

Christmas Eve  
December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022  
North Decatur Presbyterian Church  
Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

I hope you are having a good Christmas.

I hope you have people you love close to you—family, either by blood or by choice.

I hope you've felt joy this season—the delight of eating the stuff that tastes good but is bad for you; of snuggling under a warm blanket, singing beautiful music, being embraced by someone else; this is all part of the joy and thrill of being alive.

I hope you've found delight in giving gifts, sharing what you have.

I hope you've counted your blessings, because they are many.

All of those things—family, joy, gifts, and gratitude—help make Christmas so good.

I always hope for a good Christmas myself. I end up working a bit more than some of you, but it's an occupational hazard. Still, I need to share a little secret: as hard as I've tried over the years, I just don't end up feeling good about Christmas.

I'm not *supposed* to say that tonight, so let's keep this on the down low—just keep it between us, OK? Christmas, to me, never feels like it's "supposed to." Do you know what I mean?

It's not that I don't have great Christmas moments. My family is amazing, this is a great church, there's so much generosity and love. It's not the crass commercialism that's got me down—I don't get too knotted up about that. Still... Christmas always feels *weird*.

Every year, I try to get my bearings by watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. And when Linus steps up on that stage and launches, by memory, into the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Luke I think, dang it's so simple, so pure. But by the next day, I'm unsettled again.

Lately, a different thought has come to me. Maybe I'm not getting Christmas wrong. Maybe this weird, unsettled feeling is getting Christmas *right*. Maybe Christmas is the most joyful *and also* the most unsettling of holidays.

That's not the cultural narrative. The script, of course, that Christmas is a month-long frolic of joy and delight, topped off by a new vehicle in the driveway with a giant bow on it. Hands up—how many of you always experience Christmas that way? How many of you feel a bit unsettled at Christmastime? I'm not alone!

One of the great Christmas reflections of all time is by the American writer Loudon Wainwright, Jr.—if you recognize the name, he's the father and grandfather to a couple of decent singer-songwriters. Way back in 1965, Wainwright penned a Christmas essay in *Life Magazine*. He describes the ambivalent experiences and emotions that so many of us feel during the holidays: how the abstract beauty of gift-giving dissolves into what feels like "loot" on our living room floor; our guilt over the "too muchness" of all of the food and presents all when we're aware

others don't have enough; the understandable but totally unreasonable emotional expectations of cheerfulness and generosity, which none of us can muster all the time, especially not on a schedule. Then, Wainwright says, there's the great question that lurks behind all our Christmas rituals: *did we get what we wanted?* Not superficially—did you get what you... your spirit, your souls—*really* wanted?

Then Wainwright drops a great truth; "Christmas is not so much a holiday as it is a *crisis of love.*" A crisis of love! That's what Christmas is. All the things that make life full at Christmas: the gift-giving, the abundance and the gratitude, the relationships that bless us and also cost us—all of the things that make this season special, they also urge us to deeper reflection about love. What do we love? Who loves us? Whom do we love? How can we possibly express what others really mean to us? We need love. But we rarely admit it. Something about these Christmas rituals draws our need, if not to the surface of our lives, then somewhere just below.

Wainwright says that when Christmas lets us down, we should go read the old story from Scripture—the one we read tonight that begins way back with Isaiah's dream of a child who would be the prince of peace and who would make lions and lambs lay down together; a story that continues through the days of Caesar Augustus, with a young girl and a traumatic pregnancy and birth, and an infant in a feeding trough, being worshiped by the working poor and foreign intellectuals, and all around angels are singing underneath a portentous star.

What I always wished I could say to Wainwright is that this Christmas story—this amazing, beautiful, profoundly moving story about God—this story itself is no refuge. This story is also a crisis of love. In the best way.

The story insists that God is with us. Completely with us. God is all in this life with us. God lives our life alongside us, every day. God shows us what is good—and what is good is mercy and compassion and wisdom and humility and serving others. This story even goes on to say that God goes through death with us—and God finds a way through that seemingly impenetrable abyss and leads us through it, too. Love, this story says, is the most powerful force in all the world. And love is in you; in your flesh.

I love this story. And I believe it. And it is a story of tidings of comfort and joy, but it is also, most definitely, a crisis of love. In Jesus Christ, love comes to you. Now what?

- Do I have to take Jesus seriously?
- Do you have to give up all your things?
- Am I supposed let the hard parts of my heart grow softer?
- Should you come closer to those who suffer, even if you can't fix it?
- Is all this unfairness I see in the world around me—it is also my responsibility?
- Can you be honest about all your failures and still be loveable?
- Am I supposed to lay down my life to make others' lives better?

The love that created the world and reconciles all things is in your flesh. What now?

So... if Christmas ever feels a little off to you; if you feel the joy of the season, but still end up wondering “is there more to it?” ... if Christmas is full of delight but leaves you unsettled... let me just say, I think you’re on to something. Born unto you this day in the city of David is a Savior. This crisis—this Crisis of Love—is ours.