

**All We Want for Christmas
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
Christmas Eve 2006**

Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.....

The silence of this night provides a dramatic counterpoint to the cranked-up volume of the rest of our lives, the surround-sound that accompanies our lives 24/7. The noise of commerce, the roar of transportation, the jangle of electronic gadgetry, even the fierce wild beating of our anxious hearts fade into the background, and we rest in the gentle grace of Christmas carol, music of harp and bell and stately organ, familiar texts of promise and hope spoken with hushed reverence. Tonight all human words recede, to make room for the Word, God's Word, made flesh among us.

It is the Word, my friends, that makes this silent, holy night so special, so magical, so different from the constant thrum of ordinary days. But how quickly we let it die on our lips, extinguished as quickly as our candles, tucking it safely away until another whole year of ordinary days pass away. Our expectations for Christmas are so high: we pray for peace, we want a Word that will bring us light and life, but somehow come up short. Conventional wisdom reminds us that the "real meaning of Christmas" lies not in the decorations, the wonderfully wrapped packages, the parties and the presents, but in the intangibles: giving and love and family and home. We know this, yet too often commodify these spiritual values as things to be created and consumed rather than to be received with thankful hearts for their Divine Creator. Not just at Christmas but all year long we put our money on the window-dressing and miss the real deal. It's not insignificant that the Association of American Linguists' choice for "word of the year" is "truthiness"—the belief that truth is defined by what we feel is true, what we want to be true. Truthiness—for all its clever bravado on the humor circuit-- is an ultimately unsatisfying substitute for Truth, a disappointing runner-up in the quest for authenticity, a foundation upon which to build a purposive and joyful life.

On this silent night, when we are especially attentive to hearing the Word, let us listen for it. We have to listen hard, because it is spoken softly, in the tender, tiny cries of a baby born to rule the universe. What's up with that?

Best-selling author and Presbyterian pastor Fred Buechner tells about a Christmas pageant, a typical Sunday School re-enactment of the Nativity. The manger was center stage in the chancel where it always is, a baby doll wrapped in a blanket as the little Lord Jesus. Mary was there in a blue shawl seated next to Joseph. The wisemen bore gifts, the shepherds wore bathrobes, and the littlest children looked adorable in sheep's clothing. The narrators narrated and the congregation sang carols and everything went like clockwork until it came time for the arrival of the angels of the heavenly host, more children robed in white. At the right moment they were supposed to gather around the manger saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will to all," and that is just what they did except there were so many of them that there was a fair amount of crowding and jockeying for position, with the result that one particular angel, a girl about nine years old who was smaller than most of them, ended up so far out on the fringes of things that not even by craning her neck and standing on tiptoe could she see what was going on. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will to all," they all sang on cue, and then in the momentary pause that followed, the small girl electrified the entire church by crying out in a voice shrill with irritation and frustration and enormous sadness at having her view blocked, "*Let Jesus show!*" [Frederick Buechner, "Bidding Farewell" article in the *Christian Century*, April 4, 2006, p. 28]

Friends, how well we keep Jesus hidden from one another, from the world, from ourselves. So many competing voices that drown out the Word. So much truthiness masquerading as truth...so much fool's gold that fills our pockets, leaving little room for the pure stuff. Let Jesus show! Let the mystery and miracle of God's gift of love be revealed tomorrow and next week, in the way we work as well as our worship, in the cold complexities of daily decision-making the same as in the warmth and clarity of candlelight. Let Jesus show! -in the recognition that we are beloved children of God—every one of us, and by the way we treat all the children. God's Word to humanity is God-is-with-us. God-is-with-us. Not in some far-off heaven; not on Sundays in church; not for those odd

moments when we want a little religion. But here. In the middle of our lives, the buying and selling, and trying and crying, and laughing and loving and failing and fearing and hoping against hope. In a world at war. In a city crippled by poverty. Let Jesus show.

Among the stories in Michael Lindvall's wonderful book, *The Good News from Northhaven* is one about a time when Jesus showed himself clearly at the Presbyterian Church. One Thanksgiving weekend, they had a baptism, the grandson of a prominent elder. In this church whenever a baptism occurred, the minister would ask the congregation "Who stands with this child?" Then the grandparents and siblings and perhaps an assortment of relatives, would join the parents presenting their infant for baptism. After this particular baptism, one woman held back after the rest of the congregation had gone, to speak with the pastor. He noticed her "Salvation Army" style clothing and that she seemed very hesitant to speak. He asked pleasantly if she needed help. Fumbling for words, she blurted out, "Tina has had a baby and well, the baby ought to be baptized, shouldn't it?"

The pastor suggested that Tina and her husband should make an appointment to see him to discuss the possibility of baptism, preferably after Christmas. The woman looked up at the man of God and said, "Tina has no husband. She's a good girl, but she got involved with this older boy. And then she got pregnant. She's only 18." The minister mumbled something about bringing the request before the Session. When the pastor presented the request there was some questioning. Was she a member? No. How could they be sure that Tina would be faithful to the promises she was making in the baptism? How could they be sure about anybody's promise? So, after some decent and orderly debate, the baptism was approved for the fourth Sunday of Advent. When the day came, the church was filled as it always is at Christmas. The time came for the baptism, and the elder stood and read off his script, "Tina Corey presents her son, James, for baptism." Tina got up from where she was seated and came down to the front, holding two-month-old James in her arms. The scene was just as awkward as the pastor and the elders knew it would be. Tina seemed so young, so alone. As she stood there, they could not help but think of another young woman long ago. Another unwed mother, in similarly difficult circumstances.

The pastor came to the part of the service when he asked, "And who stands with this child?" He looked out at the mother of Tina and motioned her forward. Tentatively she walked to the front toward her daughter and grandson. The minister's eyes went back to his service book to proceed when he became aware of movement within the congregation. A couple of elders were standing up. Slowly the sixth-grade Sunday school teacher got to her feet. Next a new young couple in the church stood up. And then, before the pastor's astonished eyes, the whole church was standing, moving forward, clustering around the baby and the Madonna, as if they were all family. [Michael Lindvall, *The Good News from Northhaven*, referenced by William Willimon in Pulpit Resource, Vol.34, no. 4, pp. 54-55]

On this silent night, listen for the one Word that births love, animates hope and connects us with our family. Friends, all we want for Christmas may be found in the gift lying in the manger. Unto us a child is born. The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Let it show, tonight and tomorrow, in all we say and do, in all we dream and dare.

AND THE GLORY OF THE LORD SHALL BE REVEALED, AND ALL PEOPLE SHALL SEE IT TOGETHER, FOR THE MOUTH OF THE LORD HAS SPOKEN IT. AMEN.

The Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor