LORD OF LIFE
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Dear congregation – dear friends in Christ – dear ones:

As I write to you, plans are abounding for the cherished services on Christmas Eve. But before I talk about those plans, I'd like us to connect to Christmases past.

What are some of your favorite memories of Christmas eve? What makes them precious to you? Even for a Christmas curmudgeon like me, there are plenty of experiences that I wouldn't trade for anything (I love Christ and worship, but beyond that, not so much).

One of my earliest memories, and I'm not sure if it was a dream or my young mind conflating things, was at Church on Christmas eve. But it wasn't in the sanctuary, or the fellowship hall, or a big group of people – any of the places you'd expect. In my memory, I'd found my way to the Church basement, a low-ceilinged room which could only be accessed through an outside door. I peeked through the door and saw Mary and Joseph, kneeling by a manger, in a room barely lit by one warm light, and the only warmth coming from their being huddled together. And the most amazing thing was that they noticed me – *me* – and invited me in. A little child, from a different time, and nothing I could bring to help or care for them, yet they welcomed me.

Years later on a work day, I re-entered that basement, having forgotten it even existed, and remembered those feelings of wonder and welcome. Can you imagine? Re-encountering that memory, I realized that maybe I'd probably just seen a plastic nativity set in that basement. And I needed to choose: wonder, or cynicism; receive that love or call it a fake; lean in to that sense of welcome and presence, or turn away. For a long time I didn't decide, but then – *yes, the story goes on!* – on an early-December trip to Italy and the town of Assisi (St. Francis invented the idea of a nativity "set" there), we were in a cathedral when I came across a section of floor that was the kind of glass you can walk on. Beneath it were nuns placing the pieces of the crèche, lovingly moving Mary and Joseph into place. I couldn't leave until we saw them place baby Jesus in the manger. These stories, in my mind and heart, are gifts of the Holy Spirit to keep alive the knowledge that Christmas, beyond the bustle and hubbub, is about being welcomed in to Jesus' story. He came into this world so that each of us and all of us may have hope, peace, joy, and love – gifts that we desperately need.

So we enter this season with the many "Christmases past" in our hearts and minds. "Christmas present" may not feel like as much of a gift this year, as our hopes are centered on a vaccine, our joy in gathering is curtailed, the love we share in hugs and meals and wrapped presents is complicated, and we struggle to feel peace in the continuing shockwaves of a pandemic.

This year, Christmas present at Church will be either virtual or in the parking lot. Church leaders have tried to figure out a way to be in the sanctuary, but each plan comes with a level of risk – not only risks to individuals (as I truly understand the folks that say, I'm willing to risk it for the sake of worship that feels right), but any risks are

shared by the whole community. I as an individual may not worry about catching Covid from leading worship, but every leader and volunteer brings a significant risk of exposing the community at a time when ambulances, hospital beds, and even Covid testing systems are at or beyond capacity. Our Christmas "present" or gift to the world may be the willingness to sacrifice for this year so that Christmas Future will be a joyful reunion.

And yet I go back to my simple memory of being noticed, welcomed, loved, and called. Christmas may not need shoulder-to-shoulder singing in a beautiful sanctuary. A Church basement, a parking lot, an internet connection, a stable on the edge of town – God works through all of these. God is working through our Pocket families collecting cart-loads of food donations at a local grocery store, and through Advent baskets; through phone check-ins when we pass the peace and through financial gifts that warm our Church basement and keep the story of Christmas being shared. This Christmas, you are also noticed and loved. You are called to ministries of all kinds – whether you share the worship links with friends or on Facebook as a gift and a witness, or you call the Church and offer your time and talents, or you pray for communities in your circle, or you consider year-end giving options that support the sanctuary in our building or the sanctuary that is provided through ministries like Bridge of Peace and Christian Caring Center. That sense of being loved and beckoned in has been quiet for parts of my life, but congregations have brought it back to actively nurturing me.

And so – come! – we beckon you. We invite you to join us on Christmas eve:

Virtual Family Devotions and Carol Sing – hosted by Pastors Wendolyn & Eric Trozzo – all day on YouTube
Family Worship in Parking Lot with Carols and Communion at 2:00
Virtual Christmas Eve – Service of Lessons & Carols – all day on YouTube
Christmas Eve Service in Parking Lot with Carols and Communion at 8:00pm

O Come, all ye faithful – bring the warm memories of Christmases past, open to God doing new things in your Christmas present, and let us look together to the promises of God in Christ, Emmanuel, in all of our Christmas Futures.

Peace, Joy, Hope, and Love,

Pastor Wendolyn

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