

**December 24, 2011, St. Davids**

**Christmas Eve**

**Isaiah 9:2-7, Psalm 96, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-14**

**God grant us the serenity to accept the things we can not change, the courage to change the things we can and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Amen.**

Merry Christmas! Welcome to St Davids on one of two of the most sacred and incredibly beautiful times in the church year, the celebration of Christmas. Thank you for making the effort to celebrate Christmas by including worship of God and for choosing to attend St Davids this evening. For any of you who might be looking for a faith community, we would welcome you here.

I love the words of the third verse of "Away in a Manger" that we sang right before the children did a fabulous job of sharing the nativity story with us. The third verse of "Away in a Manger" captures so much of what our faith can be as well as what Christmas is about. Listen to them again. Be near me Lord Jesus,

I ask thee to stay.  
Close by me forever  
And love me I pray  
Bless all the dear children  
In thy tender care  
And fit us for heaven  
To live with thee there.

After weeks of decorating, cleaning, food preparation, parties, wrapping fits, and Christmas cards, we are finally there.....it's Christmas Eve, the annual celebration of the birth of the Christ child in a stable in Bethlehem so long ago. Scripture tells us in the Gospel of John "That God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son. So that all who believe in him should not perish but have ever-lasting life." The Christmas mystery is not just about a baby and a manger. It is about God becoming human, not so that he might be with us, but so that we might be with him. Christmas is about, to use a theological term "incarnation," God becoming one of us. And the seeds of the reason for that incarnation are in the word "Family".

For those of us lucky enough to have a family, Christmas is about

family. Maybe that group of people is not the traditional parents, grandparents, children and various aunts and uncles, but his, hers and ours. Or maybe our family is group of people who are not biologically related to us, but who provide that sense of warmth, joy, security, and love that is part of the family experience. F A M I L Y “FAMILY” The letters of FAMILY might stand for “Forget about me, I love you.” For isn’t that what the best of family experiences is about? Forget about me...I love you.

In my family of origin, despite normal family stuff of hurt feelings, anger, impatience, and injured egos, Christmas was a special time of year. My paternal grandmother came from Alsace/Lorraine which was part of France or Germany depending on the year. She believed in not setting up the Christmas tree until after we had gone to bed on Christmas Eve. As we were not wealthy, it also meant that we usually got a “Charlie Brown” tree. For by December 24<sup>th</sup>, most of the trees were already gone. Regardless, there was something incredibly wonderful about going to bed right after early church on Christmas Eve with no signs of Christmas in the house and waking up Christmas morning to a fully decorated tree and stockings. At Christmas and at so many other times and ways, my family taught me to live the family anagram of “Forget About Me, I Love You.”

Isn't that what God teaches us in the nativity story of Mary, Joseph, and the baby as well? God demonstrates in bringing Jesus into the world. "Forget about me, I love you." It is definitely a family story. We certainly find that family focus in Mary, a betrothed yet unwed girl of probably about age 13. To have a baby in those days and in that culture without marriage meant that Mary could have legally been stoned to death or cast out on the street in shame. Yet Mary accepts the words of the Angel Gabriel and despite great personal risk and sacrifice, she lives out her belief in God and family. In her willingness to bear the Christ Child, she says, "Forget about me, I love you" to Jesus and to the world in need of a Savior.

And the other side of the couple, Joseph, is tempted to put Mary aside when he discovers that she is expecting a child that he knows is not his. Yet Joseph as well, after a dream sent from God, lives out his belief in God and family. By his acceptance of Mary and Jesus he says to the world in need of a Savior, "Forget about me, I love you."

Christmas is about family, our ability to forget about ourselves and proclaim love to the world. It is about God seeking us through the birth of a baby into a sin-wracked, love-starved, God-killing world. The greatness of Christmas lies not so much in our finding as in God's giving. Consider

this story entitled “The White Envelope.”

It’s just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through branches of our tree for the past 10 years or so.

It all began because my husband Mike hated Christmas—oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it: overspending; the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry and the dusting powder for Grandma. Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties and so forth. I reached for something special just for Mike. The inspiration came in an unusual way.

Our son Kevin, who was 12 that year, was wrestling at the junior level at the school he attended; and shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church, mostly black team members. These youngsters presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler’s ears.

It was a luxury the ragtag team obviously could not afford. Well, we

ended up walloping them in every weight class. Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly, "I wish just one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them." Mike loved kids—all kids— he knew them, having coached little league football, baseball and soccer. That's when the idea for his present came.

That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed the envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years. For each Christmas, I followed the tradition—one year sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a family whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas.

The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents.

As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure. The story doesn't end there. You see, we lost Mike last year to cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by three more.

Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition has grown and someday will expand even further with our grandchildren standing around the tree with wide-eyed anticipation watching as their fathers take down the envelope.

So this Christmas as we celebrate the birth of the Christ Child in the stable in Bethlehem may we think about family. And may we truthfully say to each other, "Forget about me, I love you."

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**