

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of Summer, Winter, Spring, and Fall, we know you throughout all the seasons of our earth. You present yourself in the snow, the rain, the blowing of leaves, the springing of flowers, and you present yourself in the silence in between all these things. The world around us, from the things we notice to the wonders that evade our sight, show your goodness and delight to all of your children. But sometimes the world is confusing, and we struggle. In the midst of struggle, drought, rainless days, and floods, guide us to help our sisters and brothers in the midst of their darkness. By our actions and our prayers, guide us to show your goodness through us, your blessed creation.

Gracious God, we come to celebrate what it means to live Christmas. The Light has come into the world, and, at the same time, the Light is consistently coming into the world. Eternal One who knows time not as we do, help us to celebrate this groundbreaking event as an event and as a lifestyle. Let us celebrate it in timeliness as well as in an ongoing way. Let us invest in the our time and place, giving full heed to our nature as relational people who value family, in blood and otherwise, to recognize how relational this holiday truly is. At the same time, help us claim our place as God-Bearers in this world, giving form to good deeds, loving words, and bringing the Reign of God more and more closer to the world. We pray all these things in the name who has come and who draws closer even still, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together...

## SERMON

I remember when I was a young boy in Nebraska, there was one company that yearly had a special called "Christmas in July." I always thought it was kind of silly. Of course, it was a sales gimmick. Little did I know, one day I would be talking about it myself,

but I'm not going to offer you special discounts on TVs or sofas. This is no gimmick; this is a calling to look at something that we find so normal in a different way. Today, we move into the next great church season: the season of Christmas. By the liturgical calendar, do you know how long we celebrate the season of Christmas? You may have heard a song about it. Yes, there are 12 days to the Christmas season, beginning with Christmas Day and ending with the day of Epiphany.

If you remember my sermons from last Christmas, and yes, you should be taking weekly detailed notes, Christmas can easily be dishonored when we consider it a one-day present and food fest. Indeed, if you are taking notes, you should know that I find most cultural interpretations of religious holidays to be...mostly worthless. Afterwards, there is nothing but let-down. If we buy into that mentality, then we have bought into the cultural Christmas, which is Christmas that is fixed in one day. There is another celebration of Christmas, one that is timeless and timely, that does and does not hold the bounds of a certain time of year. Although we as Christians recognize the Christmas season as a time of special holiness, that season is the one-time recognition of the event and mentality that should come throughout the year. Jesus Christ has come. Jesus Christ has come in the past. Jesus Christ is here. Jesus Christ is yet to come. In the beginning was the Word, but the Word abides still. We won't talk about the details, which are better reserved for the holiday, but let's look at the spirit of the holiday. Let us look again at what Christmas means to us as a people of faith. We'll look at why that is so chronologically and more spaciouly, as we are both bound and not bound by time in our celebrations of the Christmas holiday.

As we think about Christmas as a season and section of time, I can't help but look back at my celebrations of Christmas as I grew up. We would celebrate every Christmas Eve at my Great Aunt's house in Bellevue, NE. We would enjoy a great traditional dinner of ham and turkey, then follow it up by sitting around in the living room and hearing the story of Christ's birth from the book of Luke, the same one we read today. When I was very young, my Uncle Bill or my Uncle Kurt would read the story; when I got older, I was assigned the task. We would sing a verse of "O Come All Ye Faithful," then dive into the child's greatest part of Christmas: the presents. I always hoped to get a new football jersey as my cornerstone gift, especially when I was older. When I was very young, my grandfather would pass them out, one at a time. When my grandfather passed in 1996, my Uncle Bill became the one to pass out the gifts. After there were many new possessions to each of our names and the large black trash bags full of wrapping paper, we could finally go down to the basement where "Santa" had come and left us something great. When I was really young, that was the "big present," usually a great LEGO model or an action figure play set. As I got older, the journey to the basement held smaller gifts, more symbolic of my younger journey to the basement. After that, it was retiring back to the dinner table for dessert, usually the always-famous Lithuanian tort or the newest big chocolate cake that was always the popular one.

The last time we did this all together was Christmas 2008. In 2009, we were snowed out. By 2010, we had to take our Christmas celebrations to my Grandmother's house nearby, because my Great Aunt Ruth couldn't live in her house alone anymore. By Christmas 2012, those traditions were all done. My Uncle Bill, who took care of my Grandmother and Great Aunt, had unexpectedly passed, and this last year, Great Aunt Ruth

went to be with her creator as well. I will never again experience those Christmas traditions as they once were. Uncle Bill will never pass out the gifts again, Great Aunt Ruth won't be there anymore, and Great Aunt Ruth's House has been sold. My grandmother has begun a new tradition of spending Christmas with family in New Zealand, where it is much warmer. I mourned for these changes a lot this last year, not spending Christmas in Nebraska, even while I was excited to form new traditions with my soon-to-be wife. When I look back at these things, I don't necessarily miss the food, the Lithuanian Tort, or the presents. I miss being in that house at that time with those people and anticipating another Christmas together. What this ultimately affirms to me is that Christmas is about family and friends. Christmas is about a time set aside on everyone's calendar of intentional connection with those we love most. All too often, we are too busy to step out of the daily routine and take hold of what is most important in our connections with others. It is, just as we talked about with Advent's idea of anticipation, seizing the present and holding it as precious. The now will never come again, and who knows how long our traditions will last.

It all leads back to the birth of a child that still affects us today. In a way, this was God's declaration of family and relationship. God appears to us in human form, feeling our pains and knowing our joys. God becomes us so God can relate to us more fully. While Western Christianity interprets the incarnation much more as God coming down to us, I find I like the Eastern tradition better. In that interpretation, God is bringing creation up, sanctifying creation and us with it. By the Incarnation of Christ into human form, we become more holy. By sending the Son of God, we claim that we are children of God as well. We treasure our family, whether or not they share the same name or the same blood. We treasure them, through all those times we love our family and all those times we'd rather

not be around them. There are times we find them beloved and times we find them an annoyance. Nevertheless, through the greater community that has become family, truly related or not, we come to understand that the basis of God's contact and love with us is connection. Through this connection, we are never disappointed, with God and with family that shares and doesn't share true relation.

Although we celebrate Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup>, the date may do us a disservice if we look at it as the one date that Christ came to earth. Let's step back for a brief history lesson. Back in the day, say about a few centuries ago, the early Christian decision makers were trying to figure out how to fix a time when we could all celebrate Christ's birthday. At the same time, there were these people called pagans that celebrated other holidays. One of them was the Winter Solstice, the shortest day of the year, usually around the 21<sup>st</sup> or 22<sup>nd</sup> of December, which recognized the rebirth of the Sun. In order to draw those pagan folks more easily into the Christian practice, December 25<sup>th</sup> over time became the official recognition of the birth of Christ. In the first Back to the Future movie, Doc Brown inputs "December 25, 0000" into his time machine and says that they could go see the birth of Christ. Quite faulty. In actuality, Jesus was probably born in March or April around 4 to 6 BC, according to archaeologists. After all, in the Middle East at that time, shepherds would not be out with their flocks in the midst of December. December 25 is the day we celebrate it together, but because it is probably not the historical day, it opens our spirits to seeing the life of Christmas beyond that date.

Let me ask you an honest question: do singing songs of Christ's coming make us feel uneasy today? On the one hand, yes, it should feel a bit uneasy or, at least, a little out-of-place. We associate them with a time in December when there is most likely snow on the

ground and temperatures that require multiple layers. As for us, any ice melts within about 10 seconds outside today, and multiple layers will make you sick. On the other hand, we sing about the coming of Christ. We can recognize the coming of Jesus Christ to earth as an event that happens time and time again. We can and should sing of Christ's coming today because Christ is coming into the world, one day, one action, one loving word at a time.

As we look at timelessness, we must return to the beginning of John. We believe that "In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." But this passage is not necessarily just about Christmas; it has farther-reaching implications. This is a passage that exists outside of time and space, speaking about God and God's deeds from our understanding of the beginning. In this way, the Word is not coming into the world at one time but consistently coming into the world. The season of Christmas is a season because Christ came into the world in one event. The ongoing celebration and understanding of Christmas is necessary because we are continually bringing Christ into the world when we act as the Body of Christ.

As always I want to draw a connection to my most favoritest scripture of all time: 1 Corinthians 12. We are the Body of Christ; we are the hands and feet and heart and mind, all the sinews, all the strength, all of the spirit, of Jesus Christ that is in the world today. We are how Christ comes into the world consistently. The Eastern Orthodox church has a special Greek word for Mary, the Mother of Jesus, that we ourselves can adopt today. I read about it for the first time in Kenda Dean and Ron Foster's book [The God-Bearing Life](#). We are theotokos: we are God-Bearers. Just as in the Birth of Christ so many years ago, we name it today: we are God-Bearers. We bring Jesus into the world today through our loving words and actions just as Mary brought the physical Jesus to earth. Christmas as an

ongoing practice can teach us to bring Christ into the world time and time again, for Christ didn't come one time but continues to come.

Christmas was and is and is to come. We celebrate it as a season and as a lifestyle. If it's all about the holly and gifts, it passes and leaves a hole. If we celebrate it as a season, we gain a greater understanding of this time in the Christian Calendar, second only to the recognition of Holy Week and Easter. We see its foundations as family, among our own families and with our God that names us as children and beloved. If we adopt it as a lifestyle, we learn how Christ consistently can come into the world through our words and actions. We each become theotokos: God-bearers ourselves! God has no hands and no feet but ours, and so we bring God into the world through our loving actions and kind words. Let us walk through the season of Christmas reaffirming this belief and walking through all the seasons of life living it out! Amen and Amen.