

CHRISTMAS EVE MEDITATIONS 2018

7PM TRADITIONAL CANDLELIGHT SERVICE

Christmas time certainly has many wonderful aspects about it. From the decorations like those which adorn this place, to the familiar carols which are sung, to the food and the seemingly endless supply of cookies (now is certainly not the time of year to count calories!), and of course the times when we gather with family and friends – the moments when we gather as a faith family here tonight. Yes, there are certainly many wonderful things about this time of year.

Still, this season of celebration and jubilation is not without a bit of frustration. I want to share with you one such frustration that is actually a little bit humorous and I bet that many of you have experienced as well. Now I love sending Christmas cards, I love getting Christmas cards. It really is prayer practice for me to sit and think about those to whom I am sending cards. It too is such a joy to just take a few moments each day, opening a card or two, and giving thanks for that person or that family's presence in my life. One day, I received a card. I opened it, pulled it out, and immediately a light shower of glitter fell from the card onto me and onto everything around me. I looked at the card, it was very nice, nice penguin on the front with a Santa hat – but now I was shimmering with specks of glitter here and there. And I tried to pick it off my clothing and off of the floor, but you can't really pick it off it just sort of clings. You know what I'm talking about? And just when you think you might have it all, you look at yourself or the floor in different lighting or from a different angle, and you are bound to find at least one more speck. Days later even after receiving this card, I'm told I still have sparkles on my face, likely from that same card.

In the past couple of weeks, I have heard many folks lament glitter in a similar way – you might be one of them too. And I have nothing against glitter, it is nice to see sure – my mom and I were just talking about that the other day - but it so hard to get off of you once it's on you. And it can cause, let's face it, a bit of frustration.

However, that glittery card which even now drops some shimmering specks on the pulpit, on my hands, and on my robe, this card and that glitter holds a message for us. And that message is this: that the blessings of this season, the hope, the peace, the joy, the love of this time of year founded in Jesus Christ, shouldn't be so easy to get rid of – so easy to forget either. We should let the blessings of this season shower over us and cling to us a little longer too. Friends, we live in a world where the day after Christmas things will begin to look like Christmas never happened. The decorations will disappear. Stores will be filled with red decorations and hearts for Valentine's Day, and Christmas music for the most part will cease and be put away until after Thanksgiving next year.

But the true meaning of Christmas is not held just within this day or tomorrow. The true meaning of Christmas is not just in the 12 days which make up the season. For the hope which came into the world, raising us from hopeless, this is with us always. The peace which comes into our hearts and which we are called to bring about in the world, this is with us forevermore. The joy does not disappear at the end of Silent Night or when we extinguish our candles, but it is an eternal joy. The love, the love of God which took on flesh and dwelt among us, a love which powerfully touches our world from heaven to the lowliest of stables and every place in between, this is everlasting.

So maybe we all need a little more glitter in our life. Since thinking about this and reflecting on my message for tonight, I have stopped trying to get rid of the little specks of glitter which still appear around the house and on my clothing. Rather, I have embraced it as a reminder. So even when I still find a glimmering speck of glitter in the middle of March, I will be reminded of the gifts of Christmas which cling to our world forevermore. For what we celebrate today is something so precious – don't let it end. Don't let the goodwill of this time of year end when the candles go out. Don't let the love that we strive to share in tangible ways with our neighbors and with our God end when the decorations come down. Don't let the joy of the gift of the Christ Child end

when the last carol is sung. Let the moments that we share today cling to you and remind you always of the wonders of our God.

Every year, one of the moments that clings to me always is the moment in which we are about to enter. When we light candles, when we sing silent night. When we sit in the silence and bask in the glow of all the candles among us. For in those quite moments, we remember the blessings of this season. We join our hearts with those around us. We experience the presence of God again among us. Let these moments, like glitter, cling to you and remind you, always and forever, about the glories of Christmas. Amen.

11:30PM CONTEMPLATIVE CHRISTMAS EVE

The nativity scene, which is brought to mind as we sing *Away in a Manger*, has long been a sign of this season. Now nativity scenes come in a variety of shapes, and sizes, even themes! Some of you got to see a few weeks ago that Charlie the Church Mouse, a puppet of mine who helps me most Sundays with my Children's Message even has one which is made up of mice! You have Mary Mouse, Joseph Mouse, little baby Jesus Mouse. I even saw a picture of a nativity icon just the other day on Facebook, which was a little different. It had the manger, the animals, the starry sky, and it had Joseph holding the baby Jesus while Mary read the scriptures - while Mary pondered the wonders of this child in her heart. Still, even though there are different styles and themes, different depictions even, they all do essentially the same thing: they call us back to the humble stable and the humble beginnings of Jesus - the humble beginnings of the Christ Child.

Now, for one of my favorite stories of a nativity scene. This story comes from a clergy colleague and friend of mine. She had been spending some time before Christmas out of the country and was in, I believe it was China for a few days. And as she was walking around town, she came upon a window display of a store which included a nativity set for sale. From what I gather, it was of a relatively classic style. You had your Mary and

Joseph in a wooden stable. You had some shepherds, some magi, some animals scattered here and there. And in the middle, of course, was a manger. Now my friend thought this looked rather nice, but she couldn't quite see into the manger. So wanting to inspect it further, she took a few steps forward toward the glass, I envision her pressing her nose against the glass to peer into the manger. And as she looked down into that trough lined with straw, what did she see? Well, it was Santa Clause of course! Yes, in that place where the Christ Child should be, was instead a figurine of Santa. In what should be the focal point of the nativity, the focal point of this season even, was not the baby Jesus but jolly old saint Nicolas!

Now, don't get me wrong. Santa is a pretty good guy. I have no issues with Santa. But he has his own story, doesn't he? Still, this odd nativity holds sort of a sobering truth. That too many of us during this time of year lose sight of the focal point. With so much going on around us, so many presents to buy and wrap, so much food to prepare, travel plans to be made, we often forget who lies at the center of it all. And yes, the presents, and the food, the time with family and friends certainly can embody the blessings of this season with Jesus at the center. But, we must be intentional, as to not get wrapped up in societal pressures or expectations and remind ourselves constantly why we are doing what we are doing.

So what does it mean to keep Christ as the focal point - to keep Jesus at the center? It means to not worry about finding the perfect present (or receiving the perfect gift for that matter), but acknowledging that the most perfect gift has already been given, and what we share with others and what we receive is simply a sign of and thanksgiving for that gift. It means not worrying about whether the food will come out just right, but making sure that there is an extra place at your table for anyone who needs a sign of hope and love founded in a hot meal and in time surrounded by friends and neighbors. It's not about having the best tree but remembering what the evergreen stands for - a sign of life! Nor is it about having the most wonderful decorations but letting what we do have be a sign of joy to us and to all who enter our dwellings. It's not about getting

everything done on our checklists which seem to grow this time of year, it's about making time in the midst of it all to sit in the peace of Christ, kind of like we are doing right now.

As midnight approaches and as we prepare to welcome Christmas Day, I bring a simple message. That it is never too late to bring Jesus back to the center. It's never too late to embody the Christmas spirit and make this day and these celebrations about the life and light of Christ - about the hope, peace, joy, and love which we rejoice in this time of year. It's never too late to extend one more invitation to your table. It's never too late to appreciate the beauty of the decorations and lights around us which proclaims Christ's birth - to simply bask in the glories of this season. And when we feel our focal point being drawn away from the manger, being drawn away from the one who teaches us to love God and love neighbor, the one who teaches us to give, the one who calls us into the loving arms of our Great God and the one who sends us out into lives of service, when we are being drawn away from this focal point, may we pause, sit in the stillness, find the silence, and remember the story of Bethlehem. May we remember the first Christmas and may we keep Jesus in our manger. So be it and may it be so. Amen.