

Paul Walker Christ Episcopal Church Christmas Eve Luke 2
“There’s Room on the Nice List for Everyone”

The warmest possible welcome to one and all this Christmas Eve! A special welcome, as we say every year, to our CEO Christians – those of us who come on Christmas, Easter and Other Occasions. Some churches lay on a vague feeling of guilt to the occasional attenders among us. We’re just the opposite – we’re so glad you’re here. Yes, the church doors are open for the next 3 months, but if you don’t darken them, we’ll see you at Easter!

Church attendance doesn’t make anyone more or less worthy in our eyes or especially in God’s eyes. Being more or less “religious” is of no consequence to God. This time of year makes that clear - Christmas is for everybody!

As we read in the story, *“And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”* Good tidings of great joy for all people. Or as the Bible says in another place, *“the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.”*

This is why I don’t mind the (so-called) “commercialization of Christmas.” If we are to look at the Barrack’s Road parking lot these past weeks, everyone is in on the action. The world’s economy has to be based on something. If it depends on a season where people are buying gifts for others, well, it could be worse! What’s more, you’ll remember that gift giving is part of the Christmas story itself – gold, frankincense and myrrh. Given the stability of gold in an erratic stock market, this kind of gift giving is a very good idea!

Gift giving at Christmas is a reflection of what Christmas is about – God’s gift to us. One way to sum up the gift that God gave and gives at Christmas to everyone are the lines from “O Holy Night”: *“long lay the world in sin and error pining till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.”*

He appeared and the soul felt its worth. What does this mean? Most of us are caught up in the fool’s errand of trying to prove our worth. If we perform well enough, we will be deemed worthy. We operate this way so naturally with other people, we think this is the way we need to be with God – proving our goodness and niceness to Him.

It reminds me of the story about a boy named Sam who wanted a new bike for Christmas. So Sam asked his mom if he could have a new bike. So, she told him to write a letter to Santa Claus. But Sam, having just played a vital role in the church nativity play, said he would prefer to write to the baby Jesus. Sam went to his room and wrote 'Dear Jesus, I have been a very good boy and would like to have a bike for Christmas.'

But he wasn't happy with it when he read it over. So he decided to try again and this time he wrote 'Dear Jesus, I'm a good boy most of the time and would like a bike for Christmas.' He read it back and thought about the kind of boy he was. So he tried a third version. 'Dear Jesus, I could be a good boy if I tried hard and especially if I had a new bike.' He read that one too, but he still wasn't satisfied with it.

So, he decided to go out for a walk while he thought about a better approach. After a short time he passed a house with a small statue of the Virgin Mary in the front yard. He crept in, stuffed the statue under his coat, hurried home and hid it under his bed. Then he wrote this letter. 'Dear Jesus, If you ever want to see your mother again, you'd better send me a new bike.'

No offense to Mary pietists among us, but as G.K. Chesterton once said, *"the test of a good religion is whether you can joke about it."* And this joke tells us something true. If we have to rely on our own niceness to earn God's favor, then we'd all have to resort to threat, violence, and disguise.

But the gift of Christmas is given to all, to everyone, the religious and non religious, the naughty and the nice. He appeared and the soul felt it's worth. This worth is just a gift that happens to you, like sunlight for a plant, like rain in a desert: you don't have to do anything to receive it. You just, well, receive it, like a gift! You have intrinsic worth because He has appeared and given it to you.

The Will Ferrell movie, *Elf*, is a gospel movie through and through. One of the lines in the Elf Code says what God's Christmas gift is all about – Elf Code #2: *"There's room on the nice list for everyone."* There's room on the nice list for everyone. Theologically, this is called imputation – that God reckons us all as good. This is not because we have earned our worth

through our goodness. It's because God is good and He decided to give us the gift of our worth at Christmas.

Elf Code #1 is "*treat everyday like Christmas.*" This just means that no matter where you are – inside or outside a church – you might remember that God gave good tidings of great joy to you and to all people. Through the gift of His Son, we're all off the naughty list and all on the nice list.

In fact, if you come back on Good Friday and Easter Day, you'll hear about how the naughty list would be torn up later by this Savior born this day in the city of David. The Bible tells us that God "*has made us alive in Him and has forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.*" (Col 2:14) Bye Bye, Naughty List!

There's room on the nice list for everyone. Yes, even him. Yes, even her. Yes, even you. For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.

Merry Christmas and Amen.