**Matthew 1:18-25 December 24, 2021**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Matthew’s Gospel gives us the Christmas story in a few simple, short, sentences. “When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.” And that’s it. A carpenter’s betrothed, who is a virgin, is found to be with child from the Holy Spirit, and she gives birth to a son, and they call him Jesus. The details of everything else is found in the other Gospels, the most expansive details being found in the Gospel of Luke. The theological implications are flushed out more in the Gospel of John, the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, the very Word from creation, from the beginning of the world, the divinity of God takes on the flesh of man. In the Gospel of Mark you get, nothing, no mention of Jesus’ birth at all, it begins with John the Baptist and moves quickly into Christ’s Baptism. If anything it’s just assumed that he was born, but there’s more important things to talk about, Mark’s Gospel is like getting shot out of a cannon and flying through the events of Jesus’ life, the birth isn’t as important as the work, which leads to the death, the atonement, the salvation found in the blood of Jesus shed for the world. But here, in Matthew, the birth is so simple to understand, and in a way, so timeless. If you were to summarize what it’s all about, the trees, the lights, the presents, the traditions, the hoopla of Christmas, it’s laid out so simply. Mary gave birth to a son, and they called his name Jesus.

Without significance, the decorations, the gestures, the presents, the lights, the “stuff” of Christmas is meaningless. What is the most popular decoration that we find during Christmas? So much so that you’ll find this particular decoration here in Church, as well as at your dentist’s office, or in a restaurant. Everywhere you look in the month of December you see, the Christmas tree. A wonderful beacon of light and beautiful colorful ornaments and decorations. A Christmas tradition in our house was to watch “Rudolph the Red Nosed reindeer” every year with my Uncle Tim and Aunt Dianne, and in it Burl Ives as the snowman gives a small speech about the Christmas tree. Maybe you remember it. He says, “What’s a Christmas Tree without tinsel and pretty silver and gold decorations? Can’t really call it a Christmas tree now can you? And think of all the fun and joy that would be lost on Christmas morning if all the young folks didn’t get to see that sparkling happy tree?” Yes it’s safe to say it isn’t Christmas without the tree. But what’s the difference between a tree of significance, a timeless tree, compared to one that is put up simply for decoration? When I go to my Father’s house around Christmas, and I see his tree, how is it different than the one that I see at the doctor’s office, or that’s put up at the Meijer to tempt people to buy one just like it? The answer is found in the meaning of the ornaments. My father puts up ornaments that I’ve seen my whole life, specialized and personalized ornaments that have my name on them, or my mother’s or my brother’s. My father has special ornaments that he’s put on the tree that you can’t find in a store, they are old and significant, they aren’t made anymore, every single one has a story, or a memory, I can remember seeing them when I was younger and there they are, the same ones today. It’s the same with my own tree at home, we have ornaments that were bought and given when my wife and I were married, and when my children were born. Ornaments that tell of Jesus’ birth, ornaments that I have that have their own stories, like a reindeer ornament that was given to me by my 6th grade basketball team when my Dad accepted a call to serve in Michigan and we moved. A gift given to me on the last day that I saw any of them in my entire life. When I see it, it has significance, it means something, it tells a story, it invokes a memory, it’s special.

But again, without significance, the decorations, the gestures, the presents, the lights, the “stuff” of Christmas is meaningless. Compare these examples of Christmas trees, with special ornaments and decorations to the cookie cutter, Christmas trees you find in stores and waiting rooms. Nothing personalized, nothing special, nothing that has any significance to why we celebrate Christmas at all. It’s a sterilized, non-offensive, colorful bulb, an artificial tree that isn’t timeless or full of meaning, it’s just a decoration. And I don’t say that to put down your own decorations at home or even here in our own sanctuary, I only bring it up to again point to our Christmas celebration as being rooted in the significant story that we find in our Gospel reading and to push back against the notion that Christmas is a holiday and nothing more. A holiday without meaning is bland, pointless, a celebration of nothing, celebrating just for celebration’s sake. But that’s not what Christmas is. Christmas can be expanded to focus on each element of the story, as we have in years past on Wednesday nights during Advent, talking about the animals around the manger or as we did this past month focusing on the town of Bethlehem, we can expand out to talk about all the details of the conception of Christ, and the Shepherds and the inn and the manger, but deep down, it’s what Matthew records, a son was born to Mary and Joseph, and they called his name, Jesus.

That’s what Christmas is about, that’s the core message, that’s why we gather together to celebrate tonight. We can’t set aside the significance and the timeless story of Christ’s birth for a generic and bland holiday observance that is devoid of any meaning. We can’t set aside our faith, just to appease. We are God’s children, and we can’t hide it, like a present deep under the tree, like an ornament that speaks specifically about Jesus’ birth that we put toward the back, or that we hide in the middle. Christmas is a wonderful day of celebration, but also it can be a day where we simply try to keep the peace, where just as Joseph resolved to divorce Jesus quietly, we too just quietly go about our lives. We don’t want to invite someone to church, it might offend, we’ll just go and then meet up and visit with them later. We don’t want to bring up that conversation about their faith or what’s going on, or why they don’t seem to fold their hands at the dinner table anymore, best to just keep it quiet, it’s Christmas, now’s not the time. But if Christmas isn’t about Christ, then what is it? It’s classified as just “holiday”, it’s stripped of everything that makes it special. Like going through a personal Christmas tree and picking out the ornaments that have meaning and replacing them with generic colored bulbs. That’s what we do with our own faith when we replace it with less offensive things in the eyes of the world. Our faith is hidden away, even on Christmas, and it’s to our own shame. Rather than keeping others from shame we heap shame upon ourselves by shying away from the true reason that we celebrate, the reason that we put up a tree, that we hang the lights, and get together.

But the truth is too great to hide under the wrapping paper and bows of presents that have been opened and enjoyed. The truth is too great to be outshone by the lights or pushed to the side for another plate of special food. A son was born to the virgin Mary and they called his name Jesus. Jesus, the promised Savior. Jesus the gift to the world. Jesus more than just a man, more than just a human like you and I, Jesus was the perfection of God brought here to earth to be the link between you and God the Father. Jesus was the gift that brought peace on Earth and goodwill to men. Jesus the promised Savior who came and didn’t shy away from the important mission that He came to accomplish, but journeyed forward in his life, to his death, and his resurrection, so that sin wouldn’t be the destruction of the world, and to make it as personal as you possibly can, Jesus, the gift of Christmas was born and given specifically and personally to you. He is your gift, just as he was to Mary and Joseph. You behold him on this wonderful and joyous day as the shepherds did, and now that you have the truth you take it to the world, you go and tell it on the mountain, which looks different in our day because it’s more digital than physical, but the call is the same. Christmas is about Christ, and we can’t ignore that. The nativity scene must not be hidden away behind the “holiday”. Christmas is more than just presents and lights and food. Christmas is about Jesus, the baby born to Mary and Joseph who saved you.

This story is a timeless one, full of significance. Christmas songs are that way. Recipes for Christmas treats are that way too as we make the same cookies each year. If you ever listen to new Christmas albums they are always trying to introduce a new classic, a new Christmas theme that will fit into the rotation of the great and timeless and classic songs and carols that seem to play on the radio every year. It’s hard to create something so timeless, and it can’t be done without it being significant. It’s why tonight, at the close of our service, we don’t sing something new, we don’t sing something that’s simply a gesture, or a meaningless song that talks only about snow, or Santa, or the season, or ourselves. We take the time, to spread the light of the Christ candle, to each and every single person seated here together, as brothers and sisters in Christ, and we sing a song of significance. That speaks about the night of our Savior’s birth. A holy night, even if it perhaps wasn’t as silent as we may think from the beautiful words that we love to sing, but a special night. A special night because of who he is, this baby born to the virgin Mary, a special night because of how his light has come to our lives and we are saved by the light of salvation that he brought to us in our sin. A timeless night, as it was sung years before, and we sing it tonight, and how, if God wills it, we will continue to sing the truth of this hymn that teaches us about our Savior, many nights in the future until Christ returns. It means something. It’s special. It’s timeless, and it lasts. Merry Christmas.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.