

# Manger Focus

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher**  
**Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio**  
**December 24, 2021—Christmas Eve**

Ugly Christmas sweaters don't count. Oh, and novelty songs like "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer." They don't count, either. Other than that, the customs and traditions we associate with Christmas are dear to us because of the beauty and pleasure they add to our lives.

- Our tastebuds look forward to annual holiday favorites, whether it's Christmas Ale or Christmas cookies.
- We hear sounds of expectation, hope, joy, whether from the excitement of children, the playlist of our favorite Christmas songs, or the melodies of concert hall or choir or church.
- Our imaginations get a workout as we work up shopping lists.
- And lest we forget, our spirits draw in deeply the wind of the Holy Spirit when we take a step back from all the commotion, chaotic schedules, travel arrangements or hosting preparations and our focus returns, yet again, to a birth.

Our challenge at Christmastime is remembering the focus of the season. There are so many distractions. Pleasant ones, to be sure, but distractions from the focus of Christmas:

Take the Christmas tree. Maybe you cut down a tree, strapped it to the roof of your car, and set it up at the crossroads of your home's floorplan. Maybe you hauled your tree down from the attic or up from the basement. Maybe decorating your tree is a chore, or it's a relaxing mental stroll down memory lane as you hang ornaments reminding you of special places you've visited, or you carefully arrange a fragile ornament crafted by your child's tiny hands long ago.

Whether they're built in or you string them on the tree yourself, the inspiration for lights laid upon branches was the view of stars twinkling through the limbs of trees as seen by a walker one winter's night. Perhaps tinsel symbolizes the snow and ice that would befall a tree on a hillside, or the tinsel reminds us of gossamer wings of angels. Each home's tree is distinctive to that family – but Christmas does not celebrate a tree. Ultimately, the Christmas tree is intended to focus our attention on the baby who was cradled by the rough-hewn wood of a manger.

Or consider the presents. The gifts we give and receive can be sources of mystery and delight. But the exchange of gifts isn't intended to increase our personal inventory of toys or ties or socks or scarves. Giving gifts is intended to focus us on the Christ Child who was honored with gifts by the reverent Magi.

Even customary Christmas delicacies like cookies and candy, breads and pies, perhaps a goose or ham or turkey aren't reason we celebrate Christmas. But they can help direct our focus to the nurture of the newborn babe.

The beloved trappings of our Christmas celebrations add special zest to the darkening chilling days of this time of year. The anticipation of Santa's arrival. The inflatable displays bobbing in the breeze of the front yard. Playlists of Christmas songs by our favorite recording artist. Holiday get-togethers. Trips to Severance Music Center and Playhouse Square, and the holiday light displays at Nela Park or the county fairgrounds.

And in this year unlike any other year, perhaps you consciously or unconsciously decided not to do some of your holiday traditions. If you didn't feel like cookie-baking, or you put up a fraction of your usual Christmas decorations, or you just don't feel motivated to send out Christmas cards, so what? You're doing the best you can, and that's okay. The physical and emotional strain of navigating each pandemic day saps energy and spirit in subtle but impactful ways. Like Christmas traditions that get blown out of proportion, the pandemic itself is a distraction from the focus of the holy day.

So what can we focus on?

Picture in your mind the traditional manger scene — perhaps there's one on your mantle, maybe on a side table, perhaps under the tree itself; or picture the display in our lobby. Maybe your manger scene includes sheep and oxen, donkeys and horses, even mice and birds. All of those creatures may be oblivious to the gathering occurring in their midst. But the rest of the figures are arranged with a purpose.

- The shepherds kneel before the baby laid in a manger.
- The magi bow in reverence a respectful distance away from the newborn.
- Joseph hovers nearby, speechless in his amazement, filled to overflowing with joy at the safe delivery after all these months and all these miles.
- And Mary, of course, intently studying her infant son's face: the ruddy, smooth-as-glass cheeks; that momentary, passing frown of eyebrows; the cute little mouth offering up soft cooing sounds; slightest motions of head and neck exploring newfound freedom outside his mother's womb.

Mary's focus is on Jesus. That's what Christmas is for. We're invited to make him our focus, too.

Like Mary bent over the manger-cradle, let's focus on Jesus. On the Incarnation — God's taking on human flesh. On the embodiment of God's love made visible to the world in human form. With our focus on Jesus we see how Jesus would grow to love and serve the world. God graces us with the realization that we can live like Jesus. We can serve others. We can maintain obedience to God in the face of temptations and challenges. We can show love and respect even in situations we might take issue with. We can strive to be a servant rather than demanding that we get all the privilege, all the attention, all the opportunity.

The tradition of the prophets anticipated this gift, declaring, "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given..." "us" meaning Jesus has come into the world for all the world, not just for people who think they deserve God's favor.<sup>1</sup> In time Jesus himself would describe his role, saying, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life."<sup>2</sup>

Just a few hundred years after that first Christmas, a Christian leader in Egypt named Origen tried to help new believers comprehend the birth of the Son of God. He described God's incarnation in Jesus in this way. Origen said, "Imagine a village with a statue so immense you couldn't take it all in, you couldn't make out exactly what it was supposed to represent. Finally, someone miniaturized the statue so you could see who it honored. Imagine that is what God did in sending the Son Jesus. In Christ we can envision God in a way we can comprehend."<sup>3</sup>

Let our focus be on Jesus: tonight, and tomorrow, and every day. Focus on Jesus. See something the world had never seen before. Like people who walked in darkness who saw a great light, a new light to illumine the path of our lives has been shined upon us. God's unconditional, unstoppable love been shown to us in a form we recognize, a form we understand, a form each of us can relate to personally. God's love has come among us in the innocence, in the potential, in the hope of a newborn baby.

Jesus the newborn baby was the focus of impoverished shepherds and wise aristocrats, the focus of a dumbfounded Joseph and relieved, hope-filled Mary. Let everything you do to celebrate Christmas help you focus on Jesus, who was born into this world to live in your heart.

[sermons; se20211224; © 2021 JMF]

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 9:6 (KJV)

<sup>2</sup> John 3:16 (CEB)

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Dale Bruner, "Is Jesus Inclusive or Exclusive?" *Theology, News, and Notes of Fuller Seminary* (October 1999), p.4. accessed 12/15/2021