

Sermon from
Sunday, 25 December 2011
Christmas Sermon
Christ Church, Millwood, Cunningham Chapel
The Rev. Karin MacPhail

There once was a little boy who had heard about the circus, but had never been to one.¹ He had read stories about the circus—all the animals and acrobats and clowns, and he really, **really** wanted to see one. The boy was walking through town one day and saw a poster in a store window that said that the circus was coming to town. Tickets were five dollars, and this boy didn't have five dollars.

The little boy asked his father for the money. The father said that he wouldn't **give** the boy five dollars, but if he cleaned his room and organized all of his toys, the boy could **earn** the money. So the boy cleaned and tidied and organized and put everything exactly where it should go. He told his father he'd finished the work, and his father paid him five dollars.

When the day of the circus arrived, the boy ran into town and saw people lining the streets waiting for the circus parade. The boy found a good place to stand, and the parade began—elephants and clowns, horses and acrobats, dogs wearing little hats, jumping through hoops—it was just magical, just like he'd read about. The boy was thrilled!

Bringing up the rear of the parade was the ringmaster in his wonderful costume and top hat. He looked exactly like the ring master in his favorite circus book at home. As the ringmaster passed by, the boy ran up to him and proudly handed over his five dollars. "Thanks, Mister!" the boy said. "What a great circus!" And the boy turned around and ran home.

He never even saw the circus—only the parade! The boy missed the main event! He missed the whole point!

Circus parades are great, but they're not the same as the circus.

This time of year, decorations and music really get us in the holiday spirit. Going to see the *Nutcracker* or *A Christmas Carol* or a community Christmas tree lighting brings delight to our eyes and ears. Parties and presents are so much fun. Christmas cards keep us connected to family and friends, and children's television specials and baking cookies fill us with nostalgia.

¹ Circus story adapted from "Don't Miss Christmas" at www.sermons4kids.com.

And then there's Santa Claus... Wonderful, wonderful Santa Claus—joy and generosity, the magic and wonder of the season all wrapped up in one jolly package.

But that's really just the parade, isn't it? Stopping there is like handing your five dollar bill over to the ring master at the end of the parade and completely missing the real show—the actual point of it all.

Even the deeper sentiments of the holiday season—the “Christmas spirit” or “what Christmas is all about,” according to the more well-meaning messages—things like family, gratitude, generosity, self-sacrifice, hope, helping those in need, sharing what we have, appreciating our friends—still fall a bit short.

Being with your family can be wonderful, and it's certainly important, but saying that the real **meaning** of Christmas is being with your family is stopping at the parade. Believing the real meaning of Christmas is the happiness of children or the magic of Santa—well, not quite.

Don't get me wrong—it's fine to enjoy the parade. I love the parade—all of that stuff that goes along with the popular Christmas season. I really do love it, and I look forward to it every year. I hope that some of those traditions give you joy, too. But this year, don't just stop at the parade and then turn around and go home. This year, go further than that.

Go deeper than the traditions and the sentiments, and stand in the stable in the cold with Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the animals. There, bundled up against the chill, is a baby in a manger—God's love incarnate. There beyond the parade is the love of God come down at Christmas.

That is what you really came to see and to know. God is love, and God loves you. God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, and that Son was born at Christmas.

The Son of God, God's love in human flesh, was born in the place where animals were born, because no one would even give his parents a room. The majesty of God in Mary's baby boy—fully God and fully man—would grow up in the messiness of human life with a human family and experiences, so that we would know nothing of pain and sorrow that God had not touched in a human life.

Jesus was born to show the fullness of God's love in a life we could see and talk about and do our best to imitate. Jesus was born that first Christmas to seek and save the lost, to care for the poor and feed the hungry, to heal the sick and welcome the stranger, to bind up the broken hearted, forgive the sinner, and love the unloved and unlovable.

The immense, profound love of God in Jesus Christ would even love and forgive in the face of abuse, and that love would go all the way to the cross. On Easter morning, that

love would raise the Son of God from the dead to show that nothing, not even death, is stronger than the love of God.

Love came down at Christmas, and that love—God’s love in Jesus Christ—changed the world.

When you go past the parade of Christmas, when you go all the way to the deep love without bounds that is incarnate in Jesus Christ, then you will find what you came to see. Go there—to the miracle of God’s love in the Son of God, born in great humility. Go there and find the true meaning of Christmas.

Before you go there, though, know that going will transform your life. The love of God in Jesus Christ will push you, change you and challenge you long after you’ve taken down the decorations and put away the presents and vowed to never eat another cookie. That love will fill you up and overflow, beyond what your heart can hold. That love will spill out in ways you don’t expect and then that love, God’s love, the real meaning of Christmas will again change the world.

May the love of God in Jesus Christ, the love born that first Christmas, call you deeply, all the way to the heart of Christ, the heart of God, who loves you deeply. And may that love so fill you, sustain you and transform you this Christmas that the real meaning of Christmas—God’s love for the world and everyone in it—is not packed away with the decorations and celebrations. May God’s love in Jesus Christ change you, and may that love, through you, change the world.