

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2014

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, MD

Readings: Isaiah 9: 2-7, Luke 2: 1-20

**“Please Pass the Maple Syrup:”
a sermon by Linda Fabian Pepe (2011)
as posted on www.theologicalstew.com
and adapted by Linda M Alessandri**

Grace and peace to you from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

I've never watched the movie "Elf" but I've heard about one particular scene. The story is about a baby who ends up at the North Pole and is raised by elves. When "Buddy" is an adult he goes back to New York to find his real family. His newly found family reluctantly take him in. The ensuing culture clashes are huge. For example, Buddy still dresses like a North Pole elf. When the family sits down for their first dinner together, "Mom" served spaghetti. As they begin to eat, Buddy asks, "Please pass the maple syrup." "It's spaghetti..." she reminds him. Buddy doesn't miss a beat, but says - "Oh... I think I have some right here!" And he reaches up into the sleeve of his coat, pulls out a little bottle of maple syrup, and proceeds to pour it all over the top of his spaghetti.

You see, Buddy does things differently than 'the rest of us.' Although he is immersed in a different culture, he brings the foundation of what he knows with him... he brings the joy, love, and hope of Christmas that he learned from the elves of the North Pole into this strange new world. And, like that maple syrup, he keeps pulling Christmas joy, love and hope out of his sleeve, without an ounce of fear or embarrassment, and he pours it out on everything, letting it flow all over the place – even though everyone around him thinks he's out of his mind!

Each year most of us talk at some time or another about "doing Christmas differently." We wonder if we shouldn't make Christmas less crazed, about more than shopping and decorating and doing - more about making space for the light of Christ to shine into and through our lives

Perhaps you've tried to do that, too. Maybe you resolved to "put Christ back in Christmas"... to bring the foundation of what you know into this strange culture of ours. Perhaps you even started planning with the best of intentions- "this year I'm going to do it - I'm not going to succumb to commercialism! I refuse to be exhausted and stressed out and in debt. I'm going to make presents for people or give some of those alternative gifts I've heard about Yeah... forget the Xbox! Let my teenage nieces and nephews find some joy in knowing that a family in Kenya got a goat in their name"

You have your plan and you feel good about it. "But then the 'season' hits - and our resolve to do things differently... well... lets just say we have traditions that don't quite mesh with our alternative Christmas plan. When the cultures clash we think, "Wait a minute... I can still put lights on my house, can't I? And how many presents are too many presents for the kids! gaming system won't hurt... And I have those parties - people expect me to be there... and I have to pick up something for the people in my office- they all exchange gifts... and I need to stop off and get more wrapping paper and some of those little meatballs everyone likes so much... and how am I going to find time to do all that and the baking when there's 75,000 extra activities at church, the kids' school and those traditions we love like the Maryland Symphony's Christmas concert and visiting the Charlie Brown Christmas Trees in the Barn and the Hagerstown Choral Arts concert and seeing the lights at City Park and the luminaries at Antietam? "

And sometimes by the time we get to Christmas Eve, it feels like our whole plan to keep Christ in Christmas failed. But it doesn't have to. No matter how many lights you have on your house or how many cookies you've baked or how stressed you feel ... you haven't missed it - and even if you didn't know it... you have a little bottle of God's maple syrup up your sleeve.

The first Christmas happened much like this one. Amidst the stresses and busyness of real life, the emperor orders a census and everyone had to drop what they're doing and

make a trip to their hometown to be registered. Now imagine for a second what that must have been like. This is how Pastor Linda Pepe imagines it:

“It’s the equivalent of all of your extended family traveling to your little house- your sisters and brothers who moved to California or Maine after college who now have three or four kids each - your parents if they are still alive and certainly their remaining siblings and their families, including the cousin you haven’t spoken to since the day he stole your girlfriend in 7th grade, or the obnoxious uncle who always wanted you to pull his finger at family get-together’s... they are all coming to stay with YOU!

Joseph is among those relatives - and he shows up at your door with his pregnant fiance and, as no small aside, happens to be in labor... great! And on top of that all the guest rooms — the word we translate as “inn” in Luke’s story — is already full. Uncle Russ & Aunt Martha came in earlier this afternoon from Scranton and she has a bad back and he has some type of gastric disorder and they need the bed. So you tell Joseph and his about to give birth fiance, Mary, they can sleep in the living room on the pull out couch. It’s the best you can do!

The living room back then, was a multipurpose room - the family would hang out there during the day, but at night, it would be cleared out and the animals brought in for warmth and shelter. The next morning, the animals would go back outside - the room would be swept and cleaned out and family was back in business.

So the dog-tired couple, desperate for rest, put up with the animals and the hair and the smells, not to mention that bar poking them in the back all night long. And sure enough, Mary delivers her baby... and she and Joseph... the ones chosen to raise God’s son, wrapped their newborn in bands of cloth and tuck him in as cozy as possible in a feeding trough. God’s beautiful new miracle in a manger. And the exhausted family drifts off to sleep.

But before long, there's this persistent knocking. Joseph, drags himself up and opens the door only to find a bunch of filthy, even worse smelling than the animals, shepherds, on the stoop. He tries to place their faces as maybe distant relatives- every family has their share of "shepherds"- but they tell him they have seen angels and they are here to worship the baby! And Joseph, who has had a visit from an angel himself -- and has learned to go with the flow of God, --- lets them in!

And by now the whole house is awake, and Aunt Martha puts on a pot of coffee and starts stuffing the turkey and Uncle Russ turns on some music, and the kids break into the cookie tins and the leftover cheese n crackers and it's a party! And in the middle of the room, in the middle of the ruckus-in his makeshift cradle, the Christ Child sleeps. Folks go by every now and then to 'ooh' and 'ahhh'... and to kiss Mary on the cheek or grab a cigar from Joseph and perhaps even whisper a prayer of thanks to God for this miracle that is barely hours old. Some may recognize that the Savior of the World is has just been born in their midst but most have no clue. Life continues. The gathering continues. The celebrations continues. The world as they know it continues.

But later that afternoon, when the football game is on and everyone is munching on nachos, Joseph will look knowingly at Mary, and he'll take a little bottle of maple syrup out of his sleeve... and he'll pour it on top of his cheesy salsa... and he and Mary will share their first Christmas meal.

You see this is why you haven't failed at keeping Christ in Christmas. Because Christ IS Christmas. Regardless of whether we show up at the door in the middle of the night after a divine encounter with a host of angels, or shuffle through the whole experience more concerned about coffee and gastric distress, Christmas will always be

about Christ. We can commercialize it or Santa-ize it, or bake through it or shop through it. Still we can't TAKE Christ out of Christmas

And do you know why? Because Christ can't take YOU out of Christmas. You are the reason there IS a Christmas. You're the reason that Jesus was sent here in the first place ----because of God's great love for you — because of God's love for US! "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son!" Because God loves, Jesus came to earth- bringing with him the foundations of God's own love, joy and hope, which God wants us to know and have.

Truly I tell you, God loves you so very much that tonight, and tomorrow and every single day that you are willing, (and even when you're not willing...) when you're stuffing turkeys and singing carols, or buying goats for families in Kenya, or just watching the game - a nail pierced hand is reaching up into the inside of a sleeve, and pulling out a little bottle of maple syrup- and is pouring its contents out on everything- and letting it flow all over the place... for us to notice, for us to taste, for us to grow a fondness for so we will fill up our own bottle to put up our own sleeves, ready to pour out the love, joy and hope of Christmas at the right and strangest times. Merry Christmas. Keep passing the maple syrup. Amen.