

I love Christmas music, and I listen to it the entire month of December. This drives my family nuts, especially the Kenny G and James Taylor Christmas CDs that I listen to over and over again. But one Christmas song I love was written by John Lennon, called “And So This Is Christmas.”

It is not a traditional Christmas song, but edgy and thought provoking. Written in 1971, Lennon was talking about what Christmas means in light of the many ongoing problems in the world, hunger, war, poverty.

Although it is 37 years old, it is a song for our time:

“And so this is Christmas and what have you done? Another year over, a new one just begun. And so this is Christmas for weak and for strong.

The rich and the poor ones, this world is so wrong.

And so happy Christmas for black and for white, for yellow and red ones.

Let’s stop the all fight.”

John Lennon is asking what difference Christmas makes.

The world is still a mess, so does Christmas really matter that much?

All of the decorating, eating, shopping, celebrating.

Does it last beyond opening presents and eating too much food?

Does it matter to the poor, the oppressed, the forgotten?

Does this holiday have the power to change anything, including us?

And so **what** is Christmas?

The essence of Christmas is transformation.

It is about a God who can change anything, anyone, anytime.

But this is hard to accept, because it seems too **good** to be true.

Just try changing something about yourself all **by** yourself.

Human beings are the most stubborn creatures in the universe.

If you have tried to lose weight, forgive someone who hurt you, alter a deeply entrenched behavior, you know that change does not come easily at all.

Just try to give up sugar for the next week, or try to quit smoking cold turkey.

Just try to stop having negative thoughts about yourself or someone you dislike.

You realize that what you have to change first and foremost is your heart.

And it cannot be done on our own efforts alone.

You can only do it with God’s help.

And that is exactly what our Christian faith (and Christmas) is all about—God’s ability to transform us from the inside out. To transform our hearts.

When you read the stories of the sort of effect Jesus had upon people, you see time and again that after encountering Jesus, they were transformed. Sinners changed, lepers changed, prostitutes changed, tax collectors changed, the arrogant changed, the maimed and sick and sad, changed.

He touched their hearts and changed their lives forever.

What happened at Christmas has the power to change us as well. Because it reveals a God that loves us so much, he decided to share our human condition and bless our reality forever.

It means that God knows us and notices us.

The message of Christmas is not only about an innocent baby and his picturesque birth. It is a radical and life changing event.

In the film *Taladega Nights* Will Ferrell plays a race car driver named Ricky Bobby. He always says grace before dinner addressed to the baby Jesus, and this annoys his wife. When she asks why he says, "I like the Christmas Jesus best.

That grown up Jesus was a little too weird."

Most of us like the Christmas Jesus best.

Now the Christmas story itself is really quite modest and ordinary.

A baby born to poor refugee parents in a cold barn.

Things like that happen every day in this world, refugees on the move, poor, alone in a strange city.

People who are unimportant, expendable and do not matter all that much. But in this humble beginning God reached out to humankind once and for all. That seemingly small, modest thing was deeply profound, and it still matters more than twenty centuries later. It means that God knows us, notices us, and continues to care about us. **This** is Christmas.

Now, I have a horrible time with Christmas shopping every single year.

I go to the mall and I am not feeling the joy. I wander around aimlessly.

Especially when it comes to my husband Fred.

He is notoriously impossible to buy for. "What do you want for Christmas, Fred?"

"Nothing" it's the same story every single year. "If you get me something I will just have to return it." And Home Depot Gift Cards only go so far.

Same is true to a lesser extent for my children, and my brother.

So I wander around the stores.

Salespeople ask, "Can I help you find something?" "I don't know."

"Well what are you looking for?" "I don't know."

What I **do know** is that I love these people so much, and I am so glad that they are a part of my life and that they continue to put up with me day after day. I want them to know how much I love them and that I am so grateful for them.

God wanted to do the same thing for us.
 God wanted us to get it once and for all, to understand that we are dearly loved, and that there is nothing we could ever do that would change that fact.
 God loves us so much that God wanted to offer us the perfect gift.

So God completely identified with our human condition,
 a condition that can be so lonely, painful and sad at times.
 God wanted us to know once and for all that we are not alone.
 In Jesus, God is saying, “I know you better than you know yourself.
 I know the ways you have failed and fallen and messed up.
 And I still love you. I will always love you.”

The birth of Jesus revealed a divine gentleness and profound hope,
 a hope that no sorrow, no addiction, no death, no disaster can diminish.

Now, 2008 has been a very depressing year on so many levels.
 It has been a year of hardship and struggle and defeat for a lot of people.
 We have seen it here at the church—people who have lost jobs, homes, hope.
 People whose spirits are crushed and some of them are sitting near you tonight
 I think of a woman I met at the Jeffco Action center who got cancer this year,
 and the treatments made her so sick that she subsequently lost her job.
 When she lost her job she lost her house and most of her stuff.
 This once attractive, successful woman is now sick and living in a homeless
 shelter with her kids, and I am sure thinking about her tonight.
 What does Christmas mean to her this year?

If I did not have a spiritual perspective, a bigger picture, I would have succumbed
 to despair a long time ago, because there is so much sadness in this world.

Some of you know that my own faith was tested sorely this year.
 Last October my brother Les and I had to make the awful decision to remove our
 48 year old sister from life support.

So we stood by her bed in ICU and watched the nurses remove tube after tube
 from her arms and mouth and nose, and in less than an hour she was dead.
 This is someone younger than me, whom I have known since she was born.

And for me, the only antidote to that sort of pain is Love.
The only relief is knowing that when you love someone, they are yours forever,
they are a part of you and nothing you have shared is lost.
All of it takes its honored place in the tapestry of your soul.
No tear, no agony, no sadness or heartache is unimportant to God.
There is something beautiful and better beyond this earthly vale of tears.
There is a spiritual reality surrounding us all the time and death is but a transition
into another form of life.
The only true consolation for the sadness of this life is love, which is God.

Betsy Neary knows this, and she learned it at Christmastime.
Her life was perfect. She lived in a small town in Nebraska, the town where she
grew up. She married her High School sweetheart.
They were blessed with a boy and a girl.
Their daughter was born when their son Peter was 6.
But just 2 weeks after the baby came, Peter was hit by his own school bus and
killed.
It was a tragedy not just for the Neary's but for the entire town to lose this darling
6 year old boy, right after Thanksgiving.
Out of love and respect for that family, nobody in that Nebraska town
could bring themselves to decorate their homes for Christmas.
How could they put up festive Christmas decorations celebrating a birth, when
people they loved had suffered such a tragic death? It just didn't seem right.
One evening Betsy's mother came to the house and said, "Come with me, we are
going for a drive." So she loaded the family in her car and drove them up one
street and down another. Then she asked: "What do you see?"
They said: "Nothing." "Nothing is right." she said.
"Everybody loves you both so much that they would not hurt you for the world.
So they cannot bring themselves to decorate their homes for Christmas.
Nobody will set up a tree, string up lights, because they are heartbroken for you.
Somehow you must find it in your hearts to give them their Christmas back.
Once you let life back into your home, everyone else will be
able to invite Christ into their homes."

Very reluctantly, the Neary's bought a Christmas tree and decorated it.
They put it in the front window for everyone to see.
They strung lights all over the outside of their home and decorations too.

Their hearts were not in it, but they did it anyway.

It was as if a switch had been turned on in that small town.

Trees and lights popped up everywhere. And soon doorbells rang unexpectedly.

Every single evening the Neary home was filled with people bringing food, flowers, tears and stories of Peter. People gave generously of the most precious commodity of all—their time, and grew closer than they had ever been before.

Peter's classmates came to the house to sing carols.

Thousands of dollars were donated to Charity in Peter's name.

Betsy later described it like this: "The gifts we received that Christmas brought us back from the bring of death and despair. We learned that Christmas is simply God's love for us manifested in our love for each other."

God's love for us manifested in our love for each other.

And so this is Christmas.

There is a line in Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol that I just love.

Most of you know Ebenezer Scrooge, whom Dickens describes as:

"A tight fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge a squeezing, wrenching, scraping, grasping, covetous old sinner, external heat and cold had little influence on him--no warmth could warm him, no wintry weather chill him. No beggars stopped him in the street, no one ever asked him directions, even blind men's dogs appeared to pull their owners into doorways when they saw him coming."

This bitter, mean man has a change of heart and he sees what a miserable, selfish little life he has been living and knows that it has all been a waste.

Scrooge suddenly realizes that Christmas, with its message of love, generosity, joy is a metaphor for what life is all about.

He is truly sorry and resolves to live as a changed man.

After his transformation, Scrooge makes this bold promise to God:

"I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all through the year."

If Christmas means anything beyond consumerism and superficiality, then it should live in our hearts and be kept all through the year.

Because Christmas has the power to transform even the most bitter and cynical among us.

Christmas has the power to make us good again.

Christmas is about God's love for us manifested in our love for each other.

And so this is Christmas. And what have you done?

By Christmas, 2009, I hope that all of us can say we kept Christmas all year.

We can say this world is indeed better, brighter, and kinder because of us.

Certainly that is what drives the ministry of this church all year long,
the conviction that because God entered our human condition in Jesus Christ
we will share God's love with everyone we meet.

My dear brothers and sisters, the birth of Jesus Christ has the power to change us.

And together, with God's help, we can change the world.

Video Clip to "And So This Is Christmas" by John Lennon

Let us pray.....

Eternal God:

And so this is Christmas.

Once again we celebrate the birth of a child who would show us the way to live
and the way to die.

He revealed tenderness, a kindness, and a promise that
no sorrow, setback, or tragedy can ultimately diminish.

Help us, gracious God to understand the true meaning of what the birth of Jesus
represents.

May we keep Christmas in our hearts all throughout the coming year.

Amen.

Tonight we light candles in the darkness as a symbol of our belief that
nothing can extinguish the hope, joy, and light of Christ.

We believe in new beginnings and in the power of Christmas.

Jesus Christ is a light no darkness can ever fully extinguish.