

Matthew 2:3-15 (New International Version 1984, ©1984)

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ^[a] was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."^[b]

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east^[c] went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The Escape to Egypt

¹³ When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."^[d]

Footnotes:

- a. [Matthew 2:4](#) Or *Messiah*
 - b. [Matthew 2:6](#) Micah 5:2
 - c. [Matthew 2:9](#) Or *seen when it rose*
 - d. [Matthew 2:15](#) Hosea 11:1
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Merry Christmas everyone! Today is the first Sunday after Christmas. Around the world, there are churches everywhere who have just read this Gospel reading that Jim read for us and it is called Holy Family Sunday – that is what today, the Sunday after Christmas, is called.

You know that Christmas and family go together in my mind. The words are synonymous. It is not just in Christianity where this is true, the culture seems to think this as well...have a look. [Slides of: *White Christmas, A Christmas Story, It's a Wonderful Life, Home Alone* and our course *our Holy Family – Mary & Joseph.*]

Family and Christmas seem to go together really well. I don't know about you, maybe you are single or alone yesterday, but whether you were alone or with family, what I'd like to do now is invite you to participate with us in a moment of preparation for our special sharing. I invite you to sit back in your



pew and if you are able or willing, to close your eyes and let us just remember for a moment our time together yesterday with our families. It has been so many weeks preparing (Ray Bacon playing guitar music in the background)....remembering exactly what to get for your kids, grandkids. You remember shopping, remember finding that special gift for that special person. Remember the stress on the roads and the traffic, shopping lines. Maybe you are worried about the money or maybe you have so much you are so grateful to give some of it away. Do you remember how your kids were laughing and smiling yesterday? Remember the joy that you had coming downstairs as a kid to the presents. How about the inlaws coming over? Remember sitting around the Christmas dinner table. Let your memory linger and take you where you need to go. Remember your family at Christmas. You can open your eyes now.

You know of the 33 years that I can remember of my 38 years of life, the 33 Christmases that I can remember, there are several that stand out in my memory for different reasons. I remember coming home from college and getting out of the car and it was late – it was the day before Christmas and we lived in Wisconsin and my mom always has the home decorated so beautifully. I got out of the car and it was so freezing and I could look up into the sky and see those shiny stars – they get so much shinier in the cold weather of Wisconsin. I walked into the house and it was so cozy and warm. I saw the big stone fireplace ablaze. I could smell that my mom had recently baked bread and there were candles on the table and the table was set and she was doing for my homecoming from college. I kind of snuck in the front door and saw her sitting at the piano in the living room playing and recalled that every Christmas Eve my grandfather would sing at the Elm Grove Lutheran Church and sing up in the choir loft that was behind the congregation and he would always sing with this beautiful Norwegian, baritone voice leading us all into worship as we lit the Christ candle.

[Peter begins singing, “O Come Let Us Adore Him” with Ray joining in for remainder of the verse]

I looked across at the room of my mother and she didn't know I was there yet and I could tell she had stopped playing and she was crying. This was the first Christmas after her father had died earlier that year and I knew that she was having a moment of remembrance and that this Christmas would never be the same. I remember that Christmas, the family at Christmas.

Ray, how about you, do you have any family members that you remember? I know that your mom is here, so no fiction. Ray answered, “I do. I remember one year that mom said we were going to do things old school. By old school, all the decorations were going to be handmade. We found an old scrub cedar tree that we cut down and brought into the house and we proceeded to make decorations with tin foil and many tongue depressors and yarn that we wrapped around them. Things that we learned that Christmas were that we should have started making the decorations in October. Stringing popcorn and cranberries is not as easy as it looks, especially when my little brother is eating all the popcorn. Real candles on a tree can be a fire hazard. But, we got it done and we were so proud of the accomplishment as a family that Christmas Eve with presents under the tree and we are standing around with the eggnog and we sang the first verse of Silent Night...it was a wonderful night.

[Peter sings Silent Night verse w/ Ray.]



That is my favorite Christmas song and when I was an associate pastor at the First Presbyterian Church in Flint, Michigan, for 8 years right, after the seminary....we would sing that to close the worship service every Christmas Eve. We did the same thing there as we do here and we would light the candles and the pastors would process out and stand in the back of the sanctuary while we sang Silent Night and so I had a view of the congregation from behind and then we would walk out into the cold Michigan night.

First Presbyterian Church of Flint is situated in downtown Flint and in my first years there most of that main street was boarded up and there was an old beautiful red bricked street and Christmas times often times it was snowy. When I got into my car to drive home, about a 3 minute drive – driving on that snow covered brick was silent. That was the year I was divorced, my first Christmas as a pastor. It is not where I thought I was going to be in 2002 at the age of 30, but there I was and I walked into my cozy English Tudor home that I could barely sell for \$100,000 and when I moved here to Austin. In Austin, I saw on Enfield Street the same exact house for \$800,000 and I asked myself what is wrong with the world?

You know Flint was once an Austin and now they are humbled, but they know how to love each other and the church was such a foundation for that whole community. They have more money in that church than they know what to do with, because all the GM executives went to that church over the years in the 1900's and they died off and left their bequests to the church. Do you know what that old staid church decided to do? They've used their endowment to pour into the homeless and the needy in that city. Tearing down old abandoned drug houses. It is a tremendous witness of transformation as a town tries to figure itself out again, like I was trying to do.

I walked into my cozy English Tudor home and I always left the lamp on because I didn't like coming home alone to a dark house. I was so depressed that year that I didn't even have a Christmas tree and that was something for me because I love Christmas trees and we'll set our Christmas tree up the day after Thanksgiving and we'll keep it up till Valentine's Day (audience laughter). Christina has often thought I am crazy. But I didn't do a Christmas tree that year and I remember sitting in my little reading chair, poured myself a drink and sat there and felt lonelier than I have ever felt and I believed the story I was telling about myself that I was going to amount to nothing and that I had failed and that my life had fallen apart and I believed that story.

Then a couple of years later, I met a person on a spiritual retreat that I took on my own, because I knew my heart was totally empty. I met this person and she reminded me that nothing can separate Peter Haas from the love of God in Christ, including my own stories I tell about myself, my own thoughts I have that are often times unexamined and my own feelings that go unchecked – all of it could not separate me from the love of God in Christ.

I sat there alone at Christmas Eve and feeling very sorry for myself and probably had one too many drinks and fell asleep in that chair. The next morning there was a big snowstorm and it covered the world with white. God's love does that – it starts over and recreates us and helps us begin again.

Just the other night, Friday night, I walked out of the sanctuary about 12:30 a.m. in the morning after a great Christmas Eve with you all and I drove home. We live off of Anderson Lane and MoPac area, so it takes me about 20 minutes to get there and it was cold outside, so it felt a little bit like a normal



Christmas (audience laughter) and when I got home I got out of the car and I stood in front of this home that Christina and I have renovated, that during our courtship she somehow got me to paint and fix things up. I stood underneath the bare tree of our front yard and looked up to the stars and said, "Thank you God. I don't know how these miracles happen." I walked into the house and there was beautiful Christina, our tree was lit and she had the candles going and we hugged and kissed and we stood in front of our Christmas tree, our little family had Christmas wondering what the year would bring and giving thanks to God for all that had happened in this year and if you had told me in the 2002 that I'd been living in Austin, Texas and married to an extraordinary human being that bears her name rightly and working at an Austin church, being paid double what I was being paid in Flint....you try to make a living on \$35,000K dollars....it was a miracle to be called here for me.

After my moment of awakening through this friend who reminded me that nothing could separate me from the love of God, she said, "Peter, you are going to go back to Flint and you are going to be a totally different human being and a totally different pastor. Your being is being transformed and therefore it is going to draw a different kind of light." You know two years previously, I had put my home on the market and it didn't even get one offer for a whole year. I came back after my retreat and put it on the market and twelve days later I had an offer on the table and I closed that deal.

So, the last six months I had in Flint, Michigan, I sensed there was a change coming. I rented a little apartment from a dear friend of mine – a 97 year old women, and out of the blue I received an email from Phil Haag, who was the chair of the PNC committee that was looking for apparently two years for the right person and at the right time I was ready and you were ready and I moved here. Then six months after I moved here I met Christina and the other night we celebrated our third Christmas Eve together as husband and wife and maybe next year, there will be a baby. Our family at Christmas.

Well Ray? What do our stories have to do with Mary, Joseph & Jesus and their stories? What do you think?

Ray Bacon, "Peter what I feel is that you know the gift of Jesus was the greatest gift that any of us could have every imagined. It was the kind of gift, that once we realized it, the soul really does feel its work. We realized how much God values us by this incredible gift of love and hope. It is amazing that this gift of love and hope didn't come to us as a grown, cognizant man or a choir of angels or even a talking lion – it came to us as a baby in a family, where that family nurtured, cared and loved that baby until he grew and it was time for him to go out into the world. That is what it means to families now – we can still nurture and cultivate and grow that love and that hope until it spills out over into the world. How about you?"

I think about Christmas all the time, because the incarnation for me, this fancy word that we use to describe what happened. When I think about Mary, Joseph and this little baby experience. You know it just hit me this year that here is a family that begins its story with an unexpected pregnancy, talk of divorce, they have major travel difficulties, they appear to be short on cash, otherwise why would they not be able to bribe someone to stay at their place, they seem to have some rushed preparations – does that sound familiar? They get visits from strange people. They are in this story we heard read today, they are running from the law basically. They are refugees and they are having to settle in a town without any of their support network or family or friends. So, this is a story that is really human. This is



the real deal. You couldn't cook a story like this up. This is a human deal, a human condition and that is kind of what means so much to me is that God's love enters into our human condition right where we are at. In fact, sometimes it is even a broken human condition that God seems attracted to the most. So, for me it is a human experience.

You know we had spent a month getting ready for the day we celebrated yesterday. I just invite you to close your eyes now again and remember your day yesterday. It will come around again next year. What can you learn from yesterday that can apply to next year? What would you like to do differently? How could you make it more of the celebration about God's love and less about spending money or getting things? You know we spend a lot of energy running around getting the perfect presents, make our home look perfect for guests, getting the right outfits to look beautiful and handsome. But you know what? Christmas isn't about being perfect at all. It is not about having a perfect family, or making perfect decisions. It is about letting the perfect love of God make you into a family.

Ray sings and strums Away In A Manager.

Let us pray.

Lord we thank you for the Christmas season that is such a blessing to each of us. We've asked that you encircle our families with the grace of your love. That we would be able to turn from the things that bring difficulties and pain to one another. That we would use our families as schools of transformation to become more and more loving. Help us to become the love we want from the other. For those who are alone or hurting – may they rise above the thoughts and the feelings that so weigh do and know that even they cannot be separated from the love of God in Christ. Merry Christmas. Amen.

