

**Luke 2: 1-20
Creekside COB
Christmas Eve Service
December 24, 2006**

Travel with me back in time to Christmas past--to the time before there were inflatable Christmas lawn decorations, and before Christmas lights made our houses look like little Las Vegas casinos. Let's go back to a time before Christmas office parties—back before Christmas had become a big business and was still considered a religious celebration.

Let's go back before yuletide carols were sung by a choir, before Santa had his first Coke, and Rudolph had a shiny nose. Reel in the memories of Christmases past when your children were children. Go back to the earliest memories of when you were a child and how you thought you would explode from excitement before Christmas day arrived.

Go back before you were born to the days when your grandparents were happy to get an orange or a pencil for Christmas. Go back before Charles Dickens created Ebenezer Scrooge, Bob Cratchet, and Tiny Tim; back before people went "wassailing," and sang the "Coventry Carol." Keep going back, back, 1,200 years ago when Christians first sang, "*O Come, O Come, Immanuel.*"

Let's go back to the time before the church was a powerful institution, even before it was a persecuted sect, back to when there was no church, back when the Roman Empire ruled the known world with an iron fist, and Caesar Augustus was Emperor.

In those days, a young woman gave birth to her first child, in a cattle stall. Shepherds were keeping a watchful eye over their flocks on a tranquil night in the Judean hills. Then came a light. Then came a voice. Then came the good news. Then came a

multitude of voices singing. “For to you is born this day in the City of *David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.*”

God invaded the world in a most unlikely manner. If only we could get back to *that moment*—back to the bare, bold, untouched, and unfamiliar essence of it. What would we have seen and heard? It must have been a far cry from how it has been depicted since then. It is because of our familiarity with those depictions that the good news has a tough time reaching us.

We know the story too well. Our familiarity defends our hearts against it. We know the players, their parts, and how it all works out.

I accept part of the blame for what has been called, “Christmas Eve Religion.” It’s my job to put this service together. The candles and choir and comforting words conspire to create a cozy, comfy mood. Someone said, “*We come to church on Christmas Eve and we want to feel calm and contented, the religious equivalent of a hot toddy.*” Don’t get me wrong—I enjoy Christmas Eve Religion as much as the next person. But God didn’t descend to us and become one of us just to put us in a good mood for the holidays.

“Jesus” means “liberator.” He came to liberate us from our preoccupation with ourselves. He came to liberate us from our sin and our checkered pasts. He came to liberate us from our fear—the fear of failure, the fear our kids won’t turn out right, the fear of growing old, the fear of sickness and death. He came to liberate us from chasing idols of success and wealth the way dogs chase cars. He came to liberate us from the pain we have inflicted and the pain others have inflicted upon us. Despite the ways we have trashed the earth and made messes of God’s gift of life, God continues to come to us, to love us.

We are not here for a manufactured dose of Christmas Eve warmth. Joy is our response to Jesus who frees from all the things that keep us from living and growing. Gratitude and joy is

ours tonight because God's amazing grace that was cradled in Mary's arms and now cradles us.

On the coast of Denmark was a poor fishing village called Norre Vosburg. It had muddy streets and thatched-roof huts. In this bleak place there lived an austere Lutheran sect that renounced all worldly pleasures. Everyone wore black. They lived on boiled cod and gruel made from boiling bread with a splash of ale in it. In their worship they sang about the New Jerusalem and saw their world as something to be tolerated until they reached the next world.

The pastor of the sect was a widower with two daughters. They were so beautiful that many came to church just to see them. One had an opportunity to marry a dashing cavalry officer, but she refused because she couldn't take care of her father in his old age. Her sister had a voice of a nightingale. She met the most accomplished opera singer of the day who said that her voice was worthy of the Grand Opera in Paris. He gave her lessons, but singing about love made her nervous. Her father refused to let her take more lessons, and the singer returned to Paris, despondent that such a promising talent had been lost.

Years passed. The now middle-aged spinster sisters tried to carry on for their deceased father, but they didn't possess his stern leadership style. The sect suffered from infighting and accusations. But the sisters were faithful to their charge, organizing services and boiling bread and cod.

One rainy night there was knock at the door. A woman fell at their feet. They revived her and found that she couldn't speak Danish. She handed them a letter from the man who had given one of the sisters singing lessons years before. The woman had lost her husband and son during the French civil war, and her own life was in danger. He booked passage for her on a ship and asked the sisters to show her mercy. The letter ended, "Her name is Babette. She can cook."

The sister's distrusted her cooking. She was French, and the French ate horses. But gradually, Babette softened their hearts.

She did chores for room and board. She worked hard for the next twelve years and never questioned her chores. Everyone agreed that she brought new life to the community. Then Babette received a letter, her first letter in twelve years. A friend had bought her tickets to the French lottery, and she had won ten thousand francs.

Babette's good fortune coincided with the hundredth anniversary of the pastor's birth. She said to the sisters. "In twelve years I have asked nothing of you. Now I have a request. I want to prepare a French meal for the anniversary service." The sisters were reluctant, but what choice did they have? They agreed, and Babette made the arrangements. Weeks later, boats arrived, unloading provisions for her kitchen. There were cases of small birds, champagne, fresh vegetables, truffles, pheasants, ham, sea creatures, and a huge tortoise. The members of the sect were unsure. Tongues were meant for praising God, not exotic tastes.

It snowed the day of the dinner, turning the dull village a beautiful white. A general serving in the royal palace was an honored guest at the feast. The table was adorned with china and crystal. The meal began and the villagers sat mute. The general raised his wine glass and exclaimed, "This is the finest Amontillado I've ever tasted." He sipped a spoonful of soup. This is turtle soup, but how could such a thing be found here?"

With each course, the general praised the food, while the villagers didn't sat mute. But gradually their tongues loosened. They spoke of the old days and their enjoyment of Christmases past. Those who held grudges were reconciled. A woman burped, and the brother next to her said, "Hallelujah!" When the quail was served, the general said he had only seen this dish in one place, the famous Café Anglais in Paris that was renowned for its woman chef. Unable to contain himself, he rose and said, "*Mercy and truth, my friends, have met together. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another.*"

At the conclusion of the feast, the old-timers went outside in the snow, formed a circle and lustily sang the old songs of faith. In

the kitchen, Babette sat exhausted, surrounded by unwashed dishes, shells, bones, broken crates and vegetable trimmings. The sisters looked at her and realized that no one had spoken to Babette about the dinner. “It was quite a nice dinner, Babette.”

Babette said, “I was once the cook at Café Anglais.” They said, “We will remember this evening when you have gone back to Paris, Barbette,” as if not hearing her. Then Babette told them she would not be going back to Paris. All her friends and relatives had been killed or imprisoned. “Besides, it would be too expensive to return,” she sighed. “But what about the ten thousand francs?” they asked. Then Babette shocked them. Every last franc had been spent on the feast they had devoured. “That is what a dinner for twelve costs at the Café Anglais.”

This is a parable of God’s grace. The somber people of Norre Vosburg lived as though God would love them for their piety and renunciation. Then a woman entered their lives and demonstrated through her incredible feast, that God’s favor was a pure gift. They were lavished with a meal they didn’t fully appreciate or know how to receive, but Babette held nothing back.

The world was a mess. Then a visitor came. He saw that we lived in fear. He saw how people were trying to appease God by keeping the rules, and the joyless existence it created. He saw the pain and suffering and set out to transform it with the gift of God’s unmerited grace that can’t be earned, only received.

The babe of Bethlehem who is crowned King of kings and Lord of lords has prepared a feast for us.