

Sermon Text: John 1:1-5; 10-14

I do need to ask, before I ask my first question, how many people do we have from other churches? We have a few? I need to tell you that we have a tradition here at Main Street you need to take home, and your preacher will appreciate it. That is I always give you the option in this congregation of the long version or the short version. You need to take that back to your congregation. Which would you prefer today? The long version or the short version? Okay. All right. I thought so. Tell your preacher you got that from me when you go to your other church.

I found a quote too good not to share with you this morning. It has nothing to do with my sermon, but it is just wonderful. Why is getting Christmas presents for your kids just like a day at the office? Why is getting Christmas presents for your kids just like a day at the office? The answer is you do all the work, and the fat guy in the suit gets all the credit. I like that! Okay. Now to the sermon.

A little more serious note. Christmas has made the news more this year than any year I can remember because some say forces are trying to erase Christmas from public celebrations, but as a student of American religious history, just for the record, in 1659 all the way up to 1681, in this country before it was a country, did you know the Puritans made it illegal, illegal to observe Christmas at all? That whole debate about public celebration, personally, in my opinion, I do not care if people who do not mean it say “Merry Christmas” to me or not, but I care a great deal whether those who say they believe show they believe in their lives, in their actions, in their priorities, and in their attitudes. I do care that you who have taken vows of faith and proclaimed your hope in Christ know what it is to have a Savior born unto us, the word made flesh. If that doesn’t make you happy, then you haven’t understood a word that has ever been said from this pulpit. Proper celebration happens right here in church in worship between God’s children and it is unto God.

Christmas, Alexander Smith says, Christmas is the day that holds time together. For people of the Christian faith, it is the day that holds time together, the day that God has acted and come into our world and also in our lives as the years go by. I count my life by Christmases, not by New Years, but by Christmases, not by April 15 when I pay my taxes – although that’s a big day – but by Christmases. I count it by who was there that Christmas and where we celebrated and who was missing that year and how things have changed. Christmas is also a huge family day. Some of my very first memories of my earliest childhood were of Christmas in Knoxville, TN, and I encourage family togetherness, but sometimes even family togetherness can go too far. For example, once a church put on a children’s Christmas play, and a young boy had only one line. You know that boy who always has just one line and blows it! He had one line, and he got in front of the people, and his line was “I am the light of the world.” On the night he was to perform, in front of all the people, he froze. He froze, and his mother was in the front row, and his mother was trying to mouth the lines to him, and he was following her

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world.” Family can go too far. No, not even the best mothers are the light of the world. We all, even mothers, need a Savior, and thank God, we have one in Jesus Christ, the babe of Bethlehem that we celebrate today with these carols and with prayers and Scripture and gifts, and it is appropriate to give gifts, and I do hear your gifts calling you back home. You hear them, don’t you? I hear your gifts calling you back home. Some of you are wearing your gifts. They made it here today to church. It’s appropriate to give gifts to celebrate the birth of the Savior, but the act of shopping, and the hassles of ordering, and the mix ups, I ordered some thing online, but it came the wrong size, and the waiting in line and the sales that run out just before you get there, it can put you in a foul mood.

A woman was waiting in the checkout line at Wal-Mart about December 21, and her arms were heavy with a mop and a broom and a pail and cleaning supplies. I guess she was getting ready for company. By her grimace, and by her deep sighs, “Huhhhh,” you could tell she was in a hurry, and she was not happy. When the cashier, a young guy, called for a price check on one of her items, the lady remarked indignantly, “I’ll be lucky to get home before Christmas!” Well, the cashier said, “Don’t worry, ma’am, with the wind kicking up out there and that brand new broom, you’ll be home in no time.” Some of you haven’t thought about it, you haven’t got that yet.

The superficial cleaning up and decorating and shopping, that won’t give you a celebration heart! It won’t give you a heart of joy. A superficial understanding, a superficial understanding of Jesus as a baby, way back long time ago, far separated from the here and now, that’s an empty gift. That’s not enough! That understanding on the surface only gives no comfort, no peace, it makes really no difference. We are looking for something more, something personal, and we have that. God became flesh and dwelt among us. You can’t be more personal.

An old professor of mine says that most of us have just enough Christianity to inoculate us against the real thing. We don’t get the depth he says of what God has offered in Jesus Christ. That depth begins with the need each of us has for a Savior. The need for a Savior is the reason. Knowing that we have one is the reason now to celebrate. We have a Savior! We can breathe easy! We can breathe deeply. We can sing out these old songs with renewed joy and with easy spirit because we know that our needs are met, that sin and death and guilt have no hold on us.

Will Willimon wrote, “When one begins with the assumption that real, that real only refers to that which can be touched and teased, reality shrinks, and our expectations for what can and cannot be get scaled down considerably.” God is real, and God really came in Jesus Christ. We sing and rejoice in Emmanuel, God with us, God become a person so that each of us might become a child of the Father. This is the glad tiding of great joy to all people. Christmas Day, this is real. More real than doubt, more real than despair, more real than old wounds, than bad news, than grief. There is something so profound in the Creator coming in weakness and poverty and innocence, and then largely being ignored and rejected. What it says about us and what it says is profound, that God gave

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Himself to us completely, body and soul, to make a way for us to understand the depth of His love, and our rejection and the cross itself shows the depth of our need for a Savior. It speaks of God and it speaks of our need.

One year, when Christmas Day came on a Sunday, as today, a farmer decided to go to church. Like some people, he came to church only a few times a year, Christmas and Easter. I read a sermon translated from the growing Christian church in Russia, and he said they call some of their members “four-wheel Christians.” An American missionary said, “What do you mean, four-wheel Christians?” He said, “They come when they are baptized, they come Easter, they come Christmas, and they come for their own funeral.” Four-wheel Christians, that’s tough! This man usually came about twice a year. He was a farmer, and he came on Christmas Day, and the sermon that was preached that day, interestingly, was from Isaiah, who does speak of the coming of the Messiah, and it is in the King James, “The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib, but Israel doth not know me. My people doth not consider me.” Isaiah was saying that man is dumber than animals! Now, after church, the farmer returned home, and he stood among his cows, and one of the cows began to lick his hand. It was a practical demonstration of the sermon he had just heard. The strong man, though he was, began to weep as he thought, “God did so much more for me, and yet, I have never thanked Him. My cow is more grateful than I am.” My cow is more grateful to me than I am to God. Love is what we are thankful for today. Love for the unlovable, love and forgiveness for sinners, and that is us. Hope and grace for those who have tried and tried and failed, and that is us. Comfort for those who think they are alone, and in all of our lives at some point, that is us. This is Christmas, the gift that covers and redeems all that assails us. The gift is love in person, at great cost to God. Christ is still present in the world, and God’s Holy Spirit is in each of His children, and when we follow the urgings of the Spirit, we reveal Christ’s love in the world, but it will cost us, too. It will cost us involvement.

I’m going to end with a story I’m sure that some of you have heard before, but it’s a story about the payoff for getting involved. Miss Thompson taught Teddy Stallard in the fourth grade. He was slow and an unkempt student, and he was a loner shunned by his classmates. The previous year, his mother had died, and what little motivation he had for school was now gone. Miss Thompson didn’t particularly like Teddy either, but at Christmas, he brought her a small present. Now, her desk was covered in beautifully wrapped little presents, but Teddy’s gift came just in a plain, brown sack. When she opened it, in it was a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with a few rhinestones missing and a little half empty bottle of cheap perfume. The children began to snicker. They knew that wasn’t a good gift, but Miss Thompson saw the importance of the moment, and she quickly splashed on some of that perfume and she put on the bracelet, acting as if Teddy had given her something very, very special. At the end of the day, Teddy worked up enough courage to softly ask, “Miss Thompson, do you know you smell like my mother, and her bracelet, it looks real pretty on you, too. I’m glad that you liked my present.” After Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees, and she prayed for God’s forgiveness, and she prayed for God to use her as she sought to love these children as well as teach them. She became, after that, a new teacher. She lovingly helped students

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like Teddy, and by the end of the year, he had caught up with the rest of the students. Miss Thompson didn't hear from Teddy for a long time, and then she received this note, it said, “Dear Miss Thompson, I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my high school class. Love, Teddy Stallard.” Four years later, she got another note, “Dear Miss Thompson, They just told me I'll be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has been tough, but I liked it. Teddy Stallard.” Four years after that, “Dear Miss Thompson, As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I'm getting married next month, and I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit, if she were alive. You're the only family I have now. Dad died last year. Love, Teddy Stallard” Miss Thompson went to the wedding, and she sat where Teddy's mother would have sat, simply because, in a moment of decision, she decided to let God use her as an instrument of encouragement. She herself became a gift that multiplied through the years.

Marcus Bord wrote, “God is real. The Christian life is about entering into a relationship with God as known in Jesus Christ. That relationship can and will change your life.” It can and will change the lives of others also as we share our faith. God's peace to your journey. God's joy the rest of this Christmas Day, kids and adults, you may go play with your presents. Take time away from your gifts though, to notice each other, to spend time with one another, to notice others and God's love. We must share and we must show our faith. Merry Christmas. Merry Christmas to each one of you. God's gift has been given to us. What we do for others is our gift to God. Merry Christmas.