

Christmas

Merry Christmas to all of you hearty souls who made a point of getting to Church on this high holy day. I don't remember going to church on Christmas Day or even on Christmas Eve when I was growing up. I DO remember going to church every Sunday, but Christmas services always seemed like something for other really religious people. My family was what most people would call a religious family but special services that weren't on a Sunday just didn't seem to fall on our radar. Many of you, your being here right here and right now, might feel like you pushed the pause button on Christmas. I know that's how it would have occurred to me when I was younger. You see, we didn't go to church on Christmas. If you're anything like me when I was a kid. Christmas didn't really happen until the gifts were opened. Once all the presents were unwrapped I can remember thinking we "did" Christmas or that Christmas was done. Occasionally we would put the wrapped presents in the car, drive to Grandma's or Aunt June's and then DO Christmas there. Christmas as an adult looked a lot like that, packing up the car heading cross country to an Aunt's home in Indiana. One year the car broke down after we had it all packed up and had to take it to the shop for repairs. And this was very distressing, why? Because Christmas was in there! We can't put Christmas in the garage! Christmas can't be imperiled—the gifts can't be locked up in a greasy auto repair shop. The gifts need to be unbound so Christmas can happen! For me, the presents seemed to define what Christmas was. The gifts seemed to hold a magical space of "this is what its all about." But we didn't go to church on Christmas. Most Christmases meant we put up a tree sometime in mid-December (Mom loved the pine smell of the live tree—no way

would we put up a fake tree) and my sisters and I would hang the colorful balls on the branches. We decorated the house, festive not gaudy. We'd put up the little plastic nativity scene and a few candles of red or white or green. Mom would get out the Christmas cookie cutters and she'd make sugar cookies and top them with red or white or green icing and then sprinkle them with those little silver-colored toppings. With my 3 sisters I would watch the yearly showing of Frostie the Snowman and Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer. We had to get all serious for when the Billy Graham Crusade for Christmas came on the TV because Dad basically made us. I guess he did that because, well, we never went to church on Christmas. We would keep an eye under the tree in the days just before Christmas Day to see how many presents would accumulate. I can remember my sisters and I peeking around at all the boxes noticing whose name was on them. "Oh, this one's yours!" someone would exclaim. "Oh, this one is mine!" We would shake them and put our ear up to them. I can remember even peeling part of the wrapping in an inconspicuous place to see if I might get a glimpse of what was inside. The anticipation was absolutely overwhelming. The gifts were what made Christmas so special . . .but we didn't go to church on Christmas. Did you notice something funny in the Gospel text we read this morning for Christmas Day? Where was Christmas? Where were Mary and Joseph? Where were the shepherds and the angels and the manger and the "no room in the inn?" Where were the wise men? Where were the gifts? Where was the gold, the frankincense and the myrrh? Where was the baby Jesus? Did John miss Christmas? No, John didn't tell us a Christmas story. John wasn't interested in weaving for us a tale. John didn't need to tell us about what happened around Christ's birth. You know what John gave us? John gave us the MEANING of the

Nativity of God's Son. And what's more is that he never even uses the word "Christ" or "Jesus." What word does John use in referring to the one we know as Jesus the Christ? "Word." Jesus is the "Word" of God. This word "Word" is a funny one in Greek (logos), it can also be translated "deed" or "statement" or "revelation" or "assertion" or "matter" or "thing." This Word, this Logos, this "thing" of God did what, according to John? It became flesh and lived among us. This Word of God was with God—this Word of God WAS God. God is inseparable from his Word. "We have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth," John says. THIS is the "thing" of Christmas, that in the human Jesus we see God—that in the humanity of this man that started out as a baby boy in Bethlehem, we experience the divinity of God. The irony of this reality is that usually the last place we look for God is in another human, right? Humans are those people that make our lives, sometimes difficult, and sometimes easy. Think about it, who is it that disappoints you over and over again in life—humans! Right? But in this Christmas event—in this incarnation even, God chooses to dwell fully in a human being, a helpless baby subject to all the exigencies of life that humans are exposed! What more validation could we feel as created humans than that God chose to literally dwell in human form? No, we didn't go to Church on Christmas, but oh we had church on Christmas alright. Usually it was on Christmas Eve or sometimes Christmas morning. We'd all be in the Living Room and Dad would be sitting in his easy chair and ask one of us kids to turn off the TV. Whenever Dad had us turn OFF the TV we knew something big was going down. Dad would then take his Bible in his hands and open it up. We all knew what that meant. It meant we're doing church, right here, right now. The theme of the Christmas home church was

always the same. Dad seemed to notice how fixated we were on the presents under the tree. So he would effectively call a time-out on our rampant imaginations and fascinations with what was under the tree and point us back to the main point of it all—yes, he redirected us to the true reason for the season. My Dad did what John’s gospel does right here in chapter one. Dad would tell us that what Christmas is about is God’s gift of himself, God’s gift of salvation, of hope in this world, in this Jesus—the same Jesus that would die for us. This gift? This gift for us was costly. It cost God a lot to give us a picture of what love looked like. This gift is for us. So why DO we give gifts to others on Christmas? We give gifts to others on Christmas because God gave the ultimate gift to us, the fullest divine expression in a fully human Son. Once Dad was sure that that point had gotten IN, he would then crack a big smile and say, “okay let’s open the presents!” And boy oh boy the paper would fly. Now, as a kid, I knew, both intellectually, and in my heart, that the presents were never supposed to be the main thing. But, truth be told, I don’t think I ever stopped thinking about the presents. But thanks to Dad I ALSO never lost view of the gift that God made to us—the gift of himself for our salvation. As a post-script, I don’t do gift exchanges anymore. I’m glad that it’s something that I’ve done and I’m sure that I don’t need to do it anymore—and it’s perfectly alright for all of y’all to exchange gift. But it is good practice for being LIKE God. No, we didn’t go to church on Christmas. But the church we DID relieved me of feeling like I had to DO something to “make” somebody else’s Christmas. You know all that pressure that comes in trying to find the perfect gift, to make sure that everyone on your list is covered, you know, that thing that makes us crazy? Well, guess what? The perfect gift has already been given, and it’s got your name on it. It’s okay, go

ahead and open it. What's your access to this gift?—the only present that truly gives life? I think you know. That's why YOU came to church on Christmas. To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen.