

## **Christmas Eve: Deliver**

Good evening again, and thank you for joining us on this Christmas Eve. Tonight, we reflect on this miraculous story, and this life-changing birth, and we marvel that the God of the universe descended to us to be among us. We celebrate that God's love, which was heard of, and preached about, and sung about for centuries, has actually come to dwell with us—this story is the ultimate story of love in action.

You see, “love in action,” is our theme this year, and we’ve been tracing it through our biblical text, looking for other moments when God’s compassion and care for human beings was put on display. We’ve looked for ways that God has protected us, comforted us, restored us, and soothed us, all because our Creator couldn’t help but want to be close to us. We’ve also looked for ways that we can respond to this divine love, we’ve gone through these verses and picked out verbs that guide us as we try to imitate God’s character in our broken world. The goal isn’t simply to increase in our knowledge of God, but to increase in love towards and to increase in love towards each other. Our purpose is to turn the love that we have experienced into tangible action that transforms our world.

Before I share a brief meditation about our text, let’s pray together.

*Holy God,*

*In a display of profound humility, you came to us in human form. You came to us through Mary, a woman so full of faith and hope that she birthed a Savior. You came to us from a manger, waiting to be found by the shepherds of the fields, not a prince in a palace. You came to us as a gift, a balm for our anxious and weary souls. You came to set the captives free, and to liberate the oppressed. As we gather in your divine presence, remind us of this incarnate reality. As we witness your arrival, draw us closer so that we might respond with adoration and gratitude. As we worship you together, fill our hearts with your eternal love. Amen.*

I have a Christmas Eve confession for you: as with all familiar scripture texts, it can be hard to know what to say.

On these special occasions, you might think it would be easy, because the story is so well known, and people know exactly what you expect—but I've never found that to be the case.

If you've ever been to a Christmas Eve service before, you know that it's the same story every year, the same passages, mostly the same hymns, the same candles lit at the end. With all that sameness, it can feel difficult to know how to make this narrative feel fresh and new. What can you say that hasn't already been said by someone else? What can you say that hasn't been said hundreds of times over the centuries? What can you say that is original and inspiring? How can you capture people's attention if their stomach is grumbling because they're thinking about the Christmas Eve meal that awaits them? How can you make an impact when parents in the pews are silently making a list in their heads of all the things that need to be done, and all the batteries that they forgot to buy?

Well, some preachers respond to this conundrum by simply preaching the exact same sermon year after year—effectively opting out of the demand for something totally new. Some choose to read a children's story instead—diverting our attention to something amusing or sentimental. Some, like me, with a tendency towards perfectionism, beat their heads against the metaphorical wall when writer's block inevitably comes to call.

And so this past week, when I lacked the right words for this beautiful story, I turned to music. Music has a way of connecting us to God when all else fails, doesn't it? The melodies and harmonies of beautiful songs settle into our hearts and come to the surface just when we need them most, often at times when we cannot fully articulate the emotions that swirl around inside of us and the challenges that plague us. Music can remind us of our childhood, or of other moments when we felt at peace. Hymns can draw us back into the magic of this season, even when everything else around us feels not so magical.

Well, unfortunately, that's not the way it happened to me this past week. Instead of that blissful transcendence or timeless melodies bringing peace, I was instead plagued, yes plagued, by a single song in particular that kept me up at night. Just one song, over and over again, until I was feeling a little bit crazy. Sometimes people call this phenomenon an "earworm," a song that repeats in your brain until it mercifully ends up wriggling itself out. Has this ever happened to you? If it has, then you know that this definitely wasn't helping my writer's block, because all that was playing in my mind were the lyrics to "Mary Did You Know?"

There's been a little bit of recent backlash against "Mary Did You Know," and I can't help but feel like at least a little bit of that criticism is valid. In case you were wondering, yes, this song was written by a man, and yes, with that in mind it does read a little bit (or a lot) like mansplaining.

Hordes of women want to shout: of course Mary knew all of this—the angel spoke directly to her! Of course she knew—scripture tells us that she had long pondered all these things in her heart! Of course she knew—she was the one carrying the baby through all those weird cravings, and frequent trips to the bathroom! Of course she knew—she had been the one preparing for the birth! Of course Mary knew!

Maybe the song should have been directed to Joseph—who forced his very pregnant wife to travel a hundred miles on a donkey for this bureaucratic nightmare of a census. I'm not saying it was a stupid plan, but I think he could have come up with some better travel options, don't you?

I will say, the original songwriter, Mark Lowry, has been pretty good natured over the years about his controversial take on the biblical story—he's said that the idea for this song came to him when he was wondering about what it must have been like for Mary in this moment when heaven and earth came together through the miracle of childbirth. He wasn't trying to be condescending, he was trying to be thoughtful about this new reality of God coming in human

form and how strange it must have been to witness. He wasn't trying to mansplain, he was just curious about the details of the story and how best to share it with the world.

And I can appreciate that, because I've been doing exactly the same thing as I tried to write this meditation.

But while I was trying to get my thoughts together, there was ONE line of this song that just kept sticking in my brain—the line goes “This child that you deliver, will soon deliver you...”

When I finally sat down to put pen to paper, I began to think that this line was more than just some catchy lyrical wordplay. Sure, it's a nice turn of phrase, but I think its relative simplicity hides the surprising and redemptive truth that I've been trying to capture.

I think this idea of delivery is both at the core of this moment with Mary and Joseph, and at the center of Jesus' story of sacrifice, and we would be wise to remember that these stories of life, death, and resurrection are deeply intertwined. These scenes, the one at the beginning of Jesus' life, and the one at the end, are held together by this common thread. This story about a delivery in an unfamiliar manger is inextricably connected to the deliverance of all of God's people, and this story about birth cannot be disconnected from the larger plan of salvation and rebirth for all of creation.

Jesus, our God with Us, was delivered into human form, so that we could be delivered too.

And that divine story is good news, today and everyday. It's the same story we tell each and every week. It's the same gospel that we preach year after year. It's the same hope that we hold onto generation after generation. It will be the same forever, whether it's Christmas or not.

I guess I've learned that this message doesn't have to be new to be transformative. It doesn't have to be original each year to be magical. It doesn't have to be innovative all the time in order to be special.

What is true about this story will always be true. What is beautiful about this story will always be beautiful. What is revolutionary about this story will always be revolutionary. What is real about this story will always be real.

The good news will always be good news.

So my friends, Merry Christmas.

Amen.