

Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator, and from Jesus God’s Son, the Messiah, God’s light and life in the world. Amen.

So, I know that you are all here tonight for one reason: the sermon.

You probably heard about it from those who attended our Advent service this morning, that Pastor Dan has prepared a three-hour message, for the late service exclusively, one that will explore everything from the “begats” of Genesis to the Beast in the Book of Revelation... Now, let me stop there that may calm your fears. I am *not* going to preach a three-hour sermon, and that’s because I get it. I *know* what it’s like to sit in the pew and listen to long-winded and sometimes short-sighted sermons.

Having said that, a preacher *does* have an important role to play on Christmas Eve. Amid all the glittering, the lights and amazing decorations, amid all these beautiful poinsettias put here by our Altar Guild, as well as the deep green of the trees that we have in the narthex and sanctuary, a preacher’s task is to invite everyone – each one of you – to pause. To pause, to be still, and to *behold*; to cast your eyes on the most important thing we often overlook because of the lights and decorations, namely, the Christ Child. Christ the Lord. Christ, our newborn King.

So, what do we see when we behold this child lying in a manger? Certainly not “a king” in the ordinary sense of that word, someone who rules his subjects with power and ruthlessness; and certainly not “God” in the ordinary or popular sense of the word, namely as the Sovereign Lord of the Universe, Almighty Rule-giver.

No, we see something, rather, we *behold* something, quite different. We behold *a paradox*, which is to say, a seeming contradiction, that upon later reflection makes sense. We behold a paradox, which for Martin Luther was, and is, the real meaning of Christmas.

What is that paradox? What is that seeming contradiction?

“Here,” Luther writes, “the One who is in the cradle is at the same time the Almighty God. The smallest and most helpless being has within Himself, the center of divinity.”

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Now let’s sit with that for a moment. Here we have the only claim of its kind in all the religions of the world. Here, the universal, omnipresent being of God is contracted; is made small, is made available to each of us.

Why? Because this is the only way we can behold God. After all, as the Bible repeatedly confirms, no one has ever seen, or can see, God, as God is an experience that would be overwhelming. Let me repeat that: No one can see God as God is, because the experience would be overwhelming.

So, God becomes and appears to us as a child wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.

To go incidentally to the Sufi tradition, which is the mystical strain of Islam, the Sufis will talk about how anyone who experienced the direct presence of God would be annihilated; they would be overwhelmed.

If you're not interested in the Sufi tradition, I direct you to "Raiders of the Lost Ark" where Indiana Jones, having paid attention in Sunday School, knows you cannot behold God directly without being incinerated.

So Behold. Behold the Being of God when God is not being God. Behold the vulnerability of God our Messiah.

"Behold," as the Apostle Paul says, "the weakness of God."

A God, again, *unlike any other version of God in the history of religion*, who depends on *us* to care for *Him*. Do you hear how radical this claim is? A God who depends on us to care for Him, a God who puts Godself at our mercy.

This is not the megachurch God.

This is not the warmongering God.

And this is certainly not the Almighty Calvinist God.

Instead, this is a God who relies on *us*, who depends on each of us to do God's work in the world.

(Now, there *is* one exception to this. In the Jewish religion, there is the mystical strain of Qabalah, which likewise talks about "working with God" to mend and repair the universe. In this case, you have one exception to the point I made a moment ago, that in all the history of the world's religions, this is the only claim of its kind.)

The Almighty God of the Universe lies gurgling, cooing, crying helplessly in a manger; dependent on us to serve His needs.

Again, just let that sit with you for a minute.

Now, the question that follows is this: How do we serve this God? How do we tend to a child who is no longer physically present?

Well, Martin Luther once more offers some great advice.

"The inn," he writes, "was full, and because of that, many of us think to ourselves, 'If only I had been there, I would have been quick to help the baby!'"

"Well," Luther continues, "why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your *neighbor*. You ought to *serve* your neighbor, for what you do to your neighbor in need, you do to the Lord Christ Himself."

Yes, I get it. Most of us don't come to the Christmas Eve service *primarily* to hear the sermon. So, let me leave you with one word to summarize everything I've said here:

**Behold!**

For unto you and me a child is born; the Almighty God, lying in a manger — the reason for the season.

Amen.