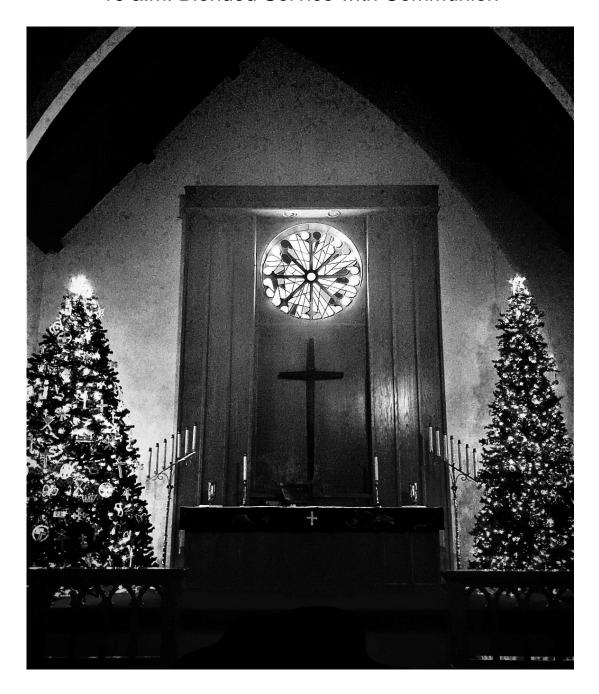
1ST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

December 26th, 2021 10 a.m. Blended Service with Communion



CHRIST LUTHERAN CHURCH

140 Russell Avenue St. Catharines, Ontario L2R 1W1 Church: 905-685-8294 Fax 905-685-7661

Office Hours: Tuesday to Friday—9 a.m. – 12 noon

Bulletin Announcements: Please send to secretary@christlutheransc.ca.

Deadline for submission is Thursday at 9 a.m.

Pastor:Pastor Todd Hoeffs(289-362-0113)pastortoddhoeffs@gmail.comParish Assistant:Louise Gondosch(905-329-8579)parish.assistant@christlutheransc.caBusiness Manager:Karen McCumberbusiness.manager@christlutheransc.ca

Secretary: Pat Kimpel secretary@christlutheransc.ca

Facebook: Lisa Gall www.facebook.com/ChristLutheranChurchSC
Bulletin by email: Judy Mason www.facebook.com/ChristLutheranChurchSC chairman.outreach@christlutheransc.ca

<u>Prayer:</u> Direct us, O Lord, in all our actions by Your gracious favor, and further us with Your continual help that in all our works, begun, continued, and ended in Your name, we may glorify Your holy name and finally by Your mercy receive eternal life; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Organist: Gloria Meyer **Reader:** Fran Porteous

Children's Message: https://youtu.be/ecrDj9ricSc

Children's Christmas Story: https://youtu.be/myQCTHNp0R4

DAILY SCRIPTURE MEDITATIONS:

Monday: Acts 7: 54-60 Wed.: 1 John 1: 1-10 Friday: Rev. 12: 1-6 Tuesday: Acts 6: 8 – 7:60 Thurs: John 21: 19b-24 Saturday: Matt. 2: 13-18

WORSHIP NOTE:

- A recording of Sunday's service will be uploaded to YouTube "Gathering the Scattered" at: (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3a4p6prdJGEyP5S-g-cNSg).
- A PDF version of the order of service for each Sunday will also be posted on our church website: christlutheransc.ca.
- Archived videos of Sunday's service will be uploaded to christlutheransc.ca "Worship" page. Any questions or concerns, please check out our church website (http://christlutheransc.ca/), contact Judy Slingerland (chairman.worship@christlutheransc.ca) or Pastor Todd (pastortoddhoeffs@gmail.com). or phone the church office. May the peace of the risen Lord be with you all.

<u>EDUCATION HOUR</u> will not meet between the services in December. It will resume in late January for Sunday school and Bible Study. Youth Catechism will resume in February and March 2022. More information still to come.

Sunday, January 2nd: 10 AM: Epiphany Blended Worship (no Education Hour)

The Christmas Tree and decorations take down will be held on Saturday, January 8th at 4 p.m. The supper will be held at 6 p.m. at Northern Flame Grill, 312 Lake Street. Menu and further details to follow. A sign-up sheet is at the back of the church for those who wish to attend. (please indicate if you will be attending supper)

Right Now Media resources at www.rightnowmedia.org.

- Children's videos such as "The Story of Christmas", a 25 minute video that helps children laugh, wonder, and rejoice as they learn of God's love for the world in the gift of baby Jesus.
- Confirmands will find a Playmobil animation video on Martin Luther
- Sports enthusiasts will receive encouragement from Christian athletes such as Tim Tebow.

There are hundreds of other Videos and Bible Studies for children, youth and adults by presenters such as Francis Chan, John Piper, Kyle Idleman, Jeanie Allen, Max Lucado, Bianca Juarez Olthoff and many others. If you need login assistance contact Louise.

Last Sunday Attendance: Dec. 19th, 2021 Attn: 9 a.m. – 46; 11 a.m. — 48; Total: 94								
	<u>Budget</u>	Weekly Need	Last Sunday	Year To Date	<u>+ or – ()</u>			
Current:	271,175.00	5,214.90	3,953.00	196,673.34	(68,286.76)			
LCC Missions	20,000.00	384.62	88.00	17,027.00	(2,588.38)			
Property Improvement:			92.00	5,822.50	,			

2022 DONATION ENVELOPES are available for pick up in your mailbox. If you don't have a mailbox, please check the table at the entrance to the sanctuary. If you have not been issued envelopes and would like some, or, you would like to be assigned a mailbox, please contact Karen at: business.manager@christlutheransc.ca or the office at 905-685-8294.

<u>MEMORIAL DONATIONS</u> have been given in memory of Julie Whittard to HLMS Mixte Nazareth Feeding Program by Susan Honey; to Christ Lutheran Church by Pastor Frank & Mary Silver, Tim & Elly Reck, Tom & Kathy Kuhl and Judy Slingerland; to the Refugee Assistance Fund by Pat & George Fejedelem, Pastor John & Linda Makey and Glenn & Carole Pink.

<u>CHRISTMAS POINSETTIAS</u>: Thank you to everyone who donated poinsettias to decorate our altar for Christmas.

j	Name:	In Honour of:	In Remembrance of:	
/	Judy Slingerland	Family		/mm/
	The Kuhl Family		Carl Wathke	//////////////////////////////////////
	Naomi Hohnberg		Mother, Doris Hohnberg	
T. Mary	The Gondosch Family	Family	_	,
NAME OF	The Gondosch Family	•	Family	*/ WIR / W
	The Reck's	Jesus` Birth	•	
12	Janice Muller		Parents, Jim & Marjanna	g. gr
1	Steve Duga		Son, Michael Duga	1000
	Gloria Meyer	Jesus` Birth		
and and	Paul & Judy Mason	Jesus` Birth		N. Walley
VWVW.	David McBride		Mother, Erna McBride	W/W
	Pastor John & Linda Makey		Earl & Jean Makey	
- Section 1	Pastor John & Linda Makey		Norman & Phyllis Smith	Name of the last
•			,	

<u>SUPPORTING YOUR CHURCH DURING THE PANDEMIC</u>: It's important for members to keep in mind that expenses for payroll, utilities, maintenance, etc. continue to accumulate even when you are not comfortable attending service.

1. THROUGH EFT DONATIONS: Lutheran Church - Canada, East District Corporation continues to facilitate this service for us. To assist you in continuing your financial support to your church, we encourage you to fill out the form that is available for printing at: http://christlutheransc.ca/?page_id=96 and then mail the form along with a voided cheque to: Lutheran Church - Canada, East District Corporation,

275 Lawrence Ave., Kitchener, ON N2M 1Y3,

Attn: Darryl Holland

2. BY MAIL: cheques can still be mailed to:

Christ Lutheran Church,

140 Russell Ave. St. Catharines, ON L2R 1W1

or dropped in the Church mailbox at the East entrance.

3. ONLINE VIA LUTHERAN CHURCH-CANADA: Lutheran Church-Canada has opened a web portal that allows parishioners to donate directly to their home church:

https://lutheranchurch-canada.tng-secure.com/?pageId=donation-edit&categoryId=10972

select "St. Catharines-Christ Lutheran-30950" from the drop down menu, enter the amount of your donations and LCC will transfer your donation to Christ. Donation is via VISA or Mastercard. Tax receipts will be issued by LCC (not Christ). This opportunity will be in effect until the COVID-19 emergency is over.

CHRISTMAS CAROL COMMUNION

December 26, 2021 10 AM Blended

OPENING HYMN:

"Away In A Manger"

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head. The stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay, The little Lord Jesus asleep in the hay.

The cattle are lowing, the poor baby wakes, But little Lord Jesus no crying he makes. I love Thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky And stay by my cradle 'til morning is nigh.

Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay Close by me forever, and love me, I pray. Bless all the dear children in thy tender care, And take us to heaven, to live with Thee there.

German Carol, public domain

INVOCATION & CHRISTMAS SCRIPTURE SENTENCES

In the name of the Father and of the Son † and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

The Word became Flesh, and we have seen His glory.

Oh, come, let us worship Him! Alleluia!

Today Christ is born! Today salvation has appeared!

Today the righteous worship and say, "Glory to God in the highest!" Alleluia!

Come, all you peoples of the earth, and drink from the wells of the Saviour!

For He is our Maker! Alleluia!

CONFESSION & FORGIVENESS

Let us confess our sins in the presence of Almighty God and one another:

(Silence for reflection)

Dear Heavenly Father:

We confess that we are sinful by our very nature, conceived and born in sin and death. We rebel against You in whatever we think, say, and do, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. Even our righteous deeds are filthy rags. We have not let Your Word have its way with us. We have made other created things become gods in place of You, the Almighty God. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, that we may be hearers and doers of Your Word, live out Your holy Will, and walk in Your ways, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

God be merciful to all of you and strengthen your faith.

Amen.

Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?

Yes.

Then let it be done for you as you believe. In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

SPOKEN KYRIE: Lord have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy.

CHRISTMAS HYMN OF PRAISE: The First Noel

The First No-el, the An-gels did say
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep
On a cold winter's night that was so deep.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel; Born is the King of Israel!

They loo-ked up and saw-- a star
Shining in the east beyond them far
And to the earth it gave great light
And so it continued both day and night
Noel, Noel, Noel, Born is the King of Israel!

GREETING & PRAYER OF THE DAY:

The Lord be with you -- And also with you.

Let us pray: All powerful and unseen God, the coming of the Light of Jesus Christ into our world has brightened weary hearts with peace. Call us out of darkness and empower us to proclaim His glorious birth. We pray through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, Who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

THE SCRIPTURES

The Old Testament: Isaiah 62:6-12

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels; all day and all night they shall never be silent. You who remind the Lord, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the earth. The Lord has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: I will not again give your grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have laboured; but those who garner it shall eat it and praise the Lord, and those who gather it shall drink it in my holy courts. Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples. The Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth; Say to daughter Zion, 'See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.' They shall be called, 'The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord'; and you shall be called, 'Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken.' This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The Epistle: Titus 3:4-7

But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL VERSE: "Good Christian Friends!"

Good Christian friends rejoice! With heart and soul and voice!

Now you need not fear the grave, Jesus Christ was born to save!

Calls you one and calls you all

Into His lavish Banquet hall!

Christ was born to save! Christ was born to save!

The Holy Gospel: St. Matthew 1:18-25

The Holy Gospel, according to St. Matthew, the 1st chapter:

Glory to You, O Lord.

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to You, O Christ.

SERMON SONG:

"O Little Town of Bethlehem"

Philip Brooks

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight

For Christ is born of Mary
And gathered all above
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love
O morning stars together
Proclaim the holy birth
And praises sing to God the King
And Peace to all on earth

O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel

CCLI Song # 27879

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Tune: "From Heav'n Above"

God's gift descends from Heav'n on High.
The Baby in the Manger lies.
Our Father has sent us His Son
That we with Him might now be one.

Christ Jesus is our Holy King! To Him glad praises we shall sing! Upon a cross deep sorrows bring; He lives, so death has lost its sting!

The Spirit comes, the Church's seal!
Christ comes, in Water, Word and Meal!
With angels let us now proclaim
We do believe God's Saving Name!

Words: Wheatridge Lutheran Ministries, © 1975 USA

THE PRAYERS

God's Son grew up knowing the joy and pain of a human family. Let us pray to our Father in heaven that he would enrich our families and every family on earth.

Lord God, heavenly Father, you have made us glad through the birth of your Son and the celebration of Christmas this year. We thank you that your holy church has been honoured to share in the praise of angels in these days. When people come into your church, wherever it may be, help them to see your Son Jesus: to receive his presence, to listen to and keep his teaching, to behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. *Lord in Your Christmas joy:*

hear our prayer and bless us.

As your Son grew in wisdom and grace before you and all people, help all the children and young people of the church to learn your word and call upon you in prayer. Protect them from the evil one, and help them make the faith they have received their own. Be with parents as they seek to pass on the faith in those they meet who need the Good News of salvation. Give them grace not to give up in this tiring task.

Lord in Your Christmas joy:

hear our prayer and bless us.

We give you thanks for our land and the blessings we receive from it. Bless and guide our leaders: her gracious Majesty our Queen, our Prime Minister and the government, the Parliament and all who hold office. May they promote justice and goodness, both for this generation and for the future. May all citizens have the will to serve their community, helping through their daily lives show how all spiritual hunger can find satisfaction in your newborn King. *Lord in Your Christmas joy:*

hear our prayer and bless us.

Have mercy on the nations of the world, and all places that suffer violence, natural disasters, and daily hardship. May good people and peacemakers prosper. May evil doers repent, before they perish. *Lord in Your Christmas joy:*

hear our prayer and bless us.

Lord, you know our needs – we now commit to you those among us who are sick, dying or distressed. We especially lift up today...[people named here...].Let the light of Christmas shine into their hearts, and may they accept your fatherly will with peace and joy. Comfort those who mourn the passing of loved ones.

Lord in Your Christmas joy:

hear our prayer and bless us.

God our Father, we give you thanks for all you have done for us. Hear our prayers, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

SERVICE OF THE SACRAMENT

PROPER PREFACE Sung responsive: Tune "Angels with Have Heard on High"

May the Lord be with you.

May the Lord remain with you.

Lift your hearts to God in praise

To the Lord our hearts we raise.

Gloria in Excelsis Deo! Gloria in Excelsis Deo!

In the Word of God made flesh — Great and wondrous mystery — With the Church in Heav'n and earth, celebrate Christ's Holy Birth:

Gloria in Excelsis Deo! Gloria in Excelsis Deo!

SANCTUS: Tune "Angels with Have Heard on High"

Holy, holy, Lord, Mighty God of Sabb-aoth. Heav'n and earth Your glory fills

Blest hosannas in Your name:

Gloria in Excelsis Deo! Gloria in Excelsis Deo!

THE LORD'S PRAYER:

Our Father, Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen

WORDS OF INSTITUTION:

Tune - "I Heard The Bells"

The night Lord Jesus was betrayed He took the bread and when He'd prayed, and given to His disciples, said: "Now take and eat all from this bread."

"This is My + Body given for you", and ev'ry time that this you do, remember that I died to free; all men that they may come to Me."

And after that when He had supped and given thanks He took the cup, and then to His disciples said: "This is My + Blood; for you it's shed."

"Now drink the Cup, for this is new, My Testament, poured out for you; your sins are gone! Now this shall be fore'er a meal rememb'ring Me."

LAMB OF GOD Tune – "I Heard The Bells"

O Lamb of God, You take away the sin of all; now hear us pray,

And grant us from our sin release; Have mercy on us! Grant us peace!

HOLY COMMUNION DISTRIBUTION

COMMUNION HYMN:

All Glory Be To Christ

[Tune: Auld Lange Syne Scottish]

Verse 1:

Should nothing of our efforts stand

No legacy survive

Unless the Lord does raise the house

In vain its builders strive

To you who boast tomorrow's gain

Tell me what is your life

A mist that vanishes at dawn

All glory be to Christ

Chorus:

All glory be to Christ our king

All glory be to Christ

His rule and reign we'll ever sing

All glory be to Christ

Verse 2:

His will be done His kingdom come

On earth as is above

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SONG OF SIMEON:

Tune – "God Rest Ye Merry"

Lord, let Your servant go in peace, Your Word has been fulfilled.

My eyes have seen Your saving work

Which for the world You willed;

The glory of Your Israel as Light for all revealed.

Oh tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy.

Oh tidings of comfort and joy.

Oh, praise to God the Father and praise to God the Son And praise to God the Spirit, most blessed Three in One As 'twas, is now, and e'er shall be while endless ages run Oh tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy.

Oh tidings of comfort and joy!

POST-COMMUNION PRAYER: (spoken)

We pray: Help us and work in us, Great Lord, that what we have received with our lips in Your holy bread and cup we may keep with pure hearts, and that through this Holy Communion gift given to us in this present life we may hereafter receive life everlasting with You in Heaven; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

BENEDICTION

Let us praise the Lord!

Thanks be to God.

The Lord bless and keep you; The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favour and + give you peace.

Amen.

Who is Himself our daily bread Praise Him the Lord of love Let living water satisfy The thirsty without price We'll take a cup of kindness yet All glory be to Christ

Verse 3:

When on the day the great I Am

The faithful and the true

The Lamb who was for sinners slain

Is making all things new

Behold our God shall live with us

And be our steadfast light

And we shall e'er his people be

All glory be to Christ

CLOSING HYMN:

"Joy To The World"

Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing, and Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns! Let all their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.

He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love, and wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love.

WORSHIP NOTES:

All liturgy, music and words are taken from the www.hymnary.org site as well as adaptations from the Lutheran Wheatridge ministries orders of service for Christmas, © 1975 USA. Biblical passages are from the New Revised Standard Version from Bible Gateway. All others are public domain.

REV. TODD HOEFFS
BOXING DAY – 2nd Christmas

Scripture: St. Luke 2:8-20

Title: "Can We Truly KEEP Christmas?!"

December 26, 2021 [10 AM Blended Carol Communion]

In the name of the Father and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The classic story "A Christmas Carol" written by Charles Dickens 175 years ago is my personal holiday favourite. Ever since I read it in 8th grade English class. And I watch the movie versions at least once every Christmas season. There's a scene where lonely, angry Ebenezer Scrooge gets visited in his London counting house by his nephew, inviting him for Christmas dinner. After Ebenezer says all of his bah humbugs and utter disgust at the Christmas financial waste, he bids his nephew farewell. Tells him "you keep Christmas in your way and I'll keep it in mine." "But Uncle Ebenezer, you don't KEEP Christmas...!!" No. You don't keep Christmas.

Christmas is meant to be shared. Because God our Father in Heaven stooped down and shared His own dear Son with the whole world. Because God cared enough to renovate and re-work His creation into the image of His Son to save us from our sins, which the very name of Jesus the Christ means. Because God saw fit to have His Son the very Bread of life born in Bethlehem whose name means "house of Bread". Christmas is meant to be shared. And tasted. And enjoyed. Yes, we share Christmas.

Today is Boxing Day. A day once known for its sharing. [Now its buying sale items] It's been a national holiday in Canada since 1871.

It may come from the traditional opening on that day of Anglican Church poor boxes that had been filled with money during Advent. Monies directed to the poor, which goes back 1000 years. Aristocracy also would give gifts to servants, employees and trades people the day after Christmas. Another reminder, Christmas is meant to share.

Just like a conversation I had with a Starbucks barista the other day. In relation to the "retail" aspect of Christmas, she told me she was a "bah humbug." She and her family prefer a peaceful Christmas so they steer clear of stores and malls and just spend time as a family. Christmas is truly a gift meant to share. Not to keep.

God gave Jesus to a world which was no more ready for Him than our world would be today. The Roman governing authority was basking in the recent victory over winning a 13 year civil war. This earned Caesar Augustus the name "saviour of the world." The birth of another saviour was unwelcomed and disbelieved. The census was timely because the local governments needed to pay off the expense of a long civil war.

The census forced the holy family back to their Bethlehem residence & heritage. Jewish religious leaders may have been taught the great Son of God would come lowly but they expected Jerusalem as the point of departure—not O Little Town of Bethlehem.

Even though King David hailed from the shepherd town, the city of Bread, the new King had to be stronger, better, more powerful.

There also was a deep disconnection between the religious establishment of Israel and the every-day person. God was seen as far removed and angry. Many of them lived like atheists and agnostics, thinking God didn't exist for them. Rules and laws and money kept the worshipper burdened....as if taxes and an oppressive foreign Roman ruler wasn't hard enough.

And this was no fun family travel day for Mary and Joseph either. In those days, rest stops and so-called "hotels" were notorious for criminals on the run and low-life's preying on the vulnerable. Families who travelled usually stayed with family. This gives a whole new meaning to the verse "there was no room for them in the inn." Not only did their culture let them down, but so did their own people. And so the Son of God, the Messiah, the World's Saviour, is born in a manger with animals, lowly and unwelcome. Because the Son of God has no home to lay His head.

For some, Christmas is a time marked by loss of family. For others, including children, the barrage of holiday advertising exacerbates the stings of poverty. For some, their jobs prevent the chance to see family. For others, the inevitability of seeing family bodes pain, not pleasure. In their eyes, Christmas looms not as hope but heartbreak.

We've all been there, on Christmas or otherwise. It doesn't matter how successful we are or how happy we seem, how rich or well regarded, or lovely we are now. We have all been through times when the loss seems too great. So we try and KEEP Christmas, to make it good for ourselves, and thereby forgetting the message of Christmas. The gift of God meant to share.

And because God's great gift could've been missed, He made sure the best people saw this wonderful birth. The best people being shepherds. BTW the most unlikely audience according the religious authority. These faithful shepherds kept watch over sacrificial Passover sheep on land owned by the Temple. These special sheep had to be clean and without blemishes to be used as sacrifices. So when they were born shepherds wrapped them up in....swaddling clothes, strips of cloth that kept them pure. So what better sign for shepherds to notice the newborn King from David's town than swaddling cloths. Representing death, as death is both the lamb's fate and the Lamb of God's fate. Birth is shrouded in death to save us who live in a culture of death. And do the shepherds keep this news to themselves? No way. They run to see. They run to tell. The 1st Christmas witnesses.

We have the message. WE ARE CHRISTMAS WITNESSES. Most of us have heard it our entire lives. We have the entire word of God to hold and read and hear and the Father, Son and Holy Spirit taking up residence in our very hearts. Which begs the

Christmas eve question for us who get tempted to keep Christmas all to ourselves: is the gift of Christmas recognizable in our lives?

Do people see the Christ child born anew in us as we daily depend on the total forgiveness of all sins & faults. For in Jesus we find our true place of origin, our lasting identity, our new born purpose.

When all else seems lost, when all our best efforts have failed, when we just can't imagine a way forward, its then that we're finally able to see what God might be doing, we are then witnessing something new. Our celebration of Jesus' coming during these darkest days of the year, symbolizes a deeper truth: it is in the depths of our hopelessness that God chooses to be born. And in His birth is our hopefulness!

I hear Christians constantly complain over the so-called war on Christmas. That the world is trying to snuff out the Saviour. But we can't expect our worldly culture to model the true meaning of Christmas for us. Christmas must be recognizable in our lives, in our words, in our actions. The present that is Jesus, the Christ child born and wrapped into our world this night, is born in us. And because He's swaddled in our hearts, that gift radiates out of our lives in how we speak, how we think, act, serve, love, accept, embrace, work and play. We're here to say Jesus isn't far distant and removed. He enters the fray we're in, living here in the real world. Heaven bends to earth; earth lifts to heaven.

Jesus, the bread of life, born in Bethlehem, the city of bread, is tangible to us, tasty and fulfilling at Holy Communion's thanksgiving meal. Which in turn blesses our meals, our celebration, our gift-giving and our sharing.

Christmas is more than just decorations or deadlines. God's gift to share leaves us more open to receiving His grace-filled surprises. While we may at times want to pursue a fleeting utopia, God packs bags and hits the road to move into our messy, conflicted world. The promised gift arrives in an overlooked stable, the child of an unwed couple far from home. It is God's breathtakingly raw and real grace. Grace that is not ours to KEEP. But enjoy Jesus' working and living in us, truly, He KEEPS us.

Amen.