

The Story
Luke 2
Don Lincoln

Twenty two straight Christmas Eves at Westminster for me. And the challenge of preaching this night each year – most preachers would tell you who stick around anywhere very long – is everyone already knows the story – “He is Born!” But you are supposed to try to bring it home anew – in funny and inspiring and creative ways. And....it’s been one of the most sacred and fun parts of the journey with this congregation these years. So if you’ll indulge me - just a little tour.

One of my earliest messages looked like this:



I put on a set of angel’s wings (much to the dismay of a few congregation members), and entered the pulpit with those on as the Angel Gabriel on the phone with God. God wants Angel Gabriel to know he has to deliver a message for God, and God has called Gabriel to tell him what the deal is. “Gabriel, I am going to go to the earth.”

(Gabriel on phone). “You what? In person? Really? Wow, chief! That’s a great idea. They’ll never expect that! Here, let me tell you how we oughta do this, if you don’t mind.

We get a nice, little executive Lear jet, land at Andrews Air Force base, then pick up one of those stealth choppers. Fly right up to the White House, land on the front lawn so You can let them know who’s really boss. Swing up the coast to Philly, stop in New York, up to Boston. It’ll be all over the world before the 11:00pm news.

(*bang phone*). I’m sorry sir. Not Washington or New York? Start in Toughkennmon. Jose and Maria? Who are they? Your parents?

A BABY????!!! Pardon me, Your holiness, do you know what they do? Oh – yes – of course – you invented the plumbing. Yes, sorry.

The message that night – (that was 20 years ago – I know you couldn't tell because my hair was just as gray, right? No!). The message was, God comes – not with thunder and majesty – but in humility, to regular folk like you and me, whether Bethlehem or Toughkennamon.

One year my message was inspired by Stormy the cow, who escaped from a live nativity scene in Old City Philadelphia as reported on KYW traffic:



“It’s 2:42 in the morning and we’ve got a cow running around on I-95 South at the Vine.”

Stormy was corralled and brought back to the nativity scene only to escape again; finally captured in a parking garage at 4th and Arch.

I suggested in **THAT** message that some PEOPLE run away from the nativity because they’ve experienced not the love of Jesus in the church but judgment, closed-mindedness, and condemnation. And I suggested that night and will suggest it again tonight, if you happen to feel anything like Stormy – lost, outcast, pushed aside, wandering the highways of life – the real Jesus we celebrate this night offers welcome, not rejection. Forgiveness, not condemnation. Hospitality, not hostility. Grace, not judgment. That’s at the heart of the Gospel.

Another favorite was the story of the Playmobil nativity set.



That was the bulletin cover the Christmas Eve I used that as the heart of my message.

A friend had told me that rather than put the nativity set away until the next Christmas, the family decided one year to put it in the big plastic bin with all the other children's Playmobil toys and pieces of equipment. And what they discovered was that all throughout the year they never knew where the baby Jesus would show up.

He might be in the company of construction workers, or inside a Playmobil ambulance or garbage truck. Sometimes Jesus would actually show up near His mom and dad – Joseph and Mary, but wearing a hard hat or a knight's helmet. The good news **THAT** Christmas was Jesus can show up anywhere! Even here.

Many of you will recall the Peanuts Christmas – and how horrified my colleagues were when I first suggested this as the bulletin cover.



They were aghast! “Don – people will be expecting something sacred; something more holy than.... uh..... Woodstock in the manger.”

I looked at them and said “It’s is not about Jesus.” And they all almost ran out of the room.

I insisted. “Christmas is about Charlie Brown – a lovable loser, a child possessed of endless determination – but dominated by his insecurities, a permanent case of bad luck, and often **bullied by his peers**. It’s about Charlie and all the young men who have and/or still feel like him.

Christmas is about Lucy – the opinionated fussbudget, who every now and then reveals she too has a heart that breaks. A woman whose undying love is never returned by introverted, socially inept, piano-playing Schroeder. The birth of Jesus is about every Lucy whose love is scorned, and every Schroeder who is so wonderfully gifted but doesn’t have a clue how to relate to others.

I did a number of other Peanuts’ characters but closed with this one. Christmas is about Pigpen – the little guy enveloped in a cloud of dirt. In his case it’s literal dirt – but in your case or my case perhaps it’s a history we cannot change; secrets in our past that few if any but God ever know about; mistakes made, soiled relationships. It’s about Pigpen, and all of us and the cloud of messes we cannot shake.

I said that night this birth is not about Jesus. It’s about all of us Peanuts characters, and God’s incarnate love for each and every one of us found in the Christ child.

Here’s the bulletin cover from the most personal Christmas Eve story:



Perhaps the simplest of about 40 nativity sets my father carved in his retirement years.

I used it when reminiscing about my childhood Christmas mornings. When my two sisters and I would bound down the stairs, get our stockings off their nails on the side of the stairway, but we couldn't go to the tree and the presents. We had to go straight to the kitchen because we had to have breakfast. Really?!

Once in the kitchen, we would inhale a bowl of cereal in two seconds and then open and dump our stockings out and they'd be done in about half a minute. Meanwhile my father began his morning feast. First, half a grapefruit, eaten section....by....section. Then Mom would poach him an egg in his little one-egg, egg poacher because he had a poached egg every single morning and why would this day be any different?

And dad would make a piece of toast, butter it, cut it into pieces and then push the egg all around the plate with it for a while. Then, he would turn to his bowl of Shredded wheat....and eat them.... shred.... by.... shred.

Then dad would get mom a **second** cup of coffee, while **HE** cleared the table, rinsed the dishes, and put them in the dishwasher.

Then the agony. The worst was yet to come. Dad would pull out the Bible, open to the Gospel of John, and begin to read – e v e r s o slowly – what seemed like the entire New Testament. Actually just the opening of John 1 we heard earlier. But you get the picture. My sisters and I were ready to explode. And finally we were released to the tree.

But in my college years Christmas morning unfolded differently. Because my sisters and I had come to know and love – each in our own way – the reality of Christ born in our hearts. And the tradition my mother's father started when my mother was a little girl of reading John 1 on Christmas day for our family had become a welcome respite in the midst of the chaos of Christmas morning to stop in awe and wonder in rejoicing that God's love is that big.

These have all been fun, sacred and important stories to me to share with this congregation over the years. But there's really only one story for this night.

Luke 2:1-14

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David. He went to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around about them, and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said to 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, who is Christ the Lord."

Well – just one more story. An all-time favorite was the story of a pastor of a church in New York City looking out the window of his study before the late Christmas Eve service at the life-size nativity scene in the church yard. Snow was falling. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a little movement and noticed a little boy off the streets, coming through the gate. He ran across the yard and into the manger scene and threw his leg up over the manger and climbed into the straw next to Jesus.

Maybe tonight it should be the opposite. Invite Jesus to crawl into your space; into YOUR story; into your life; into your heart this night. He's ready to come. Maybe for the first time. Or the thousandth. Because that's how His love will invade and make right the whole world. Through you and through me.

Friends, for unto YOU and me is born this day a Savior. A Savior. My prayer this night for each and every one of us – may it be so. AMEN.