

Coram Deo  
Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia, Soli Scriptura  
Agnus Dei, Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi  
Deo Volente  
Sermon Preach at Stouffville United Church  
By the Rev. Capt Dr. John S. Niles MSM CD

# "Developing a Christmas Heart"

*December 11, 2022*

**Luke 2:15-20**

A business man was relocating his business to a new place on the other side of the city. Some friends sent him flowers. However, they got mixed up. A funeral got the flowers meant for the business.

The next day, the businessman got a call to explain the mix-up. The businessman remarked, "I was wondering why there was a sympathy card in my flowers."

The florist said, "Well, if you think that is bad, the card in the one at the funeral said, 'Good luck in your new location.'"

In the Gospel of Luke chapter two, verse fifteen, we hear it said, "The shepherds said, one to another, 'Let us go now even unto Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known unto us...'" "Let us go now even unto Bethlehem..." Why? It was because their heart was changed.

A special tradition in Denmark is something called the "Christmas Heart," an interwoven paper basket in the shape of a heart. It is made of red and white paper, which happen to be the colors of the Danish flag. These paper hearts are put on the Christmas tree or used as mobiles, and they are filled with candy and other goodies. The Christmas Heart is a traditional Danish symbol. Most Christmas trees, including the big tree in Copenhagen's Town Hall Square, are decorated with red and white woven paper hearts.

It is believed that the first Christmas Heart may have been made by Hans Christian Andersen, who gave us 156 fairy tales, including "The Emperor's New Clothes," "The Ugly Duckling," and others. The very first one he made is still on display at his home in Denmark. April 2, 2005 marked the 200th anniversary of Hans Christian Andersen's birth, and the logo for the celebration appropriately features a red heart with a fold right down the middle.

It is said that the meaning of the Christmas Heart is to remind us of the love of Jesus towards all humanity, and that the candy inside the baskets represents the Christ Child inside the manger. The Danish Christmas Heart is a piece of Christmas tradition that we do not practice here in the Canada. Yet I wonder if we might not begin a greater tradition, one of making absolutely certain that each of us develops a true "Christmas Heart," one deep inside us that won't fade or go away. Harlan Miller once expressed a wish that "we could put up some of the Christmas spirit in jars and open a jar of it every month." That might be a good thing, but it's just wishful thinking. Wouldn't it be much better if we could develop a true Christmas Heart instead?

## I

**A Christmas heart is an eager heart.** *“So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.” Luke 2:15-16*

I was in a bookstore the other day and a clerk came up to me and said, "Can I help you?" I said, "I don't think anyone can. I don't know what I'm looking for. But when I find it, I'll let you know." A lot of people don't know what they are looking for – they don't know what they want or need.

Christmas is a time when this question and concern becomes acute and so we start looking. We search for the right item; not really knowing what that is. We search for happiness – often to discover it isn't in what we got or gave. We search for love – in the wrong places – because we don't know what we want or need. And so Christmas is a time that can produce a crisis. To which God says, "Fear not, have faith – for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior." He gives us the gift that we didn't know we wanted or needed.

## II

**A Christmas heart is an eager heart and a sharing heart.** *“When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,<sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.” Luke 2:17-18*

The story is told of a very wealthy man who, on the occasion of his daughter's marriage, sent a check for \$5,000 to the bridegroom as a wedding present. He sent it by the hand of the bride's sister and when she returned, the man eagerly asked: "What did your new brother-in-law say when you gave the check?" The girl replied. "He didn't say anything, but when he looked at it he began to cry."

"And how long did he cry?" was the question. And she replied, "Oh, I imagine for about a minute."

"Only a minute?" roared the giver, "Why, I cried for an hour after I had signed the check!"

We can only guess what the shepherds were thinking when they arrived at the manger; but we do know that as soon as they left, they had one thing on their minds – this news was too good to sit on. It was news that had to be shared. So we read beginning in verse 17: "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them."

The words "sharing" and "giving" and "Christmas" just go together somehow. Those who would be delighted to ignore the birth of Christ, still try to make the meaning of Christmas about sharing and giving and love. Even after removing Christ, they cannot remove giving from the picture. When we think of giving at Christmas, our minds might go back to the wise men who presented three different gifts to the Child, but the idea of sharing goes all the way back to the shepherds. There was no directive from the angels that they should go tell everyone. They simply received the good news, realized it needed to be shared, and they shared it.

Irving Berlin's "White Christmas" is the most recorded Christmas song in history. We are most familiar with Bing Crosby's rendition of it—and what a great job he did! Crosby tied

Christmas with sharing when he said once, “Unless we make Christmas an occasion to share our blessings, all the snow in Alaska won’t make it white.”

### III

A Christmas heart is an eager heart and a sharing heart and finally, **a pondering heart.**  
*“But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” Luke 2:19*

The experience of having her first child was probably nothing like Mary had imagined. There were no warm blankets, no mid-wife, and no mother close by to provide comfort. Yet the event was filled with wonder and mystery. With her nostrils filled with the smells of the straw, the animals and the blood, miles away from her family, her eyes glazed over with the pain and exhaustion of child-birth, Mary was able to “treasure up all these things and ponder them in her heart.”

The word “ponder” originally meant “to throw things together.” The original Greek text uses both the word that we translate into “ponder” and the word for “heart” in the same sentence. “Ponder” in the Greek suggests not just considering but also trying to put things together. But doing it in the “heart” gives an important emotional overlay to this process.

To ponder in our heart is to try to feel it out as well as to think it out. It’s a kind of wholistic contemplative response. So what is Mary doing? She is taking all the experiences of the last several months, and particularly of that night, and is bouncing them off each other to come to a conclusion.

He came to us one weekend near Christmas. He was as emotionally withdrawn as his eyes were sunken in his head. His name was Liam. He was wearing raggedy cloths and worn out running shoes. When I knelt down to take his hand he cowered and hide behind the officer’s leg; as tears streamed down his eyes. He was small, looking almost emaciated. I handed him a teddy bear and he sheepishly stuck out his hand to receive it and with the other wrapped his little fingers around one of mine.

Over the course of the evening and weekend he began to come out of his shell. He seemed to be fascinated with the Crèche and the baby Jesus in particular. I asked Liam if he knew the Christmas story of the birth of Jesus and he did. He said, “I know things, I am four you know.” We could see his little mind pondering and thinking about all that was going on.

He would play for what seemed like hours with all the camels, sheep and Wiseman and Shepherds and when he would leave the Crèche he would take the baby Jesus with him putting him his pocket and skipping a little as we went to play elsewhere; returning later to place Him in the straw and play again. He seemed to brighten a bit when he played there and so we let him.

This went on for days until it came time for Liam to leave. We hugged him and made sure he had his teddy bear and the other things we prepared for him. He seemed less withdrawn and perhaps a little taller than he was when he came. But of course that couldn’t be. He was only with us a few days. Yet, there was something. I just couldn’t put my finger on it.

It was a day or so later one of our noticed that the baby Jesus was nowhere to be found. We looked high and low but could not find him. It was then that Tabitha said, “I think Liam took Jesus with him.”

The words she had just said stopped me in my tracks. And I said, “Darling, I hope he did take Jesus with him. I hope he did.”

I have always hoped he had taken Jesus with him that Christmas. And I hope you do this Christmas as well. You think about that. Amen