



Christmas Eve
24 December 2022

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, the newborn King, Jesus, the Christ. Amen

Merry Christmas!

Ready or not, Merry Christmas! If you are still praying for the Amazon truck to deliver at your house by the time you get home from church – well, this is the place to pray for and believe in miracles. But, speaking from experience, a printed picture of said item wrapped and under the tree brings a tremendous amount of peace. But don't tell my wife, let her be surprised tomorrow morning. And on the 14th of January – she will be so happy and that way the Christmas season is stretched just a little bit farther. Follow my TikTok feed for more Christmas hints on how to disappoint your spouse while extending the Christmas season long after the tree has turned brown.

Well, my friends – you are here. Some of us will return home to wrap the last of the gifts or prepare overnight French toast or an egg bake, but now, in this moment we are so close. I wonder what your world has looked like over the past weeks. Christmas decorations throughout the house. Most of the outdoor lights blinking on the strand above the garage are actually lit. Christmas gifts wrapped under the tree, but when the ribbon ran out – we just left that step behind. Christmas gatherings to celebrate being together while forgetting what we said we would bring. Baking cookies- a holy tradition in our house. This year I made the traditional four cookies in the Marien house – fudge, shortbread, cut out cookies, and Mexican Wedding Cakes. In my ability to be more efficient, I mixed three of the doughs at the same time and when we ate the latest cookie tray two nights ago, my wife looked at me and said, “what is wrong with your shortbread?” To which I replied sarcastically, “what are you talking about?” And then when I bit into a piece I realized – I added salt to the wrong dough – shortbread does not get salt but the cut-out cookies do. And now everything makes sense. Shopping for gifts on Thursday only having to go back to the same store on Friday because you only had half the list when you went the day before. There were days in these past weeks – I could not remember what I had done but knew I did not have enough time to get everything done. I don't know anyone who misses the covid shutdown, but Advent 2020 was certainly more peaceful, quieter – if not a little more lonely as well.

I wonder if the roads we run in these weeks leading up to this night are designed by God's great plan? Preparing for the journey to Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph also had much to get done. In the last weeks of her pregnancy, when she should have been at home resting, surrounded by the women of her family, confirming the midwife and keeping her feet up – Mary is prepping for a donkey ride to Bethlehem. And Joseph, knowing he must take his pregnant wife to register in Bethlehem, is also preparing. Trying to finish the last of his carpentry projects for clients before they left. Still tending a bruised ego as he prepares to marry a woman who has become pregnant by someone else. Still listening to the painful jabs spoken under the breath of neighbors and clients in town. Still suffering from the dream of an angel visit telling him, “²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,^[1] because he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).” Is it any wonder that we run through these last few weeks preparing for this night? It seems, in our running, we are simply following in the footsteps of countless family members before us.

I realize now, in my late forties, I have no idea how my mom did it. Working full-time, cooking, cleaning, Christmas cards, decorating, shopping (before Amazon), serving at church, wrapping, hosting,



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crafting the Christmas traditions. Of course, my dad was around – but I am pretty sure he was only responsible for getting the tree into to the stand, stringing the lights, assisting Santa’s elves with complicated instructions of how things went together, and purchasing my mom’s gifts and seeing if the store he bought them at would wrap them for him. Yet somehow, it all got done or at the very least – the most important things got done. I gave up on cleaning the wood floors at least two weeks ago. We vacuum, of course, or the tumbleweeds of golden retriever dog hair would begin to build walls like snow drifts – but keeping them shiny – talk to me in Epiphany. I share all of this to remind you that I know the journeys many of you have walked over these past weeks. And all of this – is in addition to the real world we live in – deadlines at work, school projects to complete, laundry, car maintenance, bill-paying, checkbook balancing, grocery shopping, low-pressure tire warning lights, sick kids, doctor appointments, sport’s practice car-pooling – when does it stop? Honestly, does it?

In the midst of all things Christmas and all things life, I got an early morning phone call two weeks ago from a member of the church sharing the news of his wife being transported to the hospital for an apparent heart attack. Now, in my world, that news begins an entirely new series of events. In the life of that husband and family – time is about to stop. Later that day I went to the ICU to see the family – to pray – to listen. And a few days later – the husband called back and shared the news that his wife would not be going home – at least not to the home they had shared for the past 48 years give or take. And on that Saturday afternoon, we surrounded a woman’s bed and shared in communion hearing the words of God’s promise, “in the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying, take and eat, this is my body given for you.” We prayed the Lord’s prayer and then I gave this wife, mother, sister, and grandmother one last blessing reminding her that God was waiting to welcome her home. ICU rooms are hardly sacred space – IV tubes, ventilator, lights blinking on screens – yet this hospital room became holy ground as we held hands around her bed. And then I began to sing. This woman who had loved singing throughout her life – heard beloved Christmas carols from her family one last time.

Be near me Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay. Close by me forever and love me I pray. Bless all the dear children in your tender care and fit us for heaven to live with you there.

And with all of us keeping vigil by the bedside, I started to sing once more:

Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright, round yon virgin, mother and child, holy infant so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.

And for just a moment, the world fell away. No salt in the shortbread. No burnt-out lights on the strand. No dog hair tumbleweeds to wrangle. No gifts left to wrap.

Just standing on holy ground, before God’s throne, in the silence of a moment of worship we are in no rush to leave, to offer this woman back to God. To tell her we love her. To let our tears wash over broken hearts. To remind God of God’s promise to welcome us home.

The manger could have felt much like that ICU room – hardly sacred space to welcome the Savior of the world and yet dirt floors and fresh hay became holy ground on that first Christmas, when, for just a moment, the world stopped everything to welcome the One who gave life to the world. So that our God would know our laughter, our tears, our hopes, our fears, and come among us to know this very life we live.

Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting light, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

Welcome home Jesus, the manger may not be everything we hoped it would be for your arrival, but we are glad you are here. Merry Christmas! Amen.