

Tonight is Christmas Eve. Tomorrow morning there will be a lot of children; mine included, who will open brightly wrapped presents filled with brand new toys. Thanks to gifted advertisers we and our children want new toys. Regifting is not a thing on Christmas morning. We don't want something old or borrowed. We don't want something worn out, fragile and likely to break. We want something strong and new. The crazy thing is our definitions of new and strong change depending on whom we ask. Some people want this church the way it was when we averaged 120-150 people in worship each Sunday. The mills were still open then. Our church felt **strong** and healthy. Others want to see all of the old ways thrown out in favor of what is "contemporary" and **new**. Still others like things small, intimate and what I call Low Church tradition. (pause) When you think about it, we all want church our own way.

Very often we think we know who and what the church ought to be. We strive to make our version of the church the reality. Too often we fight for the church to fulfill our hopes and our needs. Then we behave like that child who opened the shiny present only to find socks and underwear. We become disappointed; frustrated and sometimes even act out. (pause) Our behavior becomes a telling reminder that the church is not a palace for saints. The church is a hospital for sinners. Amen? **Amen**. We are all broken and in need of God's healing. Amen? **Amen**. This is what happens when we try to make God's church about what we want. Amen? **Amen**.

My sisters and brothers hear the good news. God did not wait for you to be perfect before God sent Jesus. God is not waiting for us to get right today. Do you know why? (pause) Do any of y'all know why? (pause) "Cause if you tarry till you're better you will never come at all." God already knows we are broken. God already knows we are not perfect? God already knows just how disobedient we really are. And God sent Jesus anyway.

Y'all please listen up. There are so many people, myself included, who struggle with shame. There are so many people who struggle with the idea they are not _____ enough; not smart enough, not strong enough, not pretty enough, not rich enough, not good enough, not kind enough, you name it; not good enough. The good news is even though we fight and try to hide our short comings God already knows. God already knows what we are trying to hide behind shiny paper and big bow. If we are a gift to God, God already knows we are a gift of dirty socks and underwear. (pause) Merry Christmas! (pause) And you know what? God sent Jesus anyway. God sends Jesus Christ because God loves us right where we are. And God loves us too much to leave us where God finds us. Hans Kung put it this way; the Bible does not begin by, "laying down a doctrine of the church which has to be worked out in practice; it starts with the Church as reality, and reflection upon it comes later." God starts with us right where we are; however, far from the cross of Jesus Christ we might be. Then, through God's grace, God works to bring us home. God starts working with us right where we are even when we are not right. (pause) Sometimes especially when we are not right.

And here's the thing about Jesus. For the Jewish rulers this child of the one true King was something of a bummer gift as well. Ceasar Augustus was in charge of Rome and Rome controlled all of the Promised Land. The Romans persecuted the people and oppressed them with heavy taxes. The people obeyed because they were afraid of the Roman military. The Romans had set the blood thirsty Herod the Great to be the king over Palestine, and allowed him great latitude in terms of how he governed so long as the tax dollars kept coming in. The Pharisees tried to make people obey God's laws their way; teaching their traditions as if they were the commandments of God (Mark 7:8). Many Jews were Jewish because their family was Jewish and not because of any devotion to the Lord God Almighty. The people were not right with God, and their leaders were not

right with God. It's no wonder the Jews wanted the gift of a new, strong leader with a powerful army who would restore the kingdom to the time of King David. (pause) Jesus wasn't the gift they wanted.

Surprise! Here's Jesus brought into the world as a helpless baby. Babies are not **strong**. Babies may be resilient and built for struggle, but babies are not strong. Babies aren't new either. As one of my professors in college put it, "There is nothing new under the sun." Rich people have babies. Poor people have babies. People have been having babies for a long time. To the world, Jesus' birth wasn't special either. Jesus was born to an unwed adolescent mother who gave birth to Jesus in a barn because there was no room for them in the inn. I know the song says, "Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set his people free." but I am pretty sure most people at that time did not have the baby Jesus in mind.

Jesus does not come as a conquering king. Jesus does not come in God's full power and glory. Jesus does not have an army. Jesus does not have a loyal following of people on the day He is born. Jesus does not come to us in the way we expect. Jesus did not come to fulfill all of our wants and needs. If that's our belief then we have Jesus mixed up with the man in a white beard and a big red suit. Jesus is the surprise savior whom we too often think of as the present filled with socks and underwear. Yes, He's the gift we need, but too often Jesus is not the gift we want. That's a problem. That's a BIG problem. It makes Christmas fragile; delicate, like snowflakes falling toward a warm car. The gift of Christ at Christmas was almost snuffed out so many times, and today Christmas is threatened by our selfish wants and needs.

I'm not sure if y'all know this but there is a difference between the God we want and the God who is. Jesus Christ is not simply a wish granter. Jesus Christ is the Son of God. More than that Jesus is God. Jesus does not simply grant wishes for momentary; passing; happiness. Jesus is the giver of life. Those who accept the gift of salvation offered through God's grace and the blood of Jesus Christ must also accept Jesus' lordship of their lives. We must be open to the tugging and pulling of the Holy Spirit to travel in and through places we find scary and difficult. It is only when we are obedient to the upward call of Christ Jesus made possible through the power of the Holy Spirit that we are finally able to find the fulfillment we've been looking for. Abundant life is not purchased and provided through gifts under a tree. Truly abundant life comes from a relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. If we try to limit God, and God's church to only being a place where we get our needs met then we miss something wonderful and important. We miss out on a relationship with the creator of everything who loves us enough to send God's only son to be born like one of us, to grow up like of us, to die a traitor's death on the cross. This is the difference between the guy in the red suit who gives presents and the only begotten Son of our God and King. One becomes a representation of the things that will satisfy in the here and now, like a Hershey bar at the grocery store. The other is the God who loves us like a father and encourages us to grow and be stretched for our own good so the bad will melt away and the good will be fruitful. Abundant life comes from being fruitful. My sincerest hope this evening is we will not focus on the immediate joy of gifts under a tree this Christmas. Instead let us focus on the love of God who sent God's only Son to be born as a fragile baby in a harsh world. God's son who would one day pay the ultimate sacrifice for us because, Surprise! Jesus is not the god we want. Jesus is the God we need. What a wonderful Savior Surprise.

In the name of Jesus Christ,
Amen