

I have a confession to make. I may regret this, but, well, to be honest, you all seem like you have a very warm and forgiving spirit emanating from you this morning. It feels like a safe space. So here we go:

Once, when I was a kid, I peeked at a present under the tree. The thing was, I wanted this one gift so bad, the kind of Christmas wanting I think adults just don't understand. You've got to know: I *wanted* an Atari ST. Part computer, part video game system, but entirely the object of my desire. I'd played one at a friend's house and, well, words fail me. Technologies change, but wonder and desire, these things are forever. And so, maybe a week before Christmas, when nobody was looking, I snuck out to the Christmas tree. There it was already, this large, gift-wrapped box with my name on it. I had to know.

I wasn't going to do anything with it. I would never have taken it out or played with it. The guilt was already heavy enough. But I needed to know. I think more than anything I just needed to double-check my parents' work, just to make sure that they'd gotten it right. And so, as quietly, as carefully as I could, I just gingerly peeled back one piece of tape, and another, and another. I unfolded a leaf of paper, and another, until I found what I was looking for: electronics box. Part of a picture, maybe some wires, maybe that's a picture of the joystick? I had seen just enough and at that moment the guilt got the better of me and, as quickly as I could, I put those leafs of paper back where they were, I put those pieces of tape back where they were, and I scurried out of the room. Good news! I was going to get exactly the Christmas I was looking for.

Christmas morning came. And as much as you all might like me to say that I felt some sense of letdown or disappointment from already knowing what I was getting, the truth is, that morning, I was on top of the world: Christmas was going to happen exactly as I wanted it to happen, exactly as I knew that it *needed* to happen, in order for the universe to stay in alignment, in order for righteousness to prevail in the world. And so... when the moment came, I could at last rip off the paper I had doctored so gingerly the week before, and I came face-to-face at last with: wait, *that's* not an Atari. It's not an Atari! This wasn't the deal! We had an understanding, parents, universe, Christmas, whoever you are — we had an understanding! You got me, wait, what is this? An *Apple* computer? What am I supposed to do with that, *homework*?

Twenty years and as many apple products later, I can safely say: sorry, mom and dad. Thanks for the generous and gracious gift.

And so, the eternal day-after-Christmas question: did *you* get what you wanted? When you pulled that paper off, was there this rich ambient glow? It's okay, you can admit it, this is a safe space. Did you get what you wanted? More than that: did you get into the "spirit of the season"? Did you get the Christmas you were looking for? Do you feel like you "did it right" this year? Or are you still looking, asking the question the Magi ask, "Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?"

In our Gospel text today, this is the question on everybody's lips: "Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?" All anybody does here is search for the newborn Jesus. Wise men from the east come to Jerusalem to find him and worship him, and, as soon as the gossip filters up to the throne room, King Herod jumps into the act. His intentions aren't exactly pure, but at a fundamental level everyone is just searching for Jesus. Every mechanism of royal power is deployed in a manhunt for this newborn child: Matthew says that Herod gathers "all the chief priests and scribes," his own private brain trust, the best and the brightest of his generation. In the modern political landscape one might reasonably wonder whether Herod is overextending the reach of the federal government and wasting taxpayer dollars in this quest, but Herod doesn't have to read his own polling numbers. He can be just exactly this single-minded, every ounce of his power engaged in the search for a single child.

Finally, a scribe finds in the scroll of the prophet Micah this evasive hint that perhaps Herod should look in the city of Bethlehem. And here we have to give some credit: they're on the right path, they've found something real to go on. And so Herod enlists the wise men to go to Bethlehem and scour the city for this child. "Search diligently" for him, in every home, throughout the marketplace, in every field. Even when they think they know where to look, this is harder than it first appears. Scour the land and find this child. Find him.

Is this not what we do? We spend Advent saying "Prepare the way of the Lord" but I think something is lost in translation here: instead of preparing our hearts for some new thing we are off trying to find Christmas for ourselves. This year I bought my first Christmas present in August. August! Martha Stewart says you don't have to start *too* early; she waits until at least March before beginning to think about the next year's shopping. Decorations pop up in stores before Halloween is over, and by December First I've already long decided that I'm behind the curve, losing a race to *find* my own Christmas spirit before all of the store windows switch to Valentine's Day. If December 20<sup>th</sup> rolls around and I still don't feel like I'm adequately full up on Christmas cheer, I turn to my old favorite, the Christmas special of all Christmas specials, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. But even he confesses "I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming, but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel." Surely if there is a lamenting

prophet of our age it is Charlie Brown. And so I ask you again: do you feel like you did it right this year? Did you find that Christmas spirit? Do you feel the way you're supposed to feel?

Personally, I blame that other televised Christmas icon, the Grinch –not for trying to steal Christmas, but for even suggesting that such a thing is possible – and in his wake, how often have we proclaimed that Christmas was in need of saving? A quick headline search this week proclaims the following things to have saved Christmas: a dog, a toy, a countess, Mariah Carey's mother, an Irish hockey team, the entire discipline of economics, and a sports memorabilia collector from Haddonfield. According to the *Inquirer*, he purchased an expensive baseball card at auction from the School Sisters of Notre Dame after a previously committed bidder pulled out at the last second. The collector said he "didn't want to let them go without their Christmas gift." I'm not here to criticize the charitable impulse of the season. I'm just here to wonder at the headline, to wonder whether Christmas itself was ever in jeopardy, whether Christmas needed to be saved.

Nor am I talking about headlines that refer to the politics of saying "Happy Holidays" or the municipal hand-wringing over massive neon-lit crèche sets, as if the birth of the Messiah is somehow undersold in the absence of a good fluorescent pink. What I'm talking about is this particular and seemingly-intractable idea that each individual Christmas is somehow in peril. It may sound bizarre to put it that way but I think this is precisely what we do: we put ourselves in a race between the inevitability of the calendar and our own capacity to pull it off, to get that Christmas spirit just right, to get ourselves into that Christmas-y state of mind, to find whatever it will be that will save Christmas this year. Is this what really what we believe?

The stakes seem immeasurably high. Get it right: the perfect presents, the perfect meals, the perfect decorations, the perfect schedule, the perfect spirit. Get yourselves in that perfect place. It won't feel like Christmas unless we get it right – this is what we say. It won't feel like Christmas without Charlie Brown, or *A Christmas Carol*, or *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* – the original, in black & white, please. We've got to save Christmas or it won't feel right at all. It won't feel like Christmas if we don't have your mom's rib roast. It won't feel like Christmas if we're not all in our usual places. Or maybe it just didn't feel like Christmas this year. Not with a father in the hospital. Not with a sister in Afghanistan. Not without everybody here. Maybe it hasn't felt like Christmas for a long time. Maybe Christmas is entirely under the shadow of a loved one taken too soon.

But there is more to our story: even the wise men never find Jesus. You think you know differently – but listen carefully: "There, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was." This is what I want you to hear: *they* never discover his hiding place; *they* never unearth his secret bunker. A *star* leads them. They never *do anything* that makes Jesus show up. Of course they do enter into his presence, but not through their own effort. They can't come to him because he comes to them, in this star over the horizon, in a star that leads them to the place where the child is waiting. There's no contingency here, there's no contest. They don't get there by looking the hardest or by having the biggest search party; they certainly don't get there by having perfectly-behaved camels or seasonally-appropriate robes. It's not what they do. It's what God does.

And in what God does in that manger there is no doubt or equivocation, no room for suspicion or renegotiation. This is the child born King of the Jews; his fate sealed before he takes his first breath. This is the child of whom Isaiah writes: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, that there shall be endless peace upon His kingdom. This is the child through whom light comes to a people walking in deepest darkness. So freshly come into the world, and yet bearing not just expectations, but certainties, about what is to come. This is what will be, whether or not the wise men arrive, whether or not the shepherds behave themselves, whether or not the nation rejoices, whether or not the nations fall. This is the child born to save us.

It's not what we do. It's what God does. Wherever you have come from and however you feel this day, however well-seasoned your roast, however well-chosen your presents, however well-behaved your relatives; God has sent His Son into the world, not because of who you are or what you have done but because of who God is and because of what God is doing. This is the good news of Christmas: that we don't have to go looking, and we don't have to get it right, that we don't have to get into that perfect Christmas spirit. We cannot ourselves find Christmas, but Christmas is ours nonetheless, and we don't have to save Christmas, because the story of Christmas is God saving us.

And so, no matter what your path has been, this Christmas season I have good news. No matter if you have come this morning still wandering through the afterglow of a "perfect" Christmas day; no matter if you are still wandering through the aftermath of a year that cannot end too soon; no matter for those who share under the tree in the material bounties of the age; no matter for those who are sleeping under trees, waiting for such bounties to reach their lips; no matter if you have found in this Christmas every inflection of your heart's desire; no matter if your every search feels infected with heartache; no matter if you found the Christmas you thought you needed; no matter if you are still looking for the Christmas you were wanting; no matter if you just want it all to go away; no matter what Christmas sounded like; no matter what Christmas looked like; no matter what Christmas felt like for you. No matter what, I have good news. A child has been born for us, for you, in Bethlehem, in Judea, the one upon whose shoulders will be our every concern, the free and unconditional gift of God, a savior. Amen.