

**Christmas 2011  
Luke 2: 1-14  
December 24, 2011**

**Whew! We made it! Everyone can relax and take a deep breath. Christmas is here at last. It is finally, really and truly here.**

**I hope you believe that this is true. That Christmas is here. But I know that some of you adults still have a whole bunch of things to get done tonight before you sleep ... presents still to wrap, food to get started for tomorrow's brunch or big family dinner. You might be feeling a little agitated: *No, I'm not done yet. It can't be Christmas yet.* And the children who are here like to argue with me when I wish them a Merry Christmas on their way out the door. "It's not Christmas yet," they insist. "Not until we wake up and open our presents. Christmas comes TOMORROW."**

**But look! He's here. Baby Jesus is here, right there in this beautiful nativity scene. And if we are here in church, and we are singing Christmas carols, and Baby Jesus is in the manger ... well, let me tell you, Christmas has come at last. It's finally, really and truly here.**

**Here's how we know. Here's your sign. Just like the angels told the shepherds, this is the sign to you. Here's the child, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in the manger. And that's how you know – at All Saints Episcopal Church, anyway, on this most holy night – that Christmas has come at last. When the Christ Child is laid in the manger.**

**Earlier this month, a friend told me about an issue that arose when they were unpacking their nativity scene. He and his wife have a son who is almost three and just really beginning to figure this whole Christmas business out. And as they slowly unpacked the crèche, little Kyle was fascinated by the beautiful figures -- the cow, the donkey, the angel, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the sheep.**

**Then his parents made the mistake of bringing out Baby Jesus. Which is too bad, because they share this same tradition, of leaving the manger empty all through December, and only putting the Christ Child into the nativity scene on Christmas.**

**Kyle, not quite three years old, was not aware of this family tradition.**

**“I want Baby Jesus,” Kyle said. And he stretched his little starfish hand out for the baby.**

**“No, no,” his father said. “Baby Jesus is going to go into a safe place until Christmas comes. Then we’ll take him out and put him in the manger, and it will be Christmas.”**

**“But I WANT Baby Jesus,” Kyle insisted.**

**“No, Kyle. Baby Jesus doesn’t get to go in the manger until Christmas. That’s how we know Christmas has finally come. When you wake up and you see Baby Jesus in the manger, you will know that it is Christmas.” And he put the Baby Jesus back into the box.**

**Well, you know what happened. Kyle let loose, as only a toddler denied can let loose. “I want my BABY JESUS and I WANT BABY JESUS NOW!” And he burst into tears.**

**There’s a longing this time of year. There’s a hunger. We want. We want so much. We want the big things ... peace on earth, good will towards people. We want the impossible things ... for our families to get along, for one, just one, Christmas without drama or hurt feelings or bad behavior. We want the wonderful things ... love, companionship, security, big hugs and boisterous laughter. We want to hear good news. We want to feel the joy. We want to see the light.**

**And what we get told and taught this time of year is that the longing can be filled. That it ought to be filled. That we deserve to have it filled. Filled like the stockings get filled, packed to overflowing with silly stuff. That we can be filled with a kiss from Kay Jewelers or a Mercedes that Santa has crafted in his factory. That we can be filled with food and drink, flavored coffee and seasonal beer, cookies and turkey and candy and pie. That we can be filled if our schedules are filled. If our days and nights are stuffed with shopping trips and holiday concerts and office parties, all squeezed in around the very real work of getting the grades turned in, or the year-end financials in order, or the demands of caring for an elderly parent, a sick spouse, or a young child.**

**In one sense, we are already full – too full. Full to the brim with Christmas and all its trappings, all its demands, all its delights, delights that we are really trying to enjoy, when we can get a minute to breathe and take it all in. But we are still longing. Still hungry. Still wishing. Still hoping. And what is that all about, really? That desire, that yearning? What’s it for? Why is it still there, after all we have done, after all we have eaten and drunk and crammed into the last few weeks? What is it we want, really?**

**What we want, even if we don’t realize it, is Baby Jesus. Just like that little boy, with his face all red and wet with tears, his pudgy fingers reaching, reaching for the figure, we want Baby Jesus, and we want him now. It is Christ we hunger for, yearn for, long for.**

**Trouble is, most of the time, we don’t realize that it’s God we desire. We think this yearning has something to do with us, that we can fill our emptiness through our own endeavors, if we try hard enough, get ahead, cram enough life and money and stuff and adventures into that yearning place. But you know, it doesn’t matter how much life and money and stuff and adventures we have. This particular longing cannot be filled by anything we do or eat or buy or give.**

**It can only be filled by God.**

**Each of us is here tonight with a manger-shaped hole in our hearts. And many of us here tonight don’t realize it. Some of us are still wandering around in the Bethlehem of our lives, knocking on the door of yet another inn, chasing down another “no vacancy” sign, one after the other, looking for a place to rest, for shelter from the dark, for a safe place where something amazing can be born.**

**And all the time, what we are seeking is here, in this out-of-the-way corner, this stable, this manger. It’s why we keep coming back to this story, over and over again. There is something in this Nativity story that speaks to us. It calls to us. It draws us into its crazy logic and gives us hope. Something deep within us responds to its promise and leaps to life with the thought that it might be true – really true -- that God loves us, and wants to be with us – so much, that God came to us as a fellow human being, as a tiny baby, to change our world forever.**

**The greatest philosophers and saints have known this. C.S. Lewis wrote that sweetest thing in all his life was the longing, to find the place where all the beauty came from. Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher, described the “infinite abyss” that we attempt vainly to fill with everything around us, when all the time “it can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.” St. Augustine of Hippo wrote, “Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.”**

**All fine words, beautiful words. But too often we can let the beauty of these grown-up reflections and phrases wash over us like a wave that passes, leaving no mark. This longing is REAL. This hunger wants filling. Our hearts yearn for the infinite, the compassionate, the incarnate God. That is what we want for Christmas this year ... really.**

**So I wonder if on this Christmas Eve -- a night when we remember how God came to us as a child – I wonder if perhaps tonight, we might let the child within ourselves speak. Let that child touch the longing deep within, let that child proclaim the honest truth ... that there is a manger-shaped emptiness within each of our hearts. That child, that very real and honest child who still lives inside each of us, knows exactly what – and WHO – can fill it.**

**Perhaps this night, we too might extend our hands, our hearts, and our desires toward the manger. Perhaps tonight, we too might say, like little Kyle...**

**I want Baby Jesus. I want Baby Jesus now.**