

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Wednesday, December 24, 2008
Christmas Eve**

THE BEST CHRISTMAS EVER

John 3:14-17

THE WORST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER?

Without a doubt, it was going to be the worst Christmas pageant ever. In case you don't know the story, it was the year the Herdman kids – all six of them – had leading roles in the church's annual Christmas pageant. They had never been in the pageant before. In fact, they hadn't ever been to church before, until they heard a rumor that you could get dessert at Sunday school. Once they heard about the pageant, they threatened and bullied all the other kids into not trying out.

The Herdmans, if you don't know, were “absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars (even the girls) and talked dirty and hit little kids and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to Fred Shoemaker's old broken-down toolhouse.... They were just so all-around awful you could hardly believe they were real: Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie and Gladys – six skinny, stringy-haired kids all alike except for being different sizes and having different black-and-blue places where they had clonked each other.”

Imogene got the role of Mary. Ralph claimed the role of Joseph. Leroy, Claude and Ollie were the three wise men. And Gladys was cast as the Angel of the Lord. (Gladys was the smallest of the Herdmans, but she was fast and mean. And she was known to bite.)

With the Herdmans in the leading roles, everyone was sure it was going to be the worst Christmas pageant ever. After all, the Herdmans didn't really even know anything about the Christmas story. They knew Christmas was Jesus' birthday. But that was it. Everything else about Christmas – the shepherds, the angels, the inn, the stable, the star, the wise men – it was all news to them. Since none of them had ever gone to church or Sunday school or read the Bible or anything, the Herdmans didn't know how things in the Christmas story were supposed to be. So they acted it out the way they thought it must have been. And, in a strange sort of way, they made it come alive in a fresh, new way for children and grown-ups alike by causing everyone to see the story of Jesus' birth through new eyes.

What everyone thought was going to be the worst Christmas pageant ever turned out to be an unforgettable Christmas pageant. In fact, it was, as the title of Barbara Robinson's story indicates, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*.

It is a witty and charming story, which I think will bring a smile to your face and maybe even give you new insight into the Christmas story, with which many of us are so familiar that we take the details of the story and its meaning for granted.

This message, though, is not so much about the best Christmas *pageant* ever. It is about the best *Christmas* ever.

THE BEST CHRISTMAS EVER?

What exactly makes for the best Christmas ever? Is it being with the people you most love in all the world? That sure does make for a special Christmas, doesn't it? It makes Christmas (or any holiday) special, because deep down, we know that people are far more important than things. And being with family, being with the people we love (and who love us), is worth infinitely more than all the "stuff" we could ever get for Christmas.

For economists, market analysts, retailers, and, I suppose, politicians as well, the best Christmas ever is determined not by relationships, but by the bottom line of sales and profits. Given the economic climate here in America, and the recession worldwide, if that is the measuring stick, this will definitely *not* be the best Christmas ever. In fact, deep discounts on big ticket items and a blitz of advertising notwithstanding, the International Council of Shopping Centers expects this to be the *worst* Christmas ever – or at least in the last 40 years, when they started keeping track of holiday sales.

Maybe, because of the economic downturn, you decided to cut back on your Christmas spending, and you've said (or at least thought) that it won't be much of a Christmas this year. It may not be the *worst* Christmas ever, but it certainly won't be the *best*.

For some people, receiving the gift(s) you most desire (or covet) may be the determining factor in whether or not it is a good Christmas. If the gift you hope for isn't under the tree, or perhaps out in the driveway, you may not be likely to consider this the best Christmas ever. We can be selfish that way, can't we?

I remember one particular Christmas as a boy, when I felt sorry for myself because my younger sister got more gifts than I did. The disparity in gifts was obvious. There was no attempt to hide it. I felt cheated. My parents' explanation was that because my brother Mark and I had gotten new furniture for our bedroom earlier in the year, they didn't spend as much on us for Christmas as they did on my sister Lisa. From a grown-up perspective, I understand it completely. But as a boy, in the kind of self-centeredness that comes naturally to all of us, I was bummed. Royally. I liked the bedroom furniture. It was a big improvement over the old stuff. But I didn't want it to count toward Christmas. For me, it was one of the worst Christmases ever.

I want to tell you something this evening that I know you know. I'm going to say it, even though I know you already know it, because our culture bombards us daily, relentlessly, with messages that conflict with and even contradict what we know and believe. The truth I know you know is that you can't measure Christmas by how much you spend or what you receive. The meaning of Christmas is not defined by what we give or what we get. It doesn't depend on the economy. It is defined by the gift we have already gotten. It is defined by the gift God Himself gave us on the first Christmas. The gift of His Son.

The best Christmas ever is not this one or that one. The best Christmas ever was the first one. The best Christmas ever was the first Christmas, when the Son of God was born to Mary in Bethlehem, in the humblest of circumstances. Eugene Peterson has written: “Though there were auspicious signs that preceded and accompanied His birth, preparing the world for the majestic and kingly, the birth of Jesus itself was of the humblest peasant parentage, in an unimportant town, and in the roughest of buildings.” Yet, His coming signaled both the best Christmas ever and the giving of the best Christmas present ever.

The best Christmas ever was the first one, when God, as an expression of His incomparable and undying love for this world, initiated the plan of salvation and gave us the gift of the Savior. To borrow a phrase, He cared enough to send His very best.

The best Christmas ever was when what the apostle John called “the Word” (John 1:1) became flesh and blood and made His dwelling among us (John 1:14).

The best Christmas ever was the very first one, when God Himself gave us the best Christmas gift ever, the gift of His Son to save us from our sins. That is why He was born – to deliver His people from their sins by giving His life as a ransom for them. That is what Jesus Himself said in Mark 10:45. (see also Matthew 20:28). And that is what His name means. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and told him of the baby to be born to Mary, the angel said: “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus (which means ‘The Lord Saves’), because He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

JOHN 3:16: THE MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS

John 3:16 is probably the best-known verse in the whole Bible. Martin Luther called it “the gospel in miniature.” It is the message of the gospel, and the message of Christmas, in a nutshell. Corrie Ten Boom said: “Who can add to Christmas? The perfect motive is that God so loved the world. The perfect gift is that He gave His only Son. The only requirement is to believe in Him. The reward of faith is that you shall have everlasting life.”

The message of Christmas as it is expressed in John 3:16 is not merely that God is love or that God loved the world. It is not merely that you and I are objects of His love, as amazing as that is, all by itself. The heart of the message of Christmas is that God’s love for us – for undeserving, unworthy, unlovely sinners that we are – propelled Him to act. To give His only Son for us. Paul said it this way in Romans 5:8:

“God demonstrates His own love for us in this:
While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Why did God do it? Because He loves us. Because we matter to Him. A century ago English writer G. K. Chesterton said: “All men matter. You matter. I matter. It is the hardest thing in theology to believe.” It may be hard to believe, but it is true. You matter to God. The world matters to God. It was His love for the world, and for each of us personally, that prompted Him to give us the gift of His Son. God’s purpose in sending His Son, as it says in John 3:17, was not to condemn or punish the world, but to save the world through Him.

The love of God for us is not passive, it is active. It is a giving love. He gave what was most precious to Him – His Son. Can you imagine doing that? It is a costly love. And a painful love. For in giving His Son, God gave Him up to suffer and die for us.

At the heart of it all, at the heart of Christmas, is love. The inexhaustible love of God for a fallen world full of sinners who need a Savior. It was the incarnation of the love of God that made the first Christmas the best one ever.

CHRIST WAS LOVE

One Christmas, the father of a six-year-old kindergartner was unable to make it to his son's "Winter Pageant" at school. But there was a dress rehearsal the morning of the program, and all the parents who couldn't make it in the evening were welcome to come to it. So, the morning of the dress rehearsal, this dad along with several other parents took their seats in the school's cafeteria.

Knowing the school had long ago stopped referring to the holiday as Christmas, this father didn't expect anything other than fun and entertaining songs of reindeer, Santa Claus, snowflakes and good cheer. So, when his son's kindergarten class got up to sing "Christmas Love," he was a bit surprised by the title.

The children in the front row each had a letter they held up, one by one, to spell out the title of the song. As the class sang "C is for Christmas," a child would hold up the letter C. Then, "H is for Happy," and on it went, until each child with a letter was holding it up for the audience to see.

The performance went smoothly – except for one thing. The child holding the letter M was totally unaware that she was holding it upside down. Instead of an M, it appeared as a W.

The audience of 1st through 6th graders snickered at this kindergartner's mistake. But she had no idea they were laughing at her. She stood there, proudly holding her W.

When the last letter was raised, the laughter stopped. A hush came over the audience, both children and adults. And the true reason for the holiday became clear. When the last letter was held high, the message read bold and clear: CHRISTWAS LOVE.

Christ *was* love. Christ *is* love. God's gift to us, given in love, is the best Christmas gift ever. And the best Christmas ever was when Jesus, the incarnation of God's saving love, was born. For God so loved the world that He gave His Son. For us. For you and me.

TAKE THE SON

Let me tell you one more story before I close. It is about a father and son who loved to collect rare works of art, everything from Picasso to Raphael. The son was killed in Vietnam while trying to rescue another soldier. The father grieved deeply for his only son.

Months later, there was a knock at the father's door. It was a young man with a large package in his hands. He said: "Sir, you don't know me, but I am the soldier for whom your son gave his life. He saved many lives that day, and he was carrying me to safety when a bullet struck him in the heart. He died instantly. He often spoke of you and your love of art."

The young man held out the package and said: "I know this isn't much. I'm not a great artist, but I think your son would have wanted you to have this." The father opened the package and gazed at a portrait of his son. He stared in awe at the way the soldier had captured his son in the painting. The father hung the portrait over his mantle. When visitors came to his home, he always drew their attention to the portrait of his son before he showed them any other works of art.

When the father died, his paintings were to be auctioned. A large crowd gathered, excited about the opportunity to own some themselves. On the platform sat the portrait of the son. The auctioneer pounded his gavel and asked for someone to begin the bidding. The crowd scoffed. It was the Van Goghs and Rembrandts they had come for. But the auctioneer persisted: "Who will start the bidding? \$200? \$100?" The crowd again insisted on seeing the famous paintings. But the auctioneer continued: "The son! The son! Who will take the son?"

Finally a voice from the back said: "I'll give \$10 for the painting." It was the father's longtime gardener, a poor man who couldn't afford anything more. While the auctioneer sought a higher bid, the crowd became agitated. The auctioneer pounded his gavel and sold the painting for \$10 to the gardener.

An eager buyer in the second row called out: "Finally, on with the auction."

But the auctioneer said: "I'm sorry, the auction is over. When I was called to conduct this auction, I was told of a secret stipulation in the will. I was not allowed to reveal that stipulation until now. Only the painting of the son was to be auctioned. Whoever bought that painting would inherit the entire estate, including all the paintings. The man who took the son gets everything."

The one who takes the Son – the one who takes Jesus, the one who trusts in Him – gets everything, including the gift of eternal life. And He is the best Christmas present ever.

The best Christmas ever was the first one, when God the Father sent God the Son into the world to save us from our sins. If you have never taken the Son, if you have never embraced the Christ of Christmas as Savior and Lord of your life, it can be the best Christmas ever for you simply by opening your heart to Him in faith. It is not enough just to believe in your head that Jesus is the Son of God who died on the cross for the sins of the world. Intellectual assent alone will never save anyone. You must also receive Him by faith as Savior and Lord of your life. "To all who received Him," the Bible says, "to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

You may believe, but have you received Him? You can join His family tonight by turning to the Lord Jesus in faith and asking Him to make His home in your heart. Take the Son. Then it will be the best Christmas ever.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.