

If you ordinarily come to church on Christmas Eve, then you may have noticed that you can come for years and years, and you will always hear the same old story. You will hear the same Scripture, essentially the same sermon, sing the same songs.

Year after year it does not change, it is the same thing you heard when came to church on Christmas Eve as a child, teenager, young adult, older adult.

I wish I could give you a fresh approach to this story, some illuminating insights, something completely original that might have been overlooked for 2000 years, to say something you have never heard before.

But essentially, it is the same old story, it really does not change. This story about God coming down to earth to become one of us, God entering our human condition in all its messiness and ordinariness.

None of us can understand or even imagine the manner in which Jesus was born. He was God with us, but he was born just like all the rest of us.

We have an idea in our minds what it looks like, usually we imagine a beautiful and simple scene in a pastoral setting.

Mary is young and beautiful, Joseph handsome and calm, even though he did not attend the Lamaze classes in Nazareth prior to the delivery of this child.

In every depiction, they seem so happy and content. They look that way on Christmas cards and they look that way in nativity scenes.

The most impressive collection of nativities belongs to Maryann Bleyle. Maryann has nativities from all over the world, and every one is distinctive.

I had the pleasure of spending an afternoon at the Bleyle home recently, one of the most relaxing afternoons I've spent in a long time, and I wanted to share some of their unique nativities with you tonight.

1. This one is African American, and the name of the Christ Child is Precious.
2. This is by Mary Lucero, Native American Artist depicting the Holy Family singing
3. Another one of everyone singing from the Sante Fe Tile Company-- Jesus waving
4. This is from the Inca Indians of Peru
5. This is from Taos Pueblo, the wise men are holding corn, grain, and a medicine bag
6. Carved in Indonesia, notice the elephant, pig, and chickens, rhinoceros.
7. Made in Paonia, Co, out of clay, Joseph holding the Christ Child
8. From Ecuador, made out of Bread Dough and painted.
9. Made out of Paper Mache, from Cost Rica
10. This is Egyptian and has two Wise Men and one Wise Woman—my favorite!

11. Hand carved Olive Wood from Bethlehem.

We will never know exactly what the Holy Family looked like, or what took place when Jesus was born. Such things are better left to the imagination. I don't think it was quite as sweet and idyllic as we would imagine.

Mary was undoubtedly frightened and anxious.

Those of you who have been 9 months pregnant, mostly women, you know that just walking across the room would have been difficult, let alone riding on a donkey for 9 long days from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

That would have been painful and exhausting, even life threatening. And to think that when Mary delivered that baby she was outdoors.

There was no sterile hospital room, no medicines, no support. Rather than smiling, she would have been crying and complaining, and thinking this is not how I thought it would be, and wishing her mother was there by her side.

Keep in mind she was probably around 14 or 15 at the time, she was just a girl.

Joseph must have been terrified, also, and even conflicted about this birth, knowing although he **was** Mary's husband, he was not the real father.

This birth was a scandal, and it was frightening on several levels.

That is the Christmas story, that is our story.

In our own lives we know life is not blissful and idyllic, it is messy and complicated.

Life does not ever turn out the way you think it will.

None of us are living the life we thought we would live when we were young.

The hopes, dreams, plans we have for our lives, things do not always turn out that way.

But you learn that those difficult, disappointing moments are times when God is working in our lives, and there is meaning in all of it.

Although we do not know the particulars of the birth of Jesus, what we do know is that God showed up, and something incredible was given to the world.

It was something that had never been done before or since.

It was not perfect. Yet God was there. It was meant to be a comfort to us.

That reminder of God's presence with this poor family is so reassuring.

And the Christmas story is always the same, a reminder of God reaching out to join in our human condition.

That in itself is enormously comforting.

Everything around us is changing all the time.

The state of the world, technology, our bodies, our relationships.

Everything is changing so fast it is hard to keep up.

Under our tree tonight is a contraption that will convert video tapes to DVDs.

Do you realize that video tapes will soon be obsolete?

The new televisions will not allow you to use video tapes at all.

You will need this contraption too, or you will be left in the dust.

Everything is changing all the time.

5th century Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, "No one steps in the same river twice."

It's true, things in this world are always changing, and it has always been so.

No one steps in the same river twice.

Today is different from yesterday, and tomorrow will be different, as well.

You are not the same person you were one year, month, even day ago.

But the story of what God has done in Jesus Christ always remains the same.

What it means for us changes from year to year,

depending upon what we have experienced and what is going on in our lives.

But the story of God reaching out to us in the most personal of ways does not change.

None of us are the same people **this** Christmas that we were **last** Christmas.

Generally speaking, 20% of you have lost loved ones in the last 18 months and your life is very different now, and I know this Christmas is hard for you.

I hate to tell you this, but 20% of you will lose a loved one in the next 18 months, and your life is going to be very different, as well.

It will not be the same river without that person you loved so much.

I do enjoy reading Christmas letters from friends, including many of you, and I am always struck by all of the things that have changed in people's lives from year to year.

Some people I know are spending their first Christmas as a **married couple**, and it is so wonderful to establish new traditions as a family.

In some homes **new babies** have been welcomed and that, more than anything reminds us what Christmas is all about. Is there any better proof of God's existence than a fresh baby? (I guess they are all fresh, no stale babies)

Others are celebrating their first Christmas **alone**, and that is so difficult.

I read in these letters of how children will be spending Christmas in Iraq this year, or kids who have grown up and moved far away, jobs have changed, health has diminished.

Nothing is the same for any of us as it was one year ago.

The river of life is totally different, but it is the same God, the same story. Since life is always changing, there is something to be said for things of a spiritual nature that do not change. We need some things that do not change. And the story of God becoming one of us, to share our struggles and sorrows, that does not change.

More than any other month of the year, December is reflective for me. December is always a vivid reminder of the steady march of time. It is the end of the year, and I always feel nostalgic as I assess the year just past. Our daughter Katherine was born in December, and of course children=s birthdays are vivid reminders of the relentless passage of time. On Katie=s 17th Birthday this month I got out the photo album with her baby pictures and it made my heart hurt to look at those pictures. It was painful. It was hard to believe how quickly those years have flown by. She was born December 10, 1990 and came home from the hospital inside of a stocking. Would you like to see the first picture of our daughter?
(Picture of Katie)

And this is a picture of Katie with her delighted older brother. (Photo 2)
Her brother quickly tired of her, and here he has had enough of her. (Photo 3)

I=ll spare you the pictures of the parents, because it=s just too sad to see us young and innocent. When I look at pictures like those I think, where did those people go?

Why did those years go so fast?

It=s just not the same river at all. I will never step in that same river again.

It hurts too much to think of those kids crawling into my lap and smothering my face with kisses, and needing me so much.

That river is long gone, as it is for many of us.

However, **that is the way it is supposed to be.** There will be other, different rivers.

It all moves so fast, and changes constantly.

One day you wake up and childhood is gone, your spouse of 42 years is gone, your life as you knew it is gone. It will never be the same ever again.

But the story of God=s coming into the world, and God=s presence with us and ongoing love for us, that does not change. That story remains the same all throughout our lives.

Luke tells us that when the angels came and announced the birth of Christ to the Shepherds, they said: AFor to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who

is Christ the Lord.@"

Even his name Yasheva meant "God saves." His very name means salvation.

It is important to remember that our God saves us,

because there are so many things that we need to be saved from.

Every year, if I am honest with myself, I notice there is something **different** that I need to be saved from.

These things change from year to year, but there is always something: selfishness, greed, judgmentalism, lack of charity, laziness, pride, ego.

There is always something we need to be saved from.

God in Christ saves us from self-centeredness by reminding us to love our neighbors.

He saves us from hatred by commanding us to love our enemies.

He saves us from heartlessness by commanding us to care for those in need.

He saves us from resentment by commanding us to forgive those who have hurt and harmed us.

He saves us from endless judgment and criticism by telling us not to judge others too harshly.

He reminds us that our life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions, and he saves us from greed.

He tells us that God loves us dearly, and He will be with us always, and in this he saves us from loneliness and lovelessness.

He tells us that all things work together for good in our lives, there is redemptive meaning in all things, and in that he sets us free and gives us hope.

About a year ago a movie came out about the true story of Chris Gardener called the "A Pursuit of Happiness" starring Will Smith.

The movie told about the life of Chris Gardener and how he became homeless, and ended up living in the San Francisco Transit Authority bathrooms with his small son. He found his way to Glide Memorial United Methodist Church, and their homeless ministry and ended up being mentored by Rev. Cecil Williams there, and how he got on his feet and became a stockbroker, and now Chris Gardener is worth millions. He reinvests his money in the inner city, generously supporting those who supported him when he needed it the most.

United Methodist Pastor Adam Hamilton wanted to learn more about Chris Gardener after seeing this movie. He wanted to know if religious faith played any part in his life.

So soon after the movie came out last year,

Hamilton called the brokerage firm in Chicago where Gardener works. To his surprise he got right through to Chris Gardener, and asked him if religious faith had played any role in his journey.

Chris Gardener shared this story, a part of his story that you did not see in the movie. He said that he grew up in a home with his mother and an alcoholic and violently abusive step-father.

He was living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin where it was 15 degrees outside on Christmas day the year that Chris was 16 years old.

That Christmas day, his mother and step-father and the other kids went to go visit some neighbors.

And he was so relieved, because in his volatile and violent home, to get a few moments of peace and quiet was such a rare gift.

It was like heaven to him. So he decided he would take a bath. So he got the water really hot, and just lay there, enjoying the quiet and the warmth, and a little bit of rare serenity on the Christmas Day of his 16th year.

Then he heard the front door slam.

He heard the familiar stomping of his step-father's boots on the stairs

They came closer to the bathroom, and the door violently burst open.

He had a shotgun in his hand, and he said to Chris:

"You are getting out of this house, and I want you out now."

Chris said, "But it's Christmas!" He said, "I know what day it is."

He said, "I don't have any clothes on!" and he said "You don't need clothes."

Chris said, "Can I grab a towel?" And he said, "You don't need a towel."

And so, with the barrel of a shotgun at the back of his head, Chris Gardener was kicked out of his home completely naked, without even a towel into the 15 degree cold of Wisconsin on Christmas day of his 16th year.

Can you even begin to imagine what that was like? On Christmas, for Heaven's sake! But rather than using that experience as an excuse to throw his life away, or worse yet, become a person just as angry, abusive, and violent as his step-father,

Chris Gardener used it to become a totally different person.

He used it to create a new life for himself.

He said that on Christmas Day of his 16th year, his relationship with God became the single most important relationship in his life.

Because God was literally all he had. Today Chris Gardener says he loves God more than anything, even his own life or his children.

He felt that God saved him, that God who does not change, that God who is always there for us. God gave him a vision and a better future, and he is forever grateful.

His life is a miracle, and proof of what faith can do.

God saves us from our past, helps us in the present, and gives us hope for the future.

God saves us from so many things, including the biggest thing of all--death itself.

All of this is what the gift of Christmas means, that same old story
that speaks to us in different ways year after year.

It gives us what we most need to hear, at different stages of our lives.

Tonight you might be here just needing peace and quiet.

You might be here needing hope and assurance.

You might be here needing forgiveness.

You might be needing the strength to carry on.

Whatever it is you most need, you can find it here.

God lays the gift of a newborn baby into your hands, and that gift mysteriously
becomes exactly what you need.

About a week ago I visited Mildred Bauer. She is the oldest person I know:

Mildred Bauer is 102nd years old, and she is still sharp, sweet, and delightful.

As I visited with her I thought about all of the Christmases she has lived through in 102
yearsBthat is a long time! I asked about her Christmas memories.

She told me about being born at the family farm in Mt. Union, Iowa in 1905.

In 1905 Teddy Roosevelt was President, and the Trans Siberian Railway opened.

Mildred=s family raised clover, corn, and cattle.

The little Methodist Church they attended sat up on the hill, at the edge of their
property, with the cemetery adjacent to the church.

She remembers trudging up the hill in the snow to attend Christmas Eve services,
and how the inside of the church had a huge Christmas tree covered with candles.

Under the tree were presents for each family to take home for their children,
because some years the farming families could not afford presents on their own.

At that little country church she heard the **same Christmas story we heard tonight.**

And she sang Silent Night.

Then she grew up and went off to college at Iowa Wesleyan, in Mt. Pleasant and
remembered coming home at Christmas to see her parents and 3 brothers and sister,
and how much they loved going to church together on Christmas Eve.

She just loved the music and candlelight.

She met her husband in college at chapel, because they were seated next to one another.

He traded seats with another student so that he could sit next to Mildred.

She liked him, but did not want to get married.

For getting married would mean that she would have to abandon her dream of becoming a teacher.

She graduated and became a High School Teacher of English and Latin, and loved it.

She eventually married Morris Bauer, and life got busy.

They had 3 children and were consumed with all of the many activities that go with raising a family. So many changes, but she always relied upon God.

She remembered Christmas, the comfort it gave her hearing that same old story, year after year after year.

Of course she heard it differently when her children were young.

She heard it differently still when they were teenagers and she needed different things from that story.

And she heard it differently still when her children grew up and moved away.

She heard it differently after her husband Morris died.

She heard it much differently as a grandmother.

She hears it differently now that she is older and can no longer attend church at all.

She is now blessed with 8 grandchildren, 16 great grandchildren, and one **great, great** grandchild and two more on the way.

At 102 Mildred is bravely considering the end of her life on earth, and she is at peace.

The story of the birth of Jesus Christ means something very different to her now.

Mildred told me the thing she misses the most at Christmas is the music.

So as we sat in her apartment, I asked Mildred if she would like to sing Silent Night. Her face just lit up, and there we sat in the fading sunlight of a late December afternoon singing Silent Night. I am not a singer, you know that, but

She had tears in her eyes, and so did I, as we sang about a mother and child sleeping in heavenly peace.

It is the same old story, year after year.

None of us ever step in the same river twice.

Nothing in this life ever stays the same, and that is hard, it's so hard.

We have to learn to let it go, to let it all go.

But there is something that does not change.

The story of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

That story is there to help us and bless us, and give us hope for the future.

That story is always the same.

And **year after year after year**, it is Good News of Great Joy.

