

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Thursday, December 24, 2009
Christmas Eve**

WHAT CHRISTMAS IS REALLY ALL ABOUT

John 3:14-17

A church was holding its Christmas pageant. A 12-year-old boy, costumed and ready for his role as the boy Jesus, was waiting in the hallway when a preschooler asked him: “Who are you?”

The 12-year-old smiled and gave what seemed to be an obvious answer: “I’m what Christmas is all about!”

Do you know what the little guy said? He looked up at the older boy and said: “Oh, I’m sorry, Santa!”

A little confused, don’t you think?

Now, let me just say, I’m a big fan of movies like *Miracle on 34th Street* (with Edmund Gwenn as Kris Kringle) and Will Farrell’s *Elf* (with Ed Asner in the role of Santa). I like Santa Claus. The real St. Nicholas, the historical figure on whom the tradition of Santa Claus is based, was a godly and generous man with a heart for the needy. Thank God for Saint Nicholas and his example of charity and kindness. So this is not a knock on Santa Claus. But, the perspective of countless children notwithstanding, he is *not* what Christmas is about.

Is it OK to include Santa in your Christmas celebrations? That is a question for every family to decide for themselves.

Can you have Christmas without Santa? The answer is self-evident, isn’t it?

As wonderful as Santa Claus is, can I tell you why Jesus is better than Santa?

Santa lives at the North Pole. But Jesus is everywhere.

Santa comes just once a year. But Jesus is an ever present help.

Santa fills your stocking with goodies. But Jesus supplies all your needs.

Santa has a belly like a bowl full of jelly. But Jesus has a heart full of love.

Santa may make you chuckle. But Jesus gives strength for today and hope for tomorrow.

Santa gives toys to children. But Jesus gives new life. Jesus mends broken hearts. Jesus repairs broken homes, broken marriages, and broken lives.

Santa puts gifts under your tree. But Jesus came as God’s gift to us and died on a tree.

Santa can be a fun, lovable part of our Christmas, but he is not what Christmas is about.

Nor is it meant to be primarily about me. Or you. A lot of people, though, have turned *Christmas* into *Me-mas*. *Me-mas* is the holiday many people observe on December 25 every year. The Christ of Christmas has been pushed aside by a *me*-centered view of life.

For those who celebrate *Me-mas*, the holiday is not about the birth of Jesus Christ. It is not about God's gift to the world of a Savior. It is all about *me*. It is about what *I* want. It is about all the gifts that have *my* name on them. It is not about what God has done. Nor is it about the gifts I can give to others as a way of expressing my love for them. It is about *me*.

Do you know anyone who celebrates *Me-mas*?

For some people, Christmas is all about spending. It is about the economy. A year ago, in December 2008, despite an economy in free-fall, department stores in the U. S. reported sales of \$28.2 billion, 14 percent of their overall sales for 2008. An additional \$24 billion was spent through mail-order houses or online shopping. U. S. Christmas tree farmers reported sales of \$410 million last year. To decorate our trees (real or fake), we spent over \$470 million. In the eyes of market analysts and retailers, whether it is a "good Christmas" or not depends on how much money Americans spend.

Is that all there is to Christmas?

One of the most meaningful moments in the history of broadcast television took place on December 9, 1965, when *A Charlie Brown Christmas* aired for the first time. Charlie Brown, you may remember, was having a hard time getting into the Christmas spirit. At one point his friend Linus, blanket in hand, said to him: "Charlie Brown, you're the only person in the world who can take the most wonderful time of the year and turn it into a problem." A problem it was for Charlie Brown. But I'm sure he is not the only one. I'm sure that, for a variety of reasons, Christmas is a problem for a lot of people. Maybe it is even the case for someone here tonight.

Finally, in the midst of disappointment and confusion and exasperation, Charlie Brown cried out: "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is really all about?" Do you remember that moment?

Linus stepped forward and said: "Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is about." And then, right there on national TV, Linus recited the Christmas story from Luke 2. When he had finished, he turned to his friend and said: "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."

That is what Christmas is all about, my friends. I'm glad you're here tonight. But I hope you're not here just because it is a family tradition or ritual to go to church on Christmas Eve. I hope you're not here just to fulfill some religious obligation before you get to open all your gifts. I hope that you will see tonight the heart of God and the purpose of God in giving the gift of His Son to us. And, like Mary, I hope you will take time to ponder all these things in your heart.

John 3:16 expresses what Christmas is really all about: “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

It is perhaps the best-known and best-loved verse in the whole Bible. And for good reason. Martin Luther called it “the gospel in miniature.”

It is the message of the gospel, and the message of Christmas, in a nutshell.

The message of John 3:16 has been described this way:

God	The greatest giver
So loved	The greatest degree
The world	The greatest company
That He gave	The greatest act
His only Son	The greatest gift
That whoever	The greatest invitation
Believes	The greatest simplicity
In Him	The greatest attraction
Shall not perish	The greatest promise
But	The greatest difference
Have	The greatest certainty
Eternal life	The greatest possession

Isn't that a great message? Of course, it is meaningless if it is not true. But if it *is* true – and I believe with all my heart it is – then it makes all the difference in the world.

John 3:16 reveals to us the heart of God – a heart of passionate, unstoppable, unending love. “For God so loved the world.” What this means is that humankind – this world full of sinful men and women, boys and girls with all our faults and failures and shame and secrets, is the object of God's love. When the Bible says that God so loved *the world*, it means that He loves people. Not just in theory or generally speaking. But personally. Including you and me. No matter what baggage or scars you have brought with you tonight. God loves *you*.

But the love of God for you and me is not about who we are or what we are, as if we were worthy of His love. We're not. It is not about anything we have done or anything we could ever do to deserve it. It is totally and completely undeserved.

Who are we? We are the recipients of God's love and favor. And that is a big deal! But the message of Christmas is really about God the Giver. It is about Him, not us.

And the message of Christmas is not just that God loved the world, as wonderful as that is. It is not only that we are the objects of His amazing love, as amazing as that is. The message of Christmas is that God's love for us propelled Him to act – to give His only Son for us. That is what Paul is saying in Romans 5:8. He says:

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

God's love for you and me is not passive but active. It is a giving love. He gave what was most precious to Him – His Son – because we are precious to Him. It is a costly love. An expensive love. And a painful love. For in giving His Son, God gave Him up to suffer and to die for us.

If anything, this ought to give you a window through which to see how much you are worth in God's sight and how much you matter to Him. Not just you but every person.

Sigmund Freud, the famous psychiatrist, wrote in a letter to a friend that he considered most human beings as trash. That is not how it is with God. That is not how God sees you. Or anyone. Are we sinners? Yes. Every one of us. Have we messed up? All of us. Do we measure up to God's standard? None of us. Does our sin grieve the heart of God? For sure. The truth is that our sin is uglier and more awful than any of us realize. Nevertheless, we are of infinite value and significance to God – so valuable that He sent His Son into the world to die for us. To *die*. For *us*. That is what Christmas is really all about.

I want you to notice also that there is a promise contained in John 3:16. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son" – there we see the heart of God – "that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." The promise? Eternal life. The promise? Salvation. Who is this promise for? "Whoever believes in Him." Whoever believes in Jesus, the Son of God. Whoever embraces the Lord Jesus in saving faith.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement in the 18th century, was invited to the home of some English nobility after preaching on a certain occasion. At one point during the visit, one of his hosts said: "We think, Mr. Wesley, that you went a trifle too far in your message today."

Wesley replied: "What made you think such a thing?"

"Well," said his host, "you indicated that God would refuse no one who came to Him. You even said that God would take the devil's castaways."

Wesley did not respond immediately. He fumbled in his coat pocket and pulled out a note written by two women who had heard his message that morning. He read it to his host: "We are just two old sinful women from the London underworld. We heard you preach, Mr. Wesley, that Jesus would even take the devil's castaways. Hearing that, we want to start life over and give ourselves to God."

Do you feel like one of the devil's castaways? Jesus will refuse no one who comes to Him in faith.

This word "whoever" is a wonderful word. Think about it: It applies to the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless. It applies to the weak and the strong, the young and the old,

the healthy and the sick. It applies to Pharisees and to prostitutes, to the moral and the immoral. It applies to liberals, conservatives, and moderates. It applies to you. And it applies to me. It applies to anyone and everyone who trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. Including the devil's castaways.

If you have never taken hold of this gift of eternal life, I want you to know it can be yours tonight. It is God's Christmas gift to you. Simply reach out by faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ and receive it.

John 3:16 shows us the *heart* of God. A heart of love that became flesh and blood in the birth and life and suffering and death on the cross of Jesus our Savior. It tells us what Christmas is really all about.

John 3:17 shows us the *purpose* of God in sending His Son into the world: "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him."

Why did Jesus come? Not to judge the world. Not to condemn us (which is what we deserve). But to save us. The sober truth is that there will be a day of judgment for those who do not believe in Him or receive Him as Savior and Lord. But that was not the purpose of Christmas. That was not the purpose of the Incarnation. Jesus came to save us. And you cannot be saved, you cannot be made right with God, you cannot have the certainty of sins forgiven, peace with God and a home in heaven after death apart from Him. No one can.

The eternal Son of God took on our flesh and blood, was born in a barn in Bethlehem, lived and taught and healed the sick, and suffered and died a cruel death on the cross to pay the penalty for your sins and mine. All of them. That is why Jesus came. That is what Christmas is really all about.

May you know the heart of God and the depth of His love for you this Christmas. May the Christ of Christmas live in your heart by faith and be pre-eminent there. Tonight and always, may we celebrate what Christmas is really all about.

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