

“Forever Christmas” *Advent 2022 –Christmas Eve*

Isaiah 9:2,6-7 and Luke 2:1-20

[title] Good evening, friends. What a special night to be together. I want to start by thanking everyone serving tonight. I’m talking about our musicians, our ushers, our acolytes, our coffee hour hosts, audio/video crew, our office manager Vicki, and Rev. Jeff. And there’s more: first responders, plow truck drivers, city, county and state employees who work tirelessly to keep us safe and the roads clear. We certainly need them tonight! I also want to thank those who are tuning in on YouTube to worship with us tonight. That includes the residents of the Bluffs who will be watching this in December 2023!

I’m curious. How many of you would honestly say Christmas is your favorite holiday? What do you love most about Christmas? (*reunions, food, presents, music, church.*)

Here’s a harder question: If it were possible, would you want Christmas to last forever? It would be great to have the feeling of Christmas year-round, but maybe not so much the calories. How many children want winter break to last forever? (*sing*) “And Mom and Dad can hardly wait for school to start again.”

Still, it’s intriguing to imagine what Christmas would look like if it lasted forever. For one thing, we would never have to wait for Christmas again, because it would always be here!

[chorus] I got a small taste of a “Forever Christmas” when my family went to hear Handel's Messiah in Toronto. I was 15 years old at the time, and I felt like the song would go on forever. I actually feel asleep until an elderly lady sitting next to me elbowed me in the ribs right before everyone stood up for the Hallelujah chorus. That was a bit embarrassing.

[shopping mall] There are other ways a Forever Christmas might not be so great. If we had to shop for decorations, food and presents every day, we’d be in trouble quickly. We’d probably all be in debt, overweight, and depressed. And entertaining all those guests in our homes? Well, they say relatives are like leftovers...after a week or so, they start to smell funny.

Some movies feature this terrible “forever” curse. In Groundhog’s Day, Bill Murray’s character gets trapped in a world where it’s always February 2nd, and it doesn’t go so well. In The Chronicles of Narnia, the White Witch keeps the land under her spell where it’s always winter and never Christmas. Without variety and the changing of season, our lives would become stale.

[nativity] Here’s my point: The real idea of a “Forever Christmas” is not that every day would be December 25th. Rather, it’s about sustaining the feelings, emotions and practices that make this holiday special. It’s about remembering God’s Son, Jesus, entering our world and taking up residence with us, and in turn, us living with Him.

[bible verses] If you are listening closely to the scriptures, the keys to having a Forever Christmas are there. Take Luke 2:19, “Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” Mary’s first Christmas did not last forever. Her boy, Jesus, grew up. But because Mary took time and reflected on the meaning of it all, we know her story. She shared her memories with others.

There is another, older clue, in the verses we read with the Advent Candles. They are also the lines from Handel’s Messiah, found in Isaiah 9:6-7 - He will be called “Everlasting Father. Jesus is eternal. Isaiah says, his government and peace will have no end, and his reign will be established forever.

The implication is both clear and simple. If Jesus is the center of our worship, then all the good things about Christmas are, in fact, eternal.

[winter sky] The annual holiday of Christmas itself is a fairly recent invention, historically speaking. The “Christ Mass” originally was created by the early church to celebrate Christ’s birth around the time of the winter solstice. Church leaders wanted people to worship the Creator of the sun, moon, stars and seasons, rather those things themselves. At Christmas, we recognize Jesus is the Holy Son of the Living God, God incarnate, the eternal Word made flesh, as John chapter 1 says.

If we are honest, we long for Christmas because we long for peace on Earth. We long for hope, for justice, for everlasting life. For an end of war and strife, in the world, and in our own lives and relationships.

Friends, Forever Christmas is actually possible, and you don’t even have to leave the Christmas tree up all year. Forever Christmas starts with an invitation to

receive the best gift the world has ever known, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. It is astounding that Jesus chose to give up all the glory of heaven to come and live among us. **[verse]** The Apostle Paul describes it in

Philippians 2:6-8, “Christ Jesus..., being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!”

That's what Christmas means: someone loves you enough to die for you! In the midst of the crazy shopping for deals, preparing the house, cooking for all of the guests, trying to keep your cool with your family, there's one thing that stands out above all: Christmas is still the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. So let every heart prepare him room, including yours and mine.

[presents] Sometimes we try to quench that thirst for eternity, that hole in our hearts, by immersing ourselves in our favorite traditions. We sing “Over the River and through the Woods to Grandmother's House we go.” And when families share traditions, it gives the illusion that our little Christmas parties will last forever. But we know they don't. Nor should they.

[manger and cross] At some point, Christmas needs to grow up into Easter. The wood in the manger might come from the same forest as the wood for the cross. We need the shepherds and the angels, and we all need the witness of the women at the tomb who saw the resurrection.

Friends, I give you this simple invitation tonight to receive the Gospel. Make this Christmas a night to remember. Don't let it pass you by. Enjoy the traditions that keep us coming back again and again, but as you do, actually listen to the lyrics. “Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her King. Let every heart prepare him room.” “O Holy Child of Bethlehem, be born in us today.”

[people praying at the cross] The purpose of Grace United Methodist Church is to invite all people to develop a loving, saving relationship with Jesus Christ, for the glory of God. Our goal is to grow into mature Christians. There is no such thing as an orphan Christian or a casual Christian. After all, God doesn't

just casually love us. God sent His Son, born into a cold, dark world, to die for us, to save us. Tonight, you, too, can receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

God doesn't force anyone to receive this gift. But the scriptures say, "Today is the day of salvation." (2 Corinthians 6:2)

[man looking into sky] Friends, God created you. God loves you. God sees whatever you are going through, the depth of your pain, sorrow, sin and despair, and God craves your healing so much, He would die for you.

Christmas is so much more than a good story – Jesus is alive. Jesus is very, very real. Through the Holy Spirit, right here, right now, you can experience Jesus in your life, simply by saying, "Lord, I love you. I admit my brokenness to you, and I crave your healing. Revive my spirit. Teach me to follow you all of my life." When you believe that with all that you are, you are justified before God Almighty, and your life will never be the same again.

[title] Forever Christmas is a good thing. Salvation can happen for anyone here tonight, in-person and online, for our friends, neighbors and family, too, as we share this invitation with them.

Let Christ be born in your hearts tonight, my friends. Amen.

(offering, Silent Night, Benediction)

May the everlasting love of God enfold you in blessing,
May the Spirit's light shine before you,
And may the embrace of the Holy Child
Keep you this night and always. Amen.

Memory Verse:

John 1:14 (NIV) "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us..."

Questions for Reflection:

1. If you could, would you celebrate Christmas every day forever? What would that look like? What traditions would you keep or throw out?
2. Why would God send his son to earth in the form of a frail, human baby? Why not send Jesus as a giant, warrior, or other famous and powerful being?
3. What part of the Christmas story is your favorite? Why?

4. Will you make room in your heart and your life for Jesus to be your Messiah? Will you learn to grow in your faith? Have you shared this decision with anyone?