

Grace Lutheran Church
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Christmas Eve, December 24, 2021
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe: "What Are You Looking For?"

Our life as 2021 comes to a close seems to be one of risk. I took a risk in attending our son and his wife's thrice-delayed wedding celebration this past weekend in Minneapolis. I cannot say whether I should or should not have gone. We who attended did our best, but as a good friend likes to say, "It is what it is." The most important thing is that you, beloved people of Grace, remain safe. I treasure each of you more than I can say and will work vigilantly as we move into the new year to help this congregation thrive.

Pondering the idea of risk made me think of the risk God took in entering human history. What, you might think? Didn't God have it all worked out ahead of time? So what risk was there?

Because humanity was unable to rescue itself from sin, in supreme love for creation God brought his Son into the world as a revelation of God's own being. Because the essence of God is love and not power, this breaking-in turned the entire order of the old systems of dominion upside down: a helpless baby as the Savior; an itinerant preacher demonstrating that the poor and outcast were now the center of God's concern; a brutal death as a common criminal that broke the power of death; a resurrection proclaiming the fact that eternal life is ours not only forever but in the present moment. Death is not the end. Life is! And this changes everything!

So what was the risk if God had all this worked out?

The risk God took was in entrusting this narrative to human unpredictability. In the 4th century Pope Julius I set December 25th as the date for Christmas in an effort to Christianize the pagan celebration of the winter solstice. The church began to structure its worship life into a Christian year, re-enacting the birth, ministry, passion, and resurrection of Christ in ritual sequences. An entire Christian civilization grew up around this liturgical year.

Has it worked? Has the church been able to sanctify this time?

To the casual observer, one might say it is still an uphill journey. We are still on the long road to Bethlehem. But let's look more deeply and ask: What has become of this real-life story in our time? What has Christmas come to mean not only in our consumer-driven culture, but to each of us? In celebrating Christmas, what are you looking for?

I would like to lift up my mother and what she was looking for. I did not grow up in a religious household. In fact, we hardly ever went to church, and the one we did go to on rare occasions was mainly a social event. My mother's parents were devout Methodists, but she soured on religion when they told her that her great love of her life—a Catholic boy she met in the armed services—was off limits due to his religion. I'm not sure she ever forgave God for that. And my

father was raised in an anti-religious atmosphere. Growing up, my brother and I caught no whiff of religion in our Christmases. I can't tell you if we were even told the story. Our family carol was "Good King Wenceslas." Yet my mother cherished this holiday with all her heart. What was she looking for?

I think she was seeking the comfort and assurance of family. To her, this was the true meaning of Christmas. If I could, I would hug her tight, kiss her, and tell her what a beautiful thing that is, because I know she dealt for most of her life with depression and the feeling that she was never good enough. (Now you know where I get that from.) The enfolding warmth of the ideal of family was what she was looking for. Lord in your mercy, receive this hope into your heart!

As the season draws to a close, I'd like you to think of what *you* cherish most about Christmas, because I will be also lifting each of you into God's care. In your own seasonal liturgies and rituals, what are you looking for?

- Is it the humility of the manger, the reminder that God became manifest within migrant and outcasts who had no choice but to seek shelter with common animals, raising up before God all those who are without shelter? Lord in your mercy, receive this hope into your heart!
- Is it the homeliness of the shepherds, the first to receive the great news, who occupied the lowest rung on the social ladder of the time and give hope to all the downtrodden that they too are the center of God's concern? Lord in your mercy, receive this hope into your heart!
- Is it the quaintness of recreated Christmas villages, either outdoors or in your own home, which take us back to a purer, simpler age when families and faith went hand in glove? Lord in your mercy, receive this hope into your heart!
- Is it the kindness of Santa Claus with a little shred of discipline thrown in for good measure, the yardstick of naughty or nice so we can gauge how well we've been doing, and try next year to do even better? Lord in your mercy, receive this hope into your heart!
- Is it the piety of the creche, the manger scene, with its characters all finding their perfect place as symbols of the perfection of God's plan for the world's salvation? Lord in your mercy, receive this hope into your heart!
- Is it the razzle-dazzle of Christmas lights on Derstine Road or elsewhere, through which Christ's light shines into the world? Lord in your mercy, receive this hope into your heart!
- Is it the silence of the great mystery of the word made flesh that we find as we sink into the deep darkness of God's own being, where we may discover our true identity in the embrace of God's love? Lord in your mercy, receive this hope into your heart!

As we laugh, cry, and grieve, wonder, and wander our way through the remainder of this season, my prayer for you is that you will find the great drama of the Incarnation embedded within your own cherished rituals.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Amen!