

# Music and the Word Sermon Vignettes

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



*The Birth of Christ, 19th Century Stained Glass*

## Prayer of Adoration

Almighty God, you wonderfully created and yet more wonderfully restored the dignity of human nature. In your mercy, by the power of the Holy Spirit, grant that we may share in the divine life of Jesus Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity and who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever more.

Amen

## The Word: Isaiah 9:2 (NRSV)

The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.

### Sermon Vignette

H.G. Wells once made this observation: "I must confess as a historian this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very center of history. Jesus Christ is the most dominant figure in all of history."

- *Who's at the center of your story?*
- *Who does your life revolve around?*
- *Does Jesus light up your life and your way?*
- *How much exposure to Son light rays are you getting?*

Blaise Pascal put it this way: "Jesus Christ is the object of all things, the center towards which all things tend. We feel empty when we make ourselves the center. We're happy in God when Christ is the center of our lives."

Christmas reminds us:

- *Our life begins with Christ.*
- *Our life continues in Christ.*
- *Our life ends with Christ.*

Jesus is the center and the circumference of our lives, the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last. When our lives don't orbit around Christ, we find ourselves out of kilter, at odds with the universe. As the sun is the center of the solar system, so Jesus, the son of God, is the center of God's universe. And he's to be the center of our lives. He is our delight and our desire—and it's there that we're surprised by joy.

### The Music: "*Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring*"

*"Jesu, joy of man's desiring,  
Holy wisdom, love most bright;  
Drawn by Thee, our souls aspiring,  
Soar to uncreated light.  
Word of God, our flesh that fashioned,  
With the fire of life impassioned,  
Striving still to truth unknown,  
Soaring, dying round Thy throne."*

## The Word: Luke 1:26-33

### *The Birth of Jesus Foretold*

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

### Sermon Vignette

I don't know about you, but as we get closer to December 21st, Winter Solstice, the longest night of the year, the harder it is for me to get out of bed on those dark mornings.

One of my favorite parts of winter is Christmas because of the way it lightens us and warms us.

- There's the progression of candles during Advent.
- Seeing homes decorated with lights and wreathes.
- Singing the great carols to one another of joy, peace, and mercy mild.
- Gathering with family and friends.
- Expectation for not only the delivery of presents, but the birth of the Christ child once again.

The hope of Christ's arrival gives us that motivation to literally and figuratively get out of bed each morning. The Japanese have a word for that – "ikigai" – what gets you up each day. Without Christmas, winter wouldn't be as merry.

C.S. Lewis thought so too, describing the reign of the White Witch in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* where, "It was always winter and never Christmas." Christmas arrives to break the spell of the witch.

We're assured the ice and snow will melt and our darkness will be lightened. And so, we once again gather together around the warmth and glow of the radiant Christ child.

### The Music: "*In the Bleak Midwinter*" (excerpt)

*"What can I give Him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;  
Yet what can I give Him: give my heart."*

## The Word: Isaiah 9:6

For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

## Sermon Vignette

Presbyterian pastor and author Fred Buechner tells a great story about a Christmas pageant. It was that vintage Sunday School re-enactment of the Nativity—not unlike our pageant last week. The manger was down in front of the chancel steps, a baby doll wrapped in a blanket was the little Lord Jesus. Mary was there in her obligatory blue shawl seated next to Joseph. The wisemen bore gifts, the shepherds wore terry-cloth bathrobes, and the littlest children looked like *Precious Moments* characters in their sheep's clothing.

The narrators narrated, the congregation caroled. Everything went like clockwork. Until the arrival of the angels of the heavenly host—more children robed in polyester white. At the right moment they were supposed to gather around the manger saying, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will to all,*" and that is just what they did except...there was a bit of jockeying going on with all the crowded Christmas characters—there was no room on the stage. A girl about nine years old who was smaller than most of them, ended up so far out on the fringes of things that not even by craning her neck and standing on tiptoe could she see what was going on.

*"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will to all,"* they all sang on cue, and then in the momentary pause that followed, the small girl electrified the entire church by crying out in a voice shrill with irritation and frustration and enormous sadness at having her view blocked, ***"Let Jesus show!"***

This is the Christmas message—*let Jesus show!* Let's not hide Jesus. Let's not crowd out Jesus with all of the season's trappings and distractions. *Let Jesus show!* Let Jesus show in our lives. Let Jesus show in Immanuel. Let Jesus show in the world. Let's give Jesus the stage.

## The Music: "*What Child Is This?*" (excerpt)

*"What child is this who, laid to rest, On Mary's lap is sleeping?  
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet, While shepherds watch are keeping?  
This, this is Christ the King, Whom shepherds guard and angels sing;  
Haste, haste, to bring Him laud, The Babe, the son of Mary."*

## The Word: Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup> Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup> He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

## Sermon Vignette

The most intense debate in church history has been over the *divinity of Christ*. But I think one of the greatest errors we can make is to deny the humanity of Christ. I love this quote of Martin Luther's, "*The deeper we can bring Christ into the flesh—but we are never able to do so enough—the better.*" The book of Hebrews reminds us that Christ shared in our humanity—made like his brothers and sisters in every way. Our God wants to really get to know us—to identify with us, to be down to earth, relatable, approachable. God's ultimate act of identification is the incarnation. God was in Christ reconciling the world.

*Think about it—*

- a. Jesus has a *genealogy, a family tree*. Suddenly all those begats don't seem so boring.
- b. He wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth—he was born in a place suited for animals.
- c. Like all babies, Jesus got fussy when he was hungry for milk.
- d. Mary and Joseph needed to change his diapers and they smelled. He gave them many sleepless nights.
- e. Jesus loves you so much that he went through puberty and middle school for you and me!
- f. Had a job, learned the *carpentry trade* from his adopted earthly father Joseph.
- g. Probably hit his finger a time or two pounding nails (*but he didn't cuss!*).
- h. He caught colds and had some sleepless nights.
- i. He thirsted, Jesus wept, Jesus rested. Jesus wanted and needed to be alone to pray, recharge.
- j. He felt the pains of self-denial, being betrayed, and death.
- k. Jesus shows us what God is like. He's the human face of God—but *he also knows what it's like to be human*.
- l. With Christ in us, we're called to live in the same way—to go out to others in Jesus' name—to *put a human face to Jesus's love for the world*.

## The Music: "*No Place of His Own*" (excerpt)

*"Still, he had no place He could call His own, to lay down His weary head.  
What a wondrous birth! Jesus came to earth, just to save a sinner like me."*

## The Word: Luke 2:8-14

<sup>8</sup> In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

## Sermon Vignette

Why is it a holy night? Why did Jesus come? What difference does Jesus make?

Jaroslav Pelikan notes of all the historical figures throughout the centuries, Jesus stands out as the most influential. It is by Christ's birth that most calendars in our world mark time. By the name of Jesus, millions curse and in his name millions pray. Like a kaleidoscope, each culture over the millennia portrays Jesus with different nuances and emphases. Yet simultaneously, the living Christ is "the same yesterday, today, and forever."

Jesus came for not only the manger, but for the old rugged cross. He defeated death so we might live. Jesus came to forgive us—and give us a fresh start, a new life. He frees us from the bondage of sin. He sets us free from ourselves. Jesus shows us the face of God.

Jesus shows us what it means to be truly human. He upholds the dignity of the people of every race. Jesus shows us what it looks like to love God and to love our brother and our sister. To love our enemy.

But he also works in us. Jesus is born in us. Jesus lives in us and helps us to do what we cannot do on our own. He makes us holy, silences and stills our storms, giving us heavenly peace. All we can do is fall on our knees in worship, then follow where he leads.

## The Music: "*Silent Night*" (excerpt)

*"Silent night, holy night, Wondrous star, lend thy light;  
With the angels let us sing, Alleluia to our King;  
Christ the Savior is born, Christ the Savior is born."*

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