prayers offered by **little ones who trust their parents so much.** Little ones who are **being taught to trust God** even **so much more.**

As a baby, Jesus came as God’s invitation for people, like you and me, to **become like little children** – trusting, hopeful, children of a loving, faithful God. Jesus is recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke as saying, “**Let the children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.**” (Luke 18:16b-17) Jesus sees the **simple faith children have in their parents** and Jesus invites each of us to embrace that same **simple faith in our relationship with God.**

Emil Nordean fell asleep and started to snore loudly. He was alone in the back of the church so no one could give him a nudge. He snored through the whole sermon. **Before long, I was sleeping too,** in the arms of my beloved mother, Olga. Both Emil and I **fell asleep beneath the painting of Jesus carrying the little lamb.** I learned from my mom that I was that little lamb. She said we all are the little lamb Jesus carries. **Emil and me sleeping in the arms of Jesus** on Christmas Eve.

Emil fell asleep, and you know, that wasn’t so bad. Emil and I were **safe.** That’s the “**Good News**” that our Gospel from John shares with us tonight. **Now we**

are God's children. It's a "**grace gift**" from God. We **don't deserve it**. We **can't earn it**. We can't even make a big deal about it. It's the kind of gift, like any other, that should simply be **received**, with the **unassuming mind of a child**. "**Oh, a gift for me? Thank you!**" And **opened**. And **used**. **Tonight, you are using God's gift**.

It is all a gift. The creation. The Baby. The cross. Your life. Holy Baptism, Holy Communion. Being a part of God's precious, beloved family. All of these are gifts from God. For you. For me. **For anyone who could use such gifts**.

Emil fell asleep. I fell asleep. And **Jesus fell asleep too**. He fell asleep in the arms of his beloved mother, Mary. A baby. Jesus. Human flesh. Helpless. Vulnerable. Can you see his tiny form in the arms of his teenage mother? His older father standing protective watch? Stars and hay. Cows and sheep. **This baby is one of us**. **This baby is God**.

God came as baby Jesus so that we can **approach God without fear**. So that we can **see, hear, touch** and **know** that the **heart of God beats for you and me**. So that we can **let down our human defenses** and **allow God to nurture and help us**. So that we can **grow in faith, hope and love**. So that we can **live in peace and joy**. So that **we** can be assured **God loves and cares for us every day and forever**.

My brother-in-law, Danny, age 45, almost died this week. High blood pressure ripped a hole in his aorta and then his heart and vital organs began to flounder. **St. Luke's in Duluth** airlifted him to **Madison, Wisconsin**. It was too dangerous to do surgery to fix the leak. But, without surgery, he couldn't survive. Danny hung on the edge of life and death. Finally, the decision was made, no matter how dangerous, the surgery had to happen. The doctors went ahead. Over 100 people on Facebook said that they were praying for Dan. Family members started their church prayer chains. My own prayers extended throughout the tense hours of the day and when I awakened from sleep in the darkness of night.

Dan's surgery was successful. The fear of becoming paralyzed is past. His heart is working. His organs are being revived. His lungs are doing well again. He still has

a long way to go before returning home. Will Dan start taking his blood pressure **medicine now**? Will he **pray more**? Will he **start attending worship again**? These are all **his choices to make**. **Dan's a child of God**. I attended his baptism 45 years ago, the same weekend I proposed to his big sister, Jennifer. **Baby Jesus, God**, was there for Dan's baptism, for his confirmation, first wedding, second wedding, torn aorta and Jesus will be there the **day Danny dies**. And **forever**. **That's what Christmas is all about**. And Easter. And the Lord's Supper. And worship. And tonight. **"Emmanuel – God with us."** **Gift**. **For Danny**. **For you**.

It's Christmas Eve. We've sung some carols, seen the lights and shared the warmth of this cozy church. We've **heard the story – the baby's story woven together with our own story**. **Gently wake the sleepers**. It's okay. It's safe to sleep here, because we are God's children and God holds us in God's loving arms.

John's Christmas story says of Jesus, **"But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God. . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."** (John 1:12, 14)

My wife, Jennifer, and I have been **so very excited to have most of our kids and grandkids home with us** this Christmas Eve. **But, our excitement** about having our kids home with us **pales in comparison** to the **excitement God has** over having **you and me home here tonight**. **It happens every time**. **God loves you so much**. **Can you see that love in the Baby?** **The Baby is for you**. **God is for you**. Thanks be to God. Amen.