Some years ago there was a story in *Reader’s Digest* about a moose that wandered into a residential neighbourhood in Calgary, Alberta. A Fish and Wildlife officer was dispatched to try to coax the beast back into the wild. After two hours of absolutely no progress, the officer finally shot the moose with a tranquilizer dart. The moose bolted down the street but soon collapsed on a nearby lawn. The reporters who had been following this event interviewed the woman at whose house the moose collapsed. They asked her what she thought about the incident. “I’m surprised,” she answered, “but not as surprised as my husband will be. He’s out moose hunting.” Her husband had gone out looking for moose only to have a large moose come to him. You might say that story epitomizes the message of Christmas. While humanity spends its time seeking after God, God comes to us in the babe of Bethlehem.

We could not reach up to God, so God came down to us. That’s the good news I want to proclaim to you this evening. Michael Hendrix tells about a Christmas party he once attended. A little girl was operating an electric train too fast and it derailed. She bent over the train and tried to put it back on the track but as some of you might know from experience that’s not always easy. The groove on the train’s wheel must be precisely aligned with the narrow track. Noticing her frustration, the dad said to his young daughter, “You can’t do that looking from the top down; you have to get down beside it.” He then laid down on the floor beside the train where he could easily see how to place the train back on the track. “What a wonderful way to think about the incarnation,” Hendrix says. “The human race had derailed and needed to be put back on the track of life. It couldn’t be done from above; God had to come down beside us in order to put us back on track. God came and lived among us in the person of his Son Jesus to show us his love and to put us back on the track of life.”

The Christian faith is not a philosophy; it is a revelation. God revealed his purpose and plan, his love and his grace, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. If there are some things about our faith you do not understand, join the crowd. If we could understand everything there is to know about God, God would not be God. We do not have the full mental capacity to reach up to God intellectually.
Imagine God’s dilemma. In Old Testament times God sought to communicate his love and his purpose for humanity through the Law and his word spoken to the prophets, and also through the worship of God’s people in the Temple of Jerusalem. But still people did not grasp how much God loves us and that God’s greatest desire was for us to love one another. So God did the only thing left. God became one of us in the person of Jesus. God came to us when, intellectually, we could not reach up to Him.

But that was not the only way we could not reach up to God. We also could not reach up to God morally. Before the coming of Jesus the Jewish people believed that the only way to God was through right living. If you could just follow the Law and keep all its ordinances, then you would be saved. But salvation by righteousness did not work. For some, like the Pharisees, their devotion to the Law deteriorated into an odious legalism. They looked down their noses at others who were not as seemingly righteous as they. While others, feeling that they had no hope of fulfilling every jot and tittle of the Law, simply threw up their hands in despair and did not bother to try. They were like the little three year old girl who was Christmas shopping with her mom. The girl was obviously beginning to get tired but the long line at the register was moving slowly and her mother’s patience also was stretched to the breaking point. “Straighten up and be nice,” the mother said in an irritated tone as the child began to cry and whine. “Mommy, I’m all out of nice,” came the response. Well, sometimes adults run out of nice, too, and it is not a pretty sight to see.

“Nobody’s perfect,” we say at such times. And, of course, it’s true. But sometimes when we give in to our imperfections, sad things happen. Dr. Samuel Massey tells of watching a World War II movie in which an experienced soldier is giving lessons to a young recruit character about how to destroy a dam. The pupil thought that if you used enough dynamite you could send the entire dam skyward. But the teacher explained that far less explosive power was needed. “Place a few sticks in critically vulnerable places, blow them up, and then wait patiently,” he said. “Silently, but certainly, the pent-up water would do the rest of the job washing the dam downstream.”

What’s true of a dam can also be true of a family or a reputation. One time of “running out of nice,” can sink us. One seemingly minor indiscretion can destroy a marriage, a career, not to mention one’s good
name. Who will save us when we’ve blown up our life? We know the answer to that, don’t we? I love something that author Max Lucado said in one of his books. “When we look in the mirror we may only see our failures. Even though many of us can’t see beyond the failures, this is not the way God views us. As a loving God, he looks past our failures. Can you imagine a loving parent introducing their children by saying, ‘This is my daughter Meagan who stained the carpet with grape juice when she was two,’ or ‘This is my son Myles who broke a valuable vase last week.’ If loving parents don’t have a need to memorize their children’s failures, you can rest assured our loving heavenly Father has no use for such memories either.”

Jesus showed us God’s amazing grace. He taught us by understanding that grace is not something you earn, but is a free gift. We could not reach up to God intellectually or morally, nor could we reach up to God with our good works. Even now, 2000 years after the birth of Christ, we know what God wants of us. God wants us to love one another. God wants us to take care of the least, the lowest and the lost. God wants us to lay down our lives for others, even as he lay down his life for us. But time after time we fail the test of love and compassion, just as we failed the test of keeping all the ceremonial and moral laws. We don’t have it in us to love as Christ loved us.

Actor Robert Morse tells an amusing but also revealing story about a dishevelled Hispanic man who showed up at the rear of an inner city church just as midnight mass was ending one Christmas Eve. The priest, Fr. Mark, was a man who was devoted to serving the homeless, but by the time midnight mass was over he was pretty weary and just wanted to go to bed. This Hispanic gentleman was almost “one homeless person too many” for him. Fr. Mark knew that his commitment to being a “caring” pastor had put him in this position, but he was starting to feel sorry for himself. On the way to the shelter, he stewed in his own anger at himself, at the man, and ultimately at God.

Suddenly realizing he didn’t even know the stranger’s name, Fr. Mark asked him. The man answered, “Hayzoos,” which of course, is the Spanish pronunciation for “Jesus.” The ironic humor of the whole situation suddenly washed over the priest’s mind and heart. Here he was griping to God about taking a man named Jesus to a shelter on Christmas Eve! Fr. Mark felt as if it were a huge cosmic trick. The comic aspect
of it both judged his anger and redeemed him out of it. “Leave it to God to beat us at our own game,” he thought to himself. And so, gratefully, that Christmas Eve he provided shelter to a homeless man named “Hayzoos,” Jesus.

Anyone who seeks to do good burns out at some time or another. It’s inevitable. We’re not Christ. There are many loving and devoted people in this congregation who serve God in our community. I am so thankful for each of you. But none of us, no matter how much good we do, can keep it up forever. We cannot love as Christ loved. Our love is a drop in the ocean compared to the love Christ showed for us on the cross.

We cannot reach up to God intellectually, morally, or in our good works. That is why the world needed Christmas. Christmas is the celebration of God reaching down to us when we could not reach up to him. The previous Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, tells of watching a video showing the work of one of the most experienced therapists in Britain. In the video the therapist seeks to explain what she is trying to do with her treatment of a young man suffering from extreme autism. In the video you see, first of all, this young man, severely disturbed, beating his head against a wall and then walking fast up and down the room, twisting and flicking a piece of string. The therapist’s first response is strange: she begins to twist and flick a piece of string as well. When the young man makes a noise, so does she; when he begins to do something different, like banging his hand on a table, she does the same.

By the end of the two days, the boy has begun to smile at the therapist and to respond when touched. A relationship has been created. Here is what the therapist said: “Autism arises when the brain senses too much information coming in. There’s a feeling of panic; the mind has to regain control. And the best way of doing this is to close up on yourself and repeat actions that are familiar; do nothing new, and don’t acknowledge anything coming from outside. But when the therapist gently echoes the actions and rhythms, the anxious and wounded mind of the autistic person sees that there is, after all, a link with the outside world that isn’t threatening. The world isn’t just an unfamiliar place of terror and uncertainty and so relationship begins.”
Archbishop Williams observes, “To see this sort of thing in action is intensely moving. This is real mental and spiritual healing at work. But it gives us a powerful image of what it is we remember at Christmas, that at Christmas God broke down the barriers between ourselves and God by becoming one of us, one with us, one alongside us.”

And that is the good news on this holiest of nights when heaven and earth drew near and kissed each other. When we could not reach up to God, God reached down to us. God became as we are, that we might know God’s love, and be led to love one another as Christ has loved us.