

## “Almost...?” (Luke 2:1-20) Christmas Day, December 25, 2009

This morning, I would like to talk about a Christmas I almost missed.

Some of you may remember my close call in 2006. My cousin Heinz in Germany had lost his wife earlier in the year, and I knew that holiday season would be tough for him and his daughters, so I arranged to take some continuing education at the nearby University of Bremen and spent most of December with them. The plan was to come home on December 21. Unfortunately, the weather didn't cooperate. In Germany, it was fine. Here at home it was fine. Denver was a different story. So my flight was canceled. What to do? My cousins invited me stay in Germany for the holidays, but that would not have gone over too big here at home. Not with all the services. The pastor simply could not miss Christmas! So doing some fast research, the ticket agent found that the next day there was one seat left on a direct flight to Portland. I took it! But then, how would I get from Portland to the Tri-Cities? This time, Debbie Stankovich did some quick research and found out that Ryan and Stephanie Wisness were coming here – from Portland – the same day. So they picked me up; late that night I was home. Talk about a close call!

Yes, that was one Christmas I almost missed. But actually, there's another one I came a lot closer to missing, and it's this one – this Christmas. That's the one I want to talk about. I wish I could say I almost missed it because of logistical problems, but that wasn't the case. I've spent the whole season right here. Truth be told, the main problem has been here [*head*]. Mind you, I have taken time each day for devotions. My Advent candles are burnt down to mere stumps. But with all the busyness, all the distractions, all the – well, you know what I mean! – I just wasn't mentally prepared. Not to celebrate. Not to rejoice in the good news, **“To you...is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”** So *this* is the Christmas I almost missed.

And maybe you can identify. Every Christmas, doesn't it feel like there are more and more things we have to do, more and more demands on our time? Even if we cut back, there are cards to write, cookies to bake, presents to buy, programs to attend, parties...the list goes on and on. Plus, if you have little kids at home, that cuts preparation time. They're wired this time of year! And if there is something deeper you're struggling with – missing a loved one, medical problems, financial difficulties, family strife – that makes it even tougher to prepare. So maybe you can identify. Even sitting here in church this morning, maybe you, too, know how it feels to almost miss Christmas.

Well, if that is the case, let me tell you what I told myself: *“Almost”* doesn't count! *“Almost”* means there is still time! Like right now! And frankly, what better time could there be than right now to claim Christmas for ourselves, claim its meaning and its promises, so we don't almost miss the chance to rejoice in the good news that **“to you is born a Savior...who is Christ the Lord!**

To do this, we may need to set aside some expectations about what Christmas should be like. And that's okay! Who's to say what Christmas should be like? Specifically, who's to say it has to be all cheery, cozy, and calm? Not the Bible. Not God. Far from it! I mean, think what the first Christmas was like! I'm sure we'd all agree that it was the best Christmas ever, but was it cheery? No. Was it cozy? No. Was it calm? Definitely not! Not for Mary, set to give birth to her son any moment! Not for Joseph, searching desperately for some place to spend the night. And when he did find a place, what did it turn out to be? Not exactly the Bethlehem Hilton! *Think* what the first Christmas was like! There were no lights, no cookies, no relatives, no tree. There weren't even any gifts – remember, the wisemen didn't show up until much later! Really, there was nothing. That first Christmas, there was nothing we typically expect. Nothing...except the Christ Child.

But He was enough, wasn't He? That little baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger – He was more than enough. He was the ultimate gift. He was the perfect light. He was the one who made Christmas “Christmas!” Our Savior, Jesus Christ. As for all the other stuff? Expendable. And it still is today. Trappings. Trimmings. Presents. Holiday spirit. Various and sundry expectations. Expendable. For Christmas to be “Christmas,” all we really need is Christ – His presence; His promises. So to make sure we don't almost miss “Christmas,” we need to focus on Christ – His presence; His promises.

And can't we do that right now?

Let's take just a moment to still our minds, still our thoughts. And first, let's just focus on **Christ's presence**. He is here. As truly as He was present in that lowly manger centuries ago, Christ is present right here, right now. There is no need to almost miss Him. No matter what our circumstances, He is “Emmanuel,” God-with-us. In fact, through the ages, this assurance has sustained countless Christians in the most difficult circumstances. And we can experience the same assurance today – any time, any place.

For instance, I think of a Christmas quite some time ago that I spent at the hospital with a church member named Doreen. She was a young mother with three children. After months of suffering what she thought were migraines, the doctors discovered that she had a tangle of blood vessels on her brain. Surgery was so urgent that it was scheduled for Christmas afternoon at a hospital 30 miles from home. For some reason, her husband chose not to accompany her. No other family or friends were with her, either. When I saw Doreen before the surgery, she was all alone. Naturally I felt tremendous empathy. To face such a dangerous operation, and face it without loved ones by her side, and to miss out on Christmas on top of it – talk about tough!

But you know what? She didn't miss out on Christmas. Not in the truest sense. She didn't even almost miss out on Christmas. As I prayed with her, I spoke of

Christ as Emmanuel, God-with-us. And afterward, she picked up on that. Yes, she would have preferred not to spend Christmas in the hospital, but she said, “If I have to have this surgery, what better day to assure me that the Lord cares about me and will be with me all the way?” She knew in her heart of hearts that Christ wasn’t just Emmanuel in a stable way back when. There in that hospital room He was her Emmanuel. In the operating room He would be her Emmanuel, and as she recovered, He would be her Emmanuel, too. She said, “Come what may, I know the Lord is with me. And that’s enough to go on.”

Which it was. Which it certainly was. But in my telling of her story, perhaps you noticed something. Even as Doreen counted on Christ’s presence, she also counted on His promises. Understandably. They kind of go together, don’t they? I’m not sure one even can separate them. So in this moment of stillness, as we focus on the Lord’s presence, let’s also remind ourselves of **His promises**.

- *"Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."*
- *"Be of good cheer! Your sins are forgiven you."*
- *"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you."*
- *"My grace will be sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness."*
- *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*
- *"Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."*
- *"Because I live, you will live also."*

Precious, aren’t they, these promises of the Lord? Aside from the gift of Himself, there are no greater gifts we could ask for. Comfort, peace, forgiveness, strength, guidance, eternal life. Nothing in Santa’s bag comes close to these! And the wonderful thing about them is that these promises are always here for us. Any time, any place, including right now. So whether or not we’ve checked off everything on our Christmas to-do list, whether or not we feel mentally prepared, we don’t have to miss out. Not even almost. These promises are here for us to claim, to enjoy. And *they* are the true gifts of Christmas.

So you see what I mean. Even if we came to church feeling like we almost missed Christmas, “almost” doesn’t count. This is Christmas Day. We have all the essentials. And what counts is making the most of this time right now – which we will. In just a moment, we will Baptize little Theo – sealing to him the presence and the promises of his “**Savior, who is Christ the Lord.**” A moment later, we will gather at the altar – tasting the presence and the promises of our “**Savior, who is Christ the Lord.**” And when we go home? We’ll take with us all we need to enjoy a rich, meaningful Christmas! We’ll take it home with us right here [*heart*]. For with or without the trappings, we’ll take Christ’s presence with us. With or with the trimmings, we’ll take His promises with us. We will take home the assurance, “**To you is born...a Savior who is Christ the Lord.**” And having that, there is no way we can miss Christmas! Not even almost!