

*CHRISTMAS DAY*

*December 25, 2016*

*St. Luke 2:1-14*

***“The Feeling of Christmas”***

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
2155 North Oakland Avenue  
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

“City sidewalks. Busy sidewalks. Dressed in holiday style. In the air there’s a feeling of Christmas.” So goes the opening lines of the familiar Christmas song “*Silver Bells*.” It’s one of those songs that can easily get stuck in your head as you find yourself going through all the motions to capture what can be the elusive **Feeling of Christmas**. What exactly is **The Feeling of Christmas**, and how do you get it?

With that I turned to *wikiHow*. For those of you who may not know about *wikiHow*, it is an online community consisting of an extensive database of how-to-guides. Founded in 2005 by Internet entrepreneur Jack Herrick, the website aims to create the worlds most helpful how-to-instructions to enable everyone in the world to learn how to do anything. It was there that I found the article: “*How to Get Into the Spirit of Christmas When You Don’t Feel It Anymore*.”

According to the article, there are four methods that one might employ. First of all, there is *the Kris Kringle, aka Santa Claus method*: collect and deliver gifts, avoid the crowds, imagine your best Christmas ever, decorate your house, reach out to friends and relatives, watch Christmas television, eat seasonal foods, share the work with others. Secondly, there is *the Silent Night, Holy Night method*: forget the crowds, decorate your home, turn on the music, read the story of Christmas, exchange gifts, attend Christmas church services, make the perfect Christmas dinner, and say “Merry Christmas!” Thirdly, there is *the Winter Solstice method*: shut out the noise, find like-minded people, honor the darkness, start a new tradition, decorate your home, celebrate the season your way, and happy holidays. Finally, there is *the method for Everybody*: be yourself, and know that the spirit of the season resides, first and foremost, in yourself.

I certainly don’t want to spend the whole sermon today analyzing these four methods, but I do want you to note that none of them define what **The Feeling of Christmas** is, and all of them leave you with the conclusion that it is really up to you to find it. Hopefully, all of us gathered here this morning know what Christmas is all about. What Christmas is all about leads to **The Feeling of Christmas** in the truest sense. And it is not up to us to find it. Rather, it is up to God to give it. And to be perfectly truthful, the feeling is not what most think. It is not about being a kid again. It is not the spirit of giving. It isn’t even found in the act of attending Christmas church services. And it is silly to say that it is inextricably bound within ourselves, for if that is so, then how could any one of us not have it, lose it, or need to find it?

In our Gospel lesson for this morning, we are certainly taught the whole thing. It’s hard to miss unless we are just not paying attention:

And the angel said to them, Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom his favor rests!”

Just look at those verses! You have definition of what Christmas is - Savior; you have emotion - Fear and Peace; and you have where it all comes from - the favor of God. It isn't that giving gifts, decorations, music, going to church, and Christmas meals are all wrong, but they are not in and of themselves **The Feeling of Christmas**.

I would be much more inclined to ask Mary, Joseph, and the Shepherds what it means to truly feel Christmas. Take Mary and Joseph first. They are given the promised child, who will save them from their sins, with little regard to whether they wanted to go through this or not. They were emptied of themselves and all of their life plans as they were uprooted from their home to end up in a lousy stable to give birth to the baby; the Savior of the world. Joseph embraces the Son of God as his own son, and it says of Mary that she "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart (Luke 2:19)."

And what of the Shepherds? Their Christmas was also an emptying of themselves as their normal nightly routine was inconvenienced by an angel of the Lord, and the glory of the Lord that ripped into their very souls to cause great fear - real terror! But the terror of their own inglorious existence as sinners before the glory of the Lord was soothed when they were told of the birth of the Savior and the peace that he brings. It is not an earthly peace, but a peace that will come from the removal of sin. It is a future home of righteousness. In humility, this Savior will take their sin away and give life - eternal life! God shows them favor by barging into their lives. And, when it was all said and done, what was their reaction? It says, "And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child (Luke 2:17)." They were overjoyed and couldn't keep their mouths shut!

What you see in all of this is the real feeling of Christmas. The nostalgic routine and all the symbols and traditions and so called "spirit" of the season, which are all designed to be good markers of an event, can actually uproot the event itself and mislead us to believe that the true feeling of the thing is in the celebration of the thing rather than in the thing itself. **The Feeling of Christmas** is to be uprooted and emptied of the self. It is to see the hopelessness out of personal sin, our sinful lives, and to even be afraid in the presence of the glorious one because we are an inglorious (shameful) people. It is about God intruding into our lives that he might give us the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in his one and only Son. And as the favor of God enters into our lives, we are changed and made to feel the true feelings that we may not want to feel, but that we need to feel. And having been changed in Jesus, we mark that change with routine, symbols, traditions, that attempt to embrace the happening as it really is.

In "*An Awesome Christmas Eve*," Katherine Kehler relates a family story that I would like to share:

My father was born in the Ukraine and spent his first fifteen years there. One Christmas his two older brothers bought a German-made Christmas musical wind-up tree stand for their parents. It was mechanical and played Silent Night. Their gift brought great delight to this family of ten. Not long after, the region experienced the horrors of World War I, followed by the Russian Revolution. Many people endured tremendous persecution — women were raped, and fathers were kidnapped and murdered. Thieves would barge into homes, demand food, and steal what they could, including the horses.

It was during one of those raids that God used the Christmas tree stand to perform a miracle and save the lives of my father's family. It was Christmas Eve and the tree was in the stand and playing Silent Night. The door burst open and a gang of ruffians stormed in, all brandishing guns. Terror gripped each member of the family as they feared what would happen next. However, their fear turned to astonishment as they watched these uninvited guests stop and become still. Then without saying a word, the bandits backed out of the house and closed the door. God had used the tree and Silent Night to save the lives of my father and his family. A miracle on Christmas Eve!

The real feeling of Christmas happens the same way in every generation through out the world. It is found in that moment when life is turned upside down, when sin is seen as utterly sinful, but in the middle of it all is the German-made Christmas musical wind-up tree stand, that takes us to our Savior and the reason for his birth. It is God interrupting us all, exposing sin in every way, and graciously giving us salvation. When it is our door that is burst opened by a gang of ruffians, we who are terrorized and afraid are reminded of no other place to go than Jesus. And when we find ourselves as the gang of ruffians bursting through the door, we are forced to ask ourselves, "What am I doing in the light of God and his greatest gift of a Savior?" All of this is **The Feeling of Christmas** - God intruding, God speaking, law and gospel, sin and grace, death and life, His favor, God With Us! When it is understood that way, it is always a Merry Christmas!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott