I love Christmas. It is, by far, my favorite holiday of the year. I love the decorations… the music… buying gifts for my friends and family… and all the traditions that go into the holiday season. For me, one of those traditions that I love so much… is right here… Christmas Eve service… my favorite service of the year. I love friends and families… all of us here, gathered together… to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Everyone here has taken time out of the busy holiday season… all the traditions you have with your friends and family… to come here… and praise the infant Christ. And I have to say… you all look great… all done up in Christmas attire. I do believe we’d make a very good Christmas card picture here tonight.

But you know… our gathering here tonight… it also makes me think that as wonderful as this night is… as wonderful and put together as we all look tonight… I’m not really sure it’s an accurate picture of what goes on behind the scenes. There’s a recent commercial I saw that I think illustrates this point pretty well. It’s a commercial for a digital camera… dad is trying to take a family Christmas photo… and it doesn’t seem to be going very well. In every single shot… somebody’s misbehaving. The little boy is sticking his tongue out at his sister… she’s texting her BFF… mom’s talking on the cell phone while scolding her children… grandpa’s distracted by the TV… grandma’s worried about the dog. It’s chaos. But what this camera allows the dad to do… is pick the best shot of each person from any picture… and compile it into one where everyone’s smiling and looking at the camera. The perfect picture.

We all want that beautiful picture. Especially during the holidays, I think, we want to look good… we want things to be perfect. I can relate to that… my first Christmas here at Peace… I wanted everything to be perfect tonight… but things happen… you get sick with whatever is going around at the moment… for instance… but still… we want things to be perfect so we put on a good face… regardless of what’s really going on in our lives behind the scenes. We have this tendency… no matter our struggles with family… no matter our frustrations with finances… no matter the pain we might be feeling after a loss… especially during the holidays we strive to be brave… to be happy… to put on that smiling face for those around us. But it’s an illusion. We do this in our lives… and sometimes… we even do this with our faith.

Our Christmas nativity is a good example. This year Peace Lutheran happened to be in the market for a new nativity scene for our chancel area… the result of which is this beautiful scene right here to my left. Without going into a large amount of detail… let me just say that I spent a pathetically inordinate amount of time looking at numerous nativity sets of every size and shape… looking for animals… looking at shepherds… you may have noticed the absence of a shepherd in our nativity here tonight… this particular set didn’t come with a shepherd… and while you’d think you could find just a shepherd to add in… not so much. Apparently shepherds are not sold separately… unless you want four of the same shepherd… but I digress.

What I started thinking about in all of my time spent looking through various nativity sets… is that our picture of the nativity really isn’t very accurate at all. Most of the time Jesus is portrayed as this chubby, cherub-cheeked infant with blond hair and bright blue eyes. Now first off, Jesus was a middle-eastern Jew… I’d place heavy odds that he didn’t have blue eyes and blond hair. And he was a newborn in that manger… newborns are red… and wrinkly… not chubby and cherub-cheeked. Plus they were in a barn. It would have been dirty and smelly… and when the shepherds came… more than likely they would have been dirty and smelly too.

And the wise men? The wise men wouldn’t even have been there… more than likely they found Jesus, Mary and Joseph when Jesus was closer to the age of two. And then there’s Mary. I think Mary is my favorite. I have no doubts about the character of the mother of Christ… but in the nativity… she always seems to have this kind of aura about her. She’s pristine… not a hair out of place… she’s kneeling with her hands folded… often with eyes closed and this angelic look on her face. And all I can think is this is not the look of a woman who just gave birth. Giving birth is hard work… especially back before painkillers and epidurals. A sweaty Mary… with a red face and disheveled hair… that would be more accurate.

I’m not trying to be flippant… I love the nativity… and there’s nothing wrong with remembering the birth of Christ in a way that highlights the joy and reverence of the occasion. There’s nothing wrong with wanting that perfect picture… in our faith or our lives… just as long as we don’t neglect the reality. Because the reality is, Christ came into the world in the most human way possible. He entered the world through Mary’s pain and determination… and God incarnate… Christ our Savior… our Lord of all wasn’t born into riches or power… he was born in a barn… to a lowly carpenter and his teen-age wife.

It’s so important that we remember the real way Christ came into our world… rather than just the pretty picture… because it means so much in terms of who Christ is… and what he came here to do. Jesus came into the world painfully and messy… because this world can be a painful messy place and we are messy people. We mess things up. We hurt one another… people we love dearly and people we don’t even know. Most often… our lives aren’t put together… but rather are a series of mess-ups and missteps. And I think we all know that there is darkness in this world… darkness so great that it is beyond reason itself.

But in the midst of all of that… here, now and forever is Christ. Christ is the light in our darkness… the light that no amount of darkness can overcome. God sent Jesus Christ, his only Son, into the midst of a painful, messy world with a message and a promise. The message is that God loves us unconditionally as children of God… and forgives us for all the things we mess up. And then there’s God’s promise: the promise of grace and new life. God promises new life in Jesus Christ… that all suffering and death will pass away… and we will live eternally with God in a world where there is no darkness… and God will wipe every tear from our eyes.

And God’s message and God’s promise in Jesus Christ aren’t just for a select few… not just for people who think they’ve earned or deserve it… God’s message of love and promise of grace are for all people… The angel said, “See—I am bringing you good news of great joy for ALL the people.” All the people… the good news is for all us… messy people in our messy world… because Christ didn’t come into the world in spite of our sin… but because of our sin… so that we all are forgiven and made clean. Each and every one of us are receivers of God’s love and grace. That is the gift that comes in the form the newborn Christ… and the man crucified on the cross.

We want that perfect picture because it’s what we strive for. It’s the hope we have as messy people in a messy world. And it’s completely okay to hold on to that. As long as we remember that Christ came into this world… as it is… for all of us… as we are. Tonight… as we gather together to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ… let us remember that no matter what, God is always with us… God always loves us… and God’s grace abounds in us. May the light of Christ shine brightly in the darkness for all of you this Christmas.