

Luke 2:1-20  
Creekside COB  
Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2004

### **“Wishing You a Very Thin Christmas”**

I don't know all the reasons you are here tonight, but I know one reason you are not here. You did not come to listen to me. You don't want to hurt my feelings, so you will sit politely and "put up" with me... for a little while. If you are lucky I might say something significant, but I want you to know that I know my place. I come in forth, behind the singing, communion, and candle lighting. It took several Christmases to figure this out. Pastors are tempted to take advantage of the bigger than average attendance and often talk more than they should. We fall into the trap of trying to EXPLAIN Christmas instead of getting out of the way allowing the story to tell itself. Whether this is your eighth or eightieth Christmas Eve, you have not come here for an explanation. You have come to experience something. Knowledge about God is important, but your real desire is to experience God whose dwelling among us is the center of our celebration.

Awareness of God's presence is not hard to come by-- not tonight. Our service began with singing what is probably the most beloved of all Christmas hymns: "O Come, All Ye Faithful." Study the lyrics and you will see what this hymn is not: it does not try to explain, argue, or proof anything. It invites us to respond to Jesus' birth in the only way we can when we stand before a profound mystery- with awe, abandon, and adoration. "O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord."

Tomorrow morning you will open presents. As you unwrap them, think for a moment about the wrapping itself. A thin sheet of colorful paper is all that separates you from the gift. The identity of the present remains a mystery until the paper veil is torn away.

**I take this as an image of our relationship to the mystery we behold on Christmas. The Celtic Christians of Ireland have given us some wonderful images that reveal the different dimensions of the Christian life. One of them is what they call, "thin places." There are sacred moments and places where the material and spiritual worlds are next-door neighbors. Heaven is not light years away but very near. All that separates the seen and unseen world is a tissue-thin membrane.**

**Christmas Eve is an example of a thin place. We sense being drawn to or summoned by something not of our design or imagining. It isn't just spiritually inclined or religious people who feel the pull. So do people who aren't sure they believe in anything beside themselves. Even those who claim not to have a spiritual bone in their bodies are nicer at Christmas. They succumb to acts of generosity and goodwill. The crank in the checkout lane who wouldn't acknowledge your existence at any other time turns with a smile and says, "Merry Christmas!"**

**You have come here with more than yourselves. You have brought memories of past Christmases along with you. Take a deep breath and smell the scent of pine from the tree in the living room of your childhood home. See the glow of lights on the tree. Get in touch with the warm feeling that overtook you when you realized that because of Christmas everything would somehow be all right.**

**The older we get, the more we want our lives to mirror the messages embossed on the Christmas cards sent and received. We remember hopes that never came to pass. We remember how lonely we felt when it seemed that Christmas joy visited every home except ours. We bring these memories here along with remnants of hope. We are here again, or perhaps for the first time because this may be the year the mystery of Christ's birth will wash over us. Maybe. Maybe.**

**Whether we recognize it or not, we are here because the world is caught in the gravitational pull of spiritual one. The wall between is stretched thin. From the other side we hear the beat of angel**

wings and songs of angel choirs, a baby's cry, and a mother's sigh, running feet, and excited speech. We know we are placed for a purpose in this world, and ultimately, created for another.

As you know, I like to fish. Fishing engages you in two environments at once. Surrounded by air, you seek a quarry surrounded by water. The most thrilling fishing happens where air and water meet. Here, the fly rod is the tool of choice. It's awesome when a fish breaks the surface to inhale a floating fly. But at times, the fish make only half-hearted takes at the fly in a non-aggressive manner. You see the take, but can't connect. Fly fishermen call this, "in the film." When fish won't break the surface tension, you must use a fly that adheres in the film. It doesn't rest on the surface, and it doesn't sink beneath it. The fly is presented in a way that allows the fish to take it in with no effort.

Tonight is our "thin place." We can't penetrate it. It is not like the mirror Alice walked through into Never Land. We only have inklings of what's on the other side.

Thin places aren't constant. After the angels sing, the door to heaven closes behind them. The shepherds return to their sheep. Mary, Joseph, and the baby are gone by morning. Tomorrow night we will settle back to our routines. As wonderful as it is, we can't sustain the mood of Christmas Eve. We can't lasso heaven and keep it close. We can't put ourselves in the film, or punch holes in thin places and climb across.

But we can get close because a hole has been punched from God's side of the veil. God comes to us tonight, into our Bethlehem, into our embrace. So come, let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.