

“God So Loved..” (John 3:16) Christmas Eve, December 24, 2009

My cousins, Tim and Britta, live in a beautiful German village called Warder. This is dairy country, rich and green, so it's not surprising that one of the local traditions is to hold the first Christmas Eve service in a barn – actually, a cow stall. Well, therein lies a tale. A few years back, the whole family came to Warder for Christmas, and this was the service they chose to attend – the one in the barn. It's a popular service, so a few went early to reserve seats. Then, little by little, the rest of the family arrived. All but Tim and their 3-year old daughter, Anna. Minutes ticked by. No Tim and Anna. More minutes ticked by. Still no Tim and Anna. With the service about to begin, Britta whispered to her mom, “Where could they be?” Suddenly, from the back, they heard a familiar 3-year old voice: “*Pew! This place stinks!*” The congregation chuckled. Britta turned beet-red. Britta's mom whispered back, “They're here!”

Anna was right, of course! The place did stink. I suspect that was why they held the service in a barn – to remind them what the first Christmas was like. And that's not a bad idea. We tend to “sanitize” the story. The barn we imagine is quaint and clean. The animals are well-behaved. The manger is comfy, the straw is soft, and as for the birth itself – we don't even go there. As I said, we tend to “sanitize” the story. And that's a shame, really, because something important gets lost. It's one thing to confess that the Son of God was born a human being. But what does it say about the Lord that He was born in such poverty, born in such filthy surroundings, born in a place that stinks? The high and holy Son of God, through whom all things came into being, born in a place that stinks! Why would God do such thing? Why would He choose such a birth?

And more to the point, why would He need to? We tend to “sanitize” that part as well. Certainly, we know there is more to Christmas than getting presents and gathering with loved ones. We know that Christmas is about the birth of God's Son. The reason for the season is the gift of “**a Savior who is Christ the Lord.**” *That* we've got down pat. But what tends to get sanitized away is why we need a Savior – why we need saving.

In ages past, that seemed obvious. People knew what their sins were. People knew what sins did to their relationship with God. People knew what sins would ultimately cost them. So they knew why they needed saving. They knew it all too well!

These days...not so much. We've learned to ignore sins, rationalize sins, even redefine them as no longer sinful. We all know the drill: “*Times have changed. Everybody does it. God won't mind that much.*” Of course, if that were true, we wouldn't need a Savior, would we? God could have spared Himself the effort. Jesus need not have been born. But God didn't see it that way. God *doesn't* see it that way. He sent us a Savior because He thinks we need saving. And frankly, what He thinks is what really matters!

But that said, here is the good news! Not only does God think we *need* saving, He thinks we are worth saving – worth saving no matter what the cost. If it means coming here as one of us, He cares that much! If it means suffering for our sins, He'll do that much! If it means dying on a cross, He loves us that much! And that is what we are here to celebrate tonight. Not just Christ's birth, but what His birth means: *that to God, we are worth saving!* The good news is that God did not turn up His nose at our world and say, "Pew! *This place stinks!*" "**God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...**" God didn't turn up his nose at any of us, either. He sent His Son, so "**that whosoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life.**" And let's underscore this word "**whosoever.**" The promise is not just for some people. It's for "**whosoever.**" It's not just for basically good people. It's for "**whosoever.**" It's not just for people with minor sins, understandable sins, socially acceptable sins. It's for "**whosoever.**" Whosoever believes in Christ is forgiven. Whosoever trusts in Christ has eternal life. Whosoever! The promise has no hidden clauses, no conditions in fine print. Christ has taken care of everything! He offers salvation as a gift. It's ours by grace through faith. And why? "**Because God so loved the world.**" Because God so loves you and me!

Now, of course, this is the message we expect to hear on Christmas, isn't it? About God's love. That He considers us worth saving. So why do I emphasize it so strongly? Because it's one thing to know this in theory. It's quite another thing for it to sink in – to really sink in that God loves us unconditionally and considers us worth saving, with no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

For many Christians, there is a spiritual disconnect. Outwardly, we confess that God loves us, yet in here [*heart*] we may not feel so lovable. Outwardly, we confess that God considers us worth saving, yet in here [*heart*] we may not feel worth much at all. And there is a good reason for this. It's because we live in a world that judges us by what we're like and what we do. That's how it determines whether we're lovable; that's how it determines our worth. Like when we watch "*It's A Wonderful Life*" – of course George Bailey is worth saving. Look at what he's like – such a lovable guy! And look at how bad off folks would be without him! Of course he's worth saving. But as for us? Who can say for sure? In here [*heart*] we know our short-comings all too well.

And that, my friends, is why we need to hear the good news again and again! God's love does not depend on what we're like and what we do; neither does our worth. To God, we have worth because He says we have worth – not for any other reason. To God, we are lovable because He loves us – not the other way around. His love really is unconditional. We cannot earn or deserve it, nor do we have to. God just invites us to receive it...and trust it...and let His love make a difference – as it will when we really take it to heart.

Case in point, let me share something that happened maybe 20 years ago around Christmas time. I was visiting a young man named Ray, who was in a

drug rehab program. Now, visits with Ray often lasted quite a while – it was tough on him being locked away – but this time he cut the visit short, saying, “There is someone else who needs to talk to you.” Apparently, some things had come out during their group session – something, I should say, that had been weighing very heavily on another man’s conscience. So Ray introduced us. The man asked him to stay for moral support. And then he told me his secret. What he shared was so dark I could never describe it from the pulpit. Suffice it to say it was not the sort of thing he could ever rationalize away. As he began, his tone was kind of cynical – as if testing the waters. Then he got more serious. And then...such a torrent of shame! In the end, he looked me square in the eye: “*Can God ever forgive me something like that?*” And you know what I told him. “God already has forgiven you.” He just looked at me, so I explained further – explained the good news we all know so well – that when Christ went to the cross, He took all of our sins with Him. When Christ suffered and died, He paid for our sins in full. Not just for some of them. And not just for some of us. He paid for all of them so that all of us can be forgiven. “*But how?*” the man asked. “*How can God forgive me something like that?*” And again, you know what I answered. “Because that’s the kind of God He is. It’s not that our sins don’t matter. They do. But to God, we matter infinitely more! That’s why He sent Christ – to save us *from* our sins; to save us *for* a better kind of life. Because we matter to Him. Because *you* matter to Him. Because He loves *you* that much!”

The conversation went on much longer, of course. But that afternoon, this young man experienced “Christmas” for the first time – experienced what it means that “**to you is born a Savior**” – and what a Savior! A Savior who came because you’re worth saving! A Savior who came to free you from guilt and shame! A Savior who came to transform your life! A Savior who came to guarantee you eternity! What a comfort it was for him to learn this! What a relief to lay his burden down at the foot of the cross! And in the days that followed, what a difference it made to know he was forgiven, redeemed, saved by grace alone. It was life-changing, this good news – literally life-changing! – and that is why I share his story. What was true for him is true for us. Whether our sins are big or small or somewhere in between, God does not turn up His nose at us. Whether we *feel* lovable, whether we *feel* our worth, God treasures us even so. God loves us unconditionally. God considers us worth saving! And He didn’t just tell us this. God proved it in all that Jesus did, beginning the first Christmas Eve.

So here we are this Christmas Eve – warm and snug, retelling the story of Jesus’ birth. As we do, let’s be careful not to sanitize the story or the reason why Jesus came. In its very messiness lies our hope and our joy! In its very messiness we see just how much we are worth! For why else would God’s Son be born in a place that stinks? Why else would Jesus endure all that He suffered to save us? Because “**God so loved the world!**” Because God so loves you and me. And that is the good news we take home with us this evening. God so loves you and me “**that He gave us His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life.**” Amen.