

As we come together on this night, we gather to celebrate what the heart of God is all about. We come to celebrate **God's heart of love** for the entire world. It is all about God's desire to reach deep into this world, deep into humanity, into our very flesh, touch **our** hearts, and change them. Christmas is all about God's love for us. And, quite frankly, love is messy. Sometimes I think the **choice to love others** and the **work of love** could be described and labelled as "*Outreach in a state of mess,*" because love can be difficult, hard, messy work. Christmas is about God reaching into the messiness of our lives, into our very flesh, to say, "You are loved. Have **a heart of love!**"

Why heart? Because God knows that logic and reason and might only go so far. If logic, reason and might were all that is necessary, there would be no hatred, no poverty, no violence, no racism, no sexism, no xenophobia, no war, no greed, no selfishness. And with our great military might, we would have everything necessary to enable this world to live in peace, to have a "silent night..." and to truly "...sleep in heavenly peace." But we don't, and we can't because logic, reason and might have definite limits. So, tonight we celebrate the amazing, overwhelming risk God has taken on this world and on us, the great risk God has taken just to know us,

just to know **you**. God knows that our default position, like King Herod, is to ostracize or kill the things and the people who unsettle us. So, Christmas is about God's great risk, attempting to maybe, just maybe, reach past our often hard, well defended, heavily fortified selves, to reach down deep and through our commitment to hostility and willful ignorance, to get through all of those securely protected walls, get through our fear, and reach right into the flesh of our lives and the depth of our hearts.

As we look at the story of this night, the good news of Christmas comes first to the **vulnerable**, to those ready to receive love, to people gathered in a dirty, messy barn, to the poor people living outdoors. Maybe the good news of this baby comes first to flocks of sheep and shepherds, not the corridors of power, because power corrodes hearts. Maybe this baby comes to the field first and not the temple because those people at the temple had more religion than heart. At Christmas, through Mary's baby boy, we see God reaching out from God's heart, first to the most vulnerable, and through the most vulnerable, to the heart of **all** humanity. We see God keeping God's heart **open** to us, even as we reject God and harm one another.

On a night like this, I find the arts often enable me to better express God's message to us. So, I am going to reference an unexpected work of

art through which we can garner some wisdom. I am going to ask you to remember the movie *A Charlie Brown Christmas!* I am sure all of you have seen this movie at least once in your life and you know the story. Lucy suggests that Charlie Brown should direct a Christmas play. But Charlie Brown, with all his insecurities, wants something more than the status quo, something more than a performance of seasonal sentiments. And, as often happens, we watch him get frustrated and, yes, depressed. He's almost ready to give in and forsake what his heart yearns for. Then, in walks Linus, Lucy's brother. You remember Linus, right? Linus ALWAYS has his security blanket in hand. He is NEVER without that blanket. And, in this Christmas movie, you really must watch carefully as Linus speaks, or you'll miss what happens. As Linus begins to recite the Christmas story, the music stops and the spotlight focuses on him. We hear him recite:

*“And there were in that same country, shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore **afraid**. And the angel said unto them, **fear not...**”*

And, that's when you really need to push the pause button on your remote or you just might miss what happens. Right when the angel says, “fear not,” an astonishing thing happens: **Linus throws down his blanket**. Now, I am sure many of you have seen that movie dozens of times, and I also am sure many of you have never noticed that gesture. In all other movies or

cartoons, **Linus hardly ever lets go of that blanket.** After all, it's his security. But now, in this movie when the angel says, "fear not," Linus's blanket has been replaced – replaced by the **Christmas story.** The very thing Linus relied on, that essential blanket, was cast aside for something else. Something better. **Someone** better. Linus goes on to finish the story. His hands are up, and his face is now smiling because of a joy that is released by the story. Linus is **not** just reciting words, Linus is showing something of **incarnation**, something of the change that happens when God enters the scene, when God enters our lives. In that moment, Linus's insecurities and fears are gone, and **he is transformed.**

Linus continues telling the story, saying:

*"Fear not, for I bring you good news of glad tidings that shall be for all people. And this shall be a sign for you, you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying Glory to God in the highest, and on earth **peace and good will to all people.**"*

On this night, **Linus** can teach us something about the Christmas message and the **heart of God.** Linus experiences the contagious, even invasive, love of the heart of God, and he is transformed, so much so that he let's go of his insecurities as he lets go of his blanket.

When we understand the message of Christmas, **we** discover that we can let go of fear and hatred, of partisanship and bigotry, let go of racism,

sexism, and xenophobia, let go of our need to control and our desire for power and violence, let go of all that divides us as people, and all that we do that is harmful to others. Christmas calls us to open our hearts to the **love** of God, the **love God has for the whole world**. Christmas is about God reaching into our hearts and inviting **us** to change, to be made new, to see one another as brother and sister, to work for justice and mercy in this broken world, to give up our weapons and guns and work for peace. The heart of God is inviting us to open **our** hearts and let go of **all** that hardens our hearts. Christmas is all about God's heart touching our hearts, and our hearts touching one another, and **that** is what this world needs more than anything!

So, on this night of nights, leave your false securities and your fear behind, and open your hearts, make room in your hearts, give the God of love more square footage in the depth of your being, and welcome the Christ child. And, do not just **welcome** the Christ child, but **nurture** the child, and **give the child room to grow**. Because this God of love is going to love you into newness, love you into wholeness, and give you **more** heart, a bigger heart. In fact, this God of love will not only grow, but will **burst the boundaries** of your hearts.

Tonight, we celebrate a God who has laid bare God's very heart because of love for **you**. So, open your heart to the **love** that has entered this world. And, what is so amazing is that you will discover this God who has laid bare God's very heart for you, has **always** been holding **you** in love, loving **you** just as you are, and loving **you** with an everlasting love, a love that will never, ever let you go.