

# What Would Jesus Say To...?

The Complete Series



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**A four-part look at secular Christmas characters.**

Presented by Reverends Tom & Patricia Campbell-Schmitt

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eyes of people who are hungry, imprisoned, sick, struggling for their own survival and existence and freedom. God sees the world this way because His promises to us is that in Jesus, God becomes one of us. In Jesus, God becomes involved in our world and loves us so much that it hurts him and even kills him.

This is what I believe Jesus want to say to the world. Jesus wants us to know that in the Christmas promises, God lets us in on a secret, the secret He once shared with Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zachariah—with the wisemen and shepherds, the secret that God believes in us and in this world. And because God believes in us—we too, can begin to believe in our world again. As Jesus Christ calls us to himself—as he shapes us into his community—he also sends us back into the world as his people—the kind of people who sometimes in their hoping, sometimes in their believing, sometimes in their loving—can set aside reality long enough to be a community that beckons the hopeless, the wandering, the searching, the lonely, and the suffering ones.

So this morning hear Jesus saying to us all, “Dear friends, may you receive this wonderful promise of Christmas with thankful hearts. May you really know that God believes in you and in this world—so that you may rejoice—for to you is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

One person who took the incredible promise of the incarnation quite seriously was Frederick Handel. He was so inspired by the story of Jesus that he wrote one of the greatest musical pieces of all time. So this morning our proclamation of the Word will continue as we listen to selections of Handel’s Messiah sung by our own choir.

## What Would Jesus Say to...the World?

(John 3:16-17)

Peace be with you all this morning in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. This week we will be celebrating the greatest event in all of history—the coming of God to our earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. On Christmas Day we will be recalling the opening scene of a world-shaking human drama—the personal coming of the Almighty and Everlasting God into human life. To take this event seriously—to really believe that something unique happened when Jesus was born, we must be willing to set aside what we call reality, and to trust God’s promise to this world. For there can be no rational explanation for Christmas—for the incarnation. The events of Christmas are beyond our comprehension and understanding, and we must not reduce the Christmas story to something so innocuous that no leap of faith is required to believe it.

It certainly required a huge leap of faith for those involved in that first Christmas to go along with what was happening to them. Zachariah, Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the wisemen all really boggled at what was happening to them. Like us, they all began with reality. Zachariah said he was too old to have a baby—he knew about fertility and old age. Elizabeth, his wife, hid herself for 5 months after the angel Gabriel told her she was to have a baby named John. Mary and Joseph were the first to doubt the Virgin birth. Mary knew the facts about life—where babies came from and can we really believe it was all that easy for the shepherds to leave their expensive flocks of sheep unattended simply to see a baby—or for the wisemen to undertake such a long difficult journey only to end up in a stable?

No, all these people started with the way things are—the way we all know things are—but in the end they went along with what was happening to them, incredible as it was, they went along because of the tremendous promise attached to the birth of a child. It was this promise that enabled these very human people to believe all things, to hope all things, and to endure all things. Yes, an amazing, astonishing, startling promise was made with the birth of Jesus, and the promise was that God has not abandoned this world, this people, this planet.

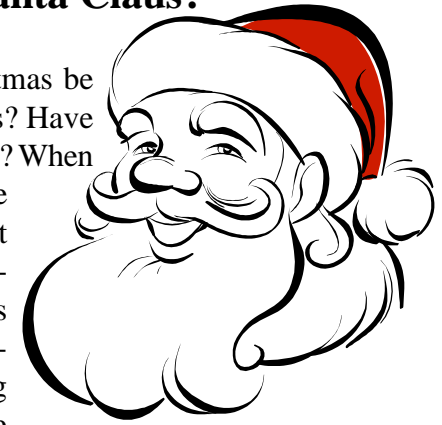
That is what I believe Jesus wants to say to this world on this Christmas seasons. Jesus wants all the world to know that God does not observe this world from afar, rather God sees it close up...ravished, spoiled, violent, the way we made it, and they way we see it. God sees this world through the



## What Would Jesus Say to...Santa Claus?

(Malachi 4:1-4; Mark 1:1-8)

Ah, Santa Claus. What would Christmas be without him? In all of his many disguises? Have you had any “close encounters” with Santa? When I was a boy I always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time when it came to meeting up with him. I can remember leaving out some Christmas cookies and milk for him on Christmas Eve, waking up the sound of sleigh bells, running downstairs as fast as I could, only to see my father tell me that I just missed seeing him! Darn that Santa. For being so jolly and plump he was sure quick on his feet! So like many children, I resorted to sending him letters because I knew it wasn’t like we would meet face to face. Here are a couple of recent letters some children have written to him:



*Dear Santa, I have been really good this year. I want to ask you a question. I don't have a chimney and was wondering how you get into my house? (We have a very advanced security system). Thank you! Love, Lewis*

*Dear Santa, Last year I asked you for a new baby brother. This Christmas I want you to take him back. Love, Sarah.*

*Dear Santa, I hope you get me at least one thing I want. I want a set of pads so I can skate at Nathan's. I also want Osama bin Laden caught. I also want my whole family to be happy on Christmas. I hope you can get me one of these things. Merry Christmas From: Robert P.S. I still believe in you.*

Someone has said there are four stages of life: the stage in which you believe in Santa Claus, the stage in which you do not believe in Santa, the stage in which you are Santa, and the stage in which you look like Santa! With all of the wonderful goodies that seem to appear during the holiday season, we’re probably all in danger of looking like Santa!

But I have a question for you this morning: What do you think Jesus would say to Santa Claus? More importantly, what would Jesus say to us about Santa? Some people feel all the hype about Santa is a lot of hum-bug. Yet there is something we need to know about him. Although it’s hard to separate the myth from the man, as far as we can tell the original St. Nicholas was a follower of Jesus. His message was not unlike someone else who shows up in the pages of the New Testament: John the Baptist. He said: “Someone more powerful than I am is coming; I am not worthy to untie the

thongs of his sandals.” Let’s explore this idea more carefully as we look at this morning’s Gospel reading from Mark 1:1-8. (read passage)

One day a horse wandered into a west Texas town with a battered, beaten cowboy, slumped in the saddle. The townspeople ran out just in time to hear the cowboy utter his last words, “Big Jake is comin’!” Then he collapsed and died. Heeding his warning, the townspeople boarded up their windows and closed their business. They huddled behind over-turned tables and prayed. Pretty soon they heard the clip-clop of horse hooves coming down the main street of the town. They peeked out through the window to see the biggest, baddest, meanest-looking cowboy they had ever seen: he was nearly seven feet tall; he wore a leather vest with a gun belt crossing his chest; he was toting two six shooters, a rifle, a glass eye, and a wicked-looking scar along his chin. The guy rode up to the local saloon and tied up his horse. As he burst through the doors, he tore them off at the hinges. He walked up to the bar and said, “Whiskey!” Trembling, the bartender uncorked a bottle and slid it his way. The cowboy downed it in one long gulp. When the bartender asked if he’d like another drink, the cowboy replied: “Uh-Uh. Gotta high-tail it outta here. Big Jake is coming!”

I think John the Baptist was very much like this cowboy: an awesome figure you didn’t want to mess with. He came into town announcing the arrival of an even more awesome figure than he was. Unlike our cowboy, John attracted followers like light attracts bugs. He was the Pied Piper of Palestine. The people thought, “Could he be the One we’ve been looking for?” Listen to what John himself had to say: “*He must increase, and I must decrease.*” (John 3:30) He was talking about Jesus. He said, “I’m just the point man. I’m not the main man. Don’t mistake the messenger for the Messiah.”

If you were to ask the original St. Nick about his purpose, his mission, he would most likely say the same thing: “I’m not the message; I’m just the messenger.” While the details we know of his life are very hazy, and many legends have grown up around him, as far as we can tell, we do know Saint Nicholas was a real person. He was born about 270 A.D. in the port town of Patara, which today is found in the country of Turkey. He was the only child of wealthy parents who both died from a plague when he was quite young. Nicholas inherited the family wealth but when he was only 17 he moved to the town of Myra to study for the priesthood.

It is said that eventually Nicholas became a bishop in the Roman Church, in part, because he was such a kind and generous man. One story has it that on the night after his appointment, he heard of a family with three daughters

lifestyles to insulate us from the needs of the poor and downtrodden. Because if we do, we will miss out on the joy and the grand adventure of what Christmas is all about.

What you do in this life does matter. It makes a difference. God remembers even small acts of kindness. As long as there is life, there is hope that hard hearts can be softened and the chains of greed and self-interest can be broken. So, pay attention to your bank account and calendar this Christmas and ask yourself, “Is there anything here for God and for the Christ Child? Is there anything here for others?” If not, honestly ask yourself, “Why not?”

Let’s pray: *Gracious and Merciful God, how we thank you for the transforming power of your gospel. We also pray that you would help us not to hide from the world and be insulated in our affluence. Allow us to see the side of life you experienced when you came as a Middle Eastern peasant. Transform us this day as you did old Scrooge from a taker into a giver. We pray that each hungry and homeless family may be transformed in our eyes into a picture of Mary and Joseph. And that each abandoned, abused, neglected children in our city, nation, and world might become a picture of the Christ Child himself. For it is in his name that we pray. Amen.*

poverty of his old life with all of it's focus on self, it's emptiness, it's absence of joy and peace. He comes to a turning point, and he chooses the converted life.

That's the second step Scrooge takes: he allows himself to change. He thinks and acts differently. When he wakes up on Christmas morning, this repentant old sinner throws open his window sash, gleeful that he has not missed truly living this great day, goes skipping down the street, liberated, full of spirit, for the first time really seeing and loving his neighbors, and shouting "Merry Christmas" to all he meets. Now it's the most natural thing in the world to buy that huge turkey for the Cratchits' table, splurge on gifts for others, to say "Yes, Thank You" to his nephew's dinner invitation, to double his clerk's salary, to stock the fire with triple the coal, to pledge his support to the poor and guarantee the medical care for Tiny Tim.

One of the modern paradoxes of America is that while we live in one of the wealthiest and most powerful nations in the history of the world, there are 30 million citizens in our nation who have no health care. Our own state of Oregon ranks second in the number of children and families living at or below the poverty level. Listen carefully: Jesus teaches us that there is a connection between both of these dilemmas of rich and poor. God has designed us in such a way that we will not find meaning in materialism. If you want to be truly happy, you need the poor as much as they need you. Because joy and meaning come in giving. By the grace of God, Ebenezer Scrooge eventually discovered that truth.

The good news is that like Ebenezer Scrooge, I am still alive. I can make changes. So what does Jesus say to the Ebenezer's in this room? I think he's saying what he said elsewhere in Luke's gospel: "to whom much has been given, from whom much will be required." (Luke 12:48) If you want to be a follower of Jesus there is one thing you need to know up front: while his grace is free for the taking, it's not cheap. What do I mean by that? God's gift to us of Jesus was a costly gift, because it cost him his life.

There is a cartoon I once saw. A man wanted to know if God was real. He looked up and said, "God, what do you want me to do with my life?" In the next frame, a voice from heaven comes and says, "Feed the poor, help the hungry, free the oppressed." In the next frame, the man looks up and says, "Just testing." In the final frame the voice says, "Same here."

The greatest test of whether Christ is real to us and whether he is truly active in our lives lies in how we treat the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, the powerless, the oppressed. These are all moral values for every Christian. You and I have to be very careful that we do not allow our comfortable

whom none of the young men in town would marry because their father was too poor to afford a dowry. So Nicholas took three leather pouches and filled each of them with gold. Then, under cover of darkness, he crept to the family's home and tossed a gold-filled pouch through each daughter's bedroom window. Not long after, all three young women were happily married. From this legend arose the belief that "unexpected gifts come from Saint Nicholas." This evolved into the custom that "Christmas gifts come from Saint Nick." Children began putting out their shoes and stockings on Christmas Eve in the hope that Saint Nicholas would come in the night to fill them with candy.

Back when Nicholas became a bishop he dressed in a long flowing gown, wore a hat or bishop's miter on his head, had a cape over his shoulders, and his beard had turned white. So you can see where Nicholas' costume originally came from. Tradition has it that after his death he was elevated to sainthood and was soon known the world over. In France, St. Nick became known as Pere Noel. In England he was Father Christmas. When the communists took over in Russia and outlawed Christianity, the Russians began to call him Grandfather Frost. To the Dutch, he was Sinterklaas (which eventually was mispronounced in America and became Santa Claus).

The Santa we know today however, really had his beginnings in 1823 with Clement Moore's "A Visit from St. Nicholas" in which he described him as "Chubby and plum, a right jolly old elf." Forty years later, the political cartoonist Thomas Nast made him big and fat and dressed him all in red.

During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln asked Nast to do an illustration showing Santa with Union troops. Many historians say this was one of the most demoralizing moments for the Confederate army—seeing Santa side with the North! Then in the '30s Coca Cola included a stylized version of Santa each year in their Christmas advertising and it wasn't long before the American Christmas was an unstoppable, overly-commercialized, extravaganza. But what we seem to have all-but-forgotten is that behind all of these popularized and commercialized images of Santa is the story of an orphan boy whose life became a reflection of the Christ he spent his life serving.

To miss the origins of Santa is to miss the true meaning of Christmas. It would be a little like walking through a hotel lobby and hearing the sounds of a wedding party taking place in the hotel's grand ballroom, deciding to peek through the door to see what all the commotion is about, slipping inside to join the party, laughing loudly and dancing wildly, eating the food and drinking the wine—but never bothering to meet the bride and groom. You say, "Hey, this party is great!" But you have no personal relationship to the couple.

But as Christians, we know that the central character in the drama of Christmas is not Santa Claus, and it's not John the Baptist—they're just the supporting cast. What this holy season is all about, what Saint Nick and John the Baptist point us to, is something far more important: we're all awaiting the arrival of "the One who saves." For that's what the name of Jesus means in Aramaic, the language our Lord spoke. One who saves.

Many years ago I had a terrifying experience that deepened my appreciation of this central figure in the drama we call Christmas. It happened about this time of year—in late November or early December. I was about nine or ten at the time and was playing where I shouldn't have been playing: on a Minnesota lake that was just beginning to freeze for the winter. Ice had formed on the lake's surface, but it wasn't very thick. I found that out in a hurry! I was sliding along on the ice, listening to it crack beneath my feet, not really watching where I was going, when all of a sudden the ice gave way and I found myself literally up to my neck in trouble. My boots and snow suit filling up quickly with water, weighing me down, and I couldn't get out. Panicked, I did the only thing I could do—I cried out for help. Fortunately a passerby stopped, got out of his car, waded out into the icy water, and pulled me to safety. Several hours later I realized how fortunate I really was. It was as if my life had been given back to me. When Christmas arrived a few weeks later and we sang "Christ the Savior is born," that phrase took on a whole new meaning for me.

Of course, you don't have to have a close call with death to appreciate the meaning of the word Savior. You can also be feeling rather hopeless about a problem that is getting the best of you. You can be searching for a sense of meaning and purpose in your life. And then you come to realize that is the reason why Christ came. To bring hope, love, joy, and peace you have never known before. Today, on this first Sunday of Advent, we enter that season once again. A time when Christ calls us from darkness into light, from sorrow into joy, from death into new life through him. That's really what John the Baptist came to announce: the coming of the Savior, the God who came to earth in the person of Jesus the Christ. So what would Jesus say to Santa Claus? "Let him point the way to me." And that is what we are trying to do in this time of worship: point the way to the one who is King of kings and Lord of all.

*Prayer:* God, thank you for the joy of Christmas. Thank you that our joy this season is not based on cute legends or festive parties. It does not even depend upon the giving and receiving of material gifts. Our joy results from the blessing of your coming to be with us in the person of Jesus Christ. We

Have you noticed this pattern within yourself? That the older you get the more set in your ways you seem to be? I sure have. Let's say, for example, that you used to be kinder, more generous, more compassionate, but too many times you discovered that someone who looked a lot like Lazarus was just running a con on you. You tried to help, but later found out that hard luck story was a lie and so you felt used and betrayed. Next time, you tell yourself, "I'll be more careful." And if you get burned again, the temptation is strong just to give up. "Better to be safe than sorry. You just can't trust anyone these days."

Looking at life through rose-colored glasses may be foolish, but shutting yourself off like Ebenezer Scrooge can also have dire consequences. There is a prayer attributed to St. Francis that goes like this: "*Make me a channel of your peace, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, in giving to others that we receive, and in dying that we are born to eternal life.*" It's that paradox Jesus spoke about when he said, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." (Luke 9:24).

But Ebenezer Scrooge has not yet realized this truth. Because he, too, has a poor man living at the end of his driveway. His name is Bob Cratchit. The youngest of Cratchit's five children is a little boy named Tiny Tim, who is desperately ill. He has braces on his legs and has to use a tree branch for a crutch. Tiny Tim is so sick that unless he receives medical treatment soon, he will die. But the family has no money. Bob Cratchit is an employee of Ebenezer Scrooge but isn't given a livable wage. Like the rich man's relationship with Lazarus, Scrooge is largely oblivious to the needs of the Cratchit family.

But one night something happens. Scrooge is confronted with his life, he is led through the pain of seeing things as they really are. Arriving home on Christmas Eve, he encounters the ghost of his late partner, Jacob Marley. He sees in Marley a mirror reflection of his own life. Marley's mission is to break Scrooge's heart so that a new heart can begin to grow. He predicts the visits of three spirits who will fashion a new life from the ashes of Scrooge's old life. Through these visitations of Christmas past, present, and future Scrooge takes baby steps toward his own healing and conversion. You see, he is not stuck in the past the way the rich man was. He still has time to change. Scrooge is offered the gift of repentance and a new beginning.

Marley reminds Ebenezer Scrooge that no one can change unless they are first disturbed by what they have become. That's step one and it's called repentance. Scrooge's blinders finally come off and he is able to see the

camped right in front of his nose, the rich man doesn't really see him. Lazarus doesn't register on his radar screen. He's like a mud puddle that you step over without thinking.

I once read a phrase that I have never forgotten. It spoke of the "obscene juxtaposition of wealth and poverty." Jesus' parable—one of many in the New Testament that focuses on money and possessions—illustrates this phrase. He paints a scene in which someone without food, without friends, without basic health care, is living right next door to someone with too much food, too many friends, and not a care in the world. Yet the rich man doesn't lift a finger to help the poor man.

But the story doesn't end there. We're told that both the rich man and Lazarus up and die. Lazarus goes to heaven but the rich man goes to that other place. He's surprised by this and didn't really see it coming. His financial plan went well into his retirement years, but not beyond. He had prepared for the golden years, but not for the eternal years. He never considered that the earthly investment of his time, talent, or treasure might have heavenly returns. He didn't think his attitudes and actions in this life would impact the life to come. But now he is in the Great Beyond and, well, he doesn't like it. There are no horns or pitchforks in this scene, no cartoon characters dressed in red. But it's Hell nonetheless because the rich man realizes he is no longer in control and worse yet, he's powerless to change the situation. There's no chance to re-write the story and it doesn't have a happy ending. What there is is a great void, an emptiness, because the hope of redemption is simply gone.

It's a disturbing story—for two reasons, really: First, while Dickens portrays Ebenezer Scrooge as a self-centered bad-guy, notice that in Jesus' parable there are no terrible wrongs the rich man seems to have committed. In Jesus' parable, Abraham doesn't say, "You evil person, you acted horribly toward other people." He just says, "Look, you had everything in life; Lazarus had nothing; and you let him lie there uncared for." The second difference between these two stories is that while Scrooge receives a second chance for his past, the rich man does not.

When this begins to sink in, still trying to control the situation, the rich man attempts to bargain with Abraham. He asks him to send Lazarus to warn his brothers so that the same fate won't happen to them. Abraham only shrugs his shoulders, throws up his hands and says, "It won't do any good." We're not really told the reason but we can speculate a little: maybe their hearts, like his, have become so hardened that they are simply not going to change.

thank you for any symbol that points us to him. We thank you for Saint Nicholas, the mysterious figure from the past who is a model of self-giving generosity to needy people. We pray that the world may come to know Christ by the way we convey our joy. We thank you that he is Immanuel, God with us. Amen.

## What Would Jesus Say to...Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer?

(Luke 1: 26-31; II Corinthians 12:10)

One Christmas Eve, Santa came to a pint-sized reindeer with a plan to save Christmas. Infinitely more important was the day God came to a humble maiden with a plan to save the world. God said something like this, “Mary, with your heart so right, won’t you bear God’s Son this night?” Listen to the extraordinary story of the announcement to Mary in the first chapter of the gospel of Luke (read Luke 1:26-31).

Let us pray: *Our gracious and loving God, help us this morning to receive your words as if they were brought to us by a winged angel on high. May we, like Mary, bow before you to say, “Let it be to me according to Your word.” We pray this in the name of Mary’s holy child, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

One December night in Chicago a little girl crawled into her daddy’s lap and said, “Daddy, why isn’t Mommy like other mommies?” Bob May glanced across the living room to the couch where his wife, Evelyn, was lying asleep. For two months she had been struggling with cancer. Her treatments had drained the family finances; they were living on the ragged edge; and this night Bob May could see what a toll the ordeal was having on their four-year-old daughter, Barbara.

Bob May had had a difficult life. When he attended Dartmouth College, he was so frail and young-looking that people often mistook him for someone’s little brother. After graduation, most of his class went off to Wall Street or other prestigious jobs. Bob May went to Chicago and became a lowly copywriter for Montgomery Ward. When Bob was 33, his wife, Evelyn, was near death, and he was broke and depressed. That night he cradled his daughter in his arms and made up a story.

He said, “Once there was a little reindeer named Rudolph. Rudolph was small and frail, and he was the only reindeer in the world with a red nose. One Christmas Eve, Santa had just finished hitching up all the big reindeer—Dancer, Prancer, and all the others—to his sleigh, and he was ready to go. Then a great mist and fog enveloped the whole world, and Santa knew there was no way he would be able to find a single chimney that night. All the children of the world would be disappointed. But through the mists Santa saw something red. It was Rudolph’s nose. So Santa hitched that little, frail reindeer to the very front of the pack and set off into the fog. Guided by



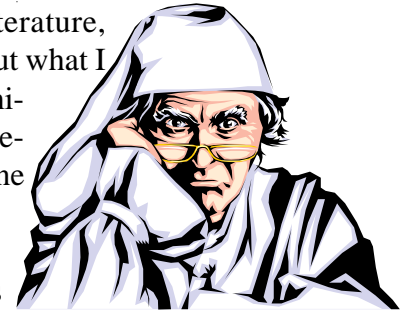
## What Would Jesus Say to...Ebenezer Scrooge?

(Luke 16:19-31)

Back in the mid-19th century Charles Dickens was the most prolific author in England. He penned such classics as *Oliver Twist*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *David Copperfield*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, and, of course, *A Christmas Carol*. Six generations have come and gone since this last novel was first published in 1843, yet it remains one of most popular stories ever written. We’re all familiar with the main character, Ebenezer Scrooge. Once you hear that name you never forget it. Dickens describes Scrooge as “a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!” What gutsy language they used back then. If we were to list the all-time bad guys in the history of literature, Ebenezer Scrooge would rise near the top. But what I hope you’ll see this morning is that mean, miserly, Ebenezer Scrooge bears an uncanny resemblance to another sad curmudgeon in one of Jesus’ parables. Turn with me, if you will, to Luke 16:19-31 (and read).

Did you notice that the people and events in Jesus’ parable are strikingly similar to those in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*? He was well acquainted with the Bible, but we don’t really know whether he was influenced by Jesus’ story when he wrote his classic. What we do know is the resemblances are uncanny: Someone from the dead returns to urge repentance; rich and poor people play prominent roles. What would Jesus say to Ebenezer Scrooge and the Rich Man? We’ll find out in a moment. But first, let’s join in a moment of prayer: *Gracious God, we pray that you would deepen our understanding of the mystery of Christmas this morning. On this third Sunday of Advent help us to grasp in a deeper way the meaning of your coming, and allow even a whimsical figure like Ebenezer Scrooge to help us grasp the truth at the heart of your gospel. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

In Jesus’ parable we are told about a certain rich man who goes unnamed. His name could have been Ebenezer or he could even have been named Tom or your name. Because in some ways we can identify with him. He lives the good life. He’s economically well off. In fact, the only thing marring his otherwise comfortable lifestyle is that a certain homeless man was making a pest of himself by camping out at the end of his driveway. Luke tells us the poor man’s name was Lazarus whom he describes as “homeless, poor, hungry, and covered with sores.” The sores were so gross the dogs came to lick his wounds. But here’s the thing: even though Lazarus is



that she would be deported immediately. Without documents, friends, family, status, or hope, my grandmother, Barbara Slobovik, saw a man in the other line looking at her. His name was Theodore Daisy. As soon as the immigration official left, Theodore Daisy looked at my grandmother, reached out and wiped off the “X.” When they got to the head of the line, Theodore Daisy said, ‘She’s with me.’ Two months later they were married.” And today, their grandson is the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Edmond, Oklahoma.

You and I were born with an “X.” We were born without hope or status in this world, and in our heart of hearts, we know it. But at Christmas, we celebrate the birth of the one who comes alongside us and reaches out a nail-pierced hand to wipe off the “X,” who says, “You’re with me; and I’m with you.” He takes us as his own. Believe in him this morning and your weakness will become his strength. To God be the glory.

Would you join me in prayer? *We thank you, O God, that you are the God of Rudolphs and Marys and Barbara Sloboviks, and people like us. Even when we are weak and struggling and frail, You come to us and wipe the “X” from our lives. You let us know that we belong in Your kingdom and in this wonderful church. We pray that as You would send us out into the fog and the mist and the darkness of this world, we might shine with Your everlasting light to the glory of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.*

Rudolph, the red-nosed reindeer, Santa found every chimney in the world that night. Little Rudolph went from being despised to being the most beloved reindeer of all.”

A few weeks after that night, Bob May’s wife died. It was with great reluctance that he went to the office party at Montgomery Ward that year. While he was there, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the story he had written for his daughter, Barbara. He read it to the gathered people. After he finished, there was a stunned silence, then uproarious applause. You know the rest of the story. “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer” has become an icon of our Christmas celebration.

The question I ask this morning is “Why?” What is it about this little reindeer that moves us so deeply? I have a hunch about the answer. I think inside each of us is a “Rudolph.” We each have a gnawing sense that “I’m not good enough.” When I began to experience that first stirring of a call to ministry, I remember saying to God, “You have got to be kidding.” Of course it didn’t help that those in authority over me in the church couldn’t imagine God calling a woman into the ministry either.

Maybe you were too tall. Maybe you were too short. Maybe you weren’t smart enough or maybe you were too “smart.” Maybe your parents had their hearts set on a daughter, and you turned out to be a son. Maybe they had their hearts set on a son, and you turned out to be a daughter. Sometimes we open our scrapbook of childhood memories and wish we hadn’t.

In 2 Corinthians 12:10 Paul sums up the paradox that lies at the heart of the gospel: “When I am weak, then I am strong.” The paradox is that when we operate from our own strength, we often shove God away, but when we are small and weak and frail like Rudolph, God enters into the void of our weakness with his power. When I allow this to occur, I am strong in the Lord. This truth is the key to the entire Bible. Look at the people God uses: stammering Moses, with his speech impediment; Jeremiah, who had a world class inferiority complex; Ruth who was a despised foreigner in a strange land; Paul, who was crippled by a mysterious “thorn in the flesh;” and impetuous Peter.

Today we look at a pregnant, unmarried, teenage girl. Mary said, “But an angel appeared to me!” And everyone said, “Right Mary.” Even her beloved fiancé was about to exit the scene. Why? Because in the first century, Jewish teenagers became pregnant in the same way as American teenagers do in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And according to the way families handled such things, Mary was packed off to relatives about eighty miles away. She needed the comfort and counsel of a wiser, older woman. You can imagine Mary’s relief

when she walked into the house, and “Auntie Elizabeth” said to her, “Favored are you, Mary, among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

Did you know that Mary was probably about fourteen years old? Joseph may well have been around seventeen years old. This was a ninth grader marrying a high school senior, and the girl was pregnant before they were married. If we are honest, we wonder, “God, what were you thinking? This was the Infinite infant. This is the once-and-for-all revelation of God in human flesh. If any baby ever should have been born in a palace to a king and queen, wrapped in silk blankets and placed on satin pillows, it was this child.” Instead, God enters our world through a problem pregnancy. Jesus is not wrapped in nice linens; he is bundled in rough cloth and placed in a feed box. He lay there amid the manure and sweat of farm animals. The Apostle Paul said it all in Philippians 2. God made himself nothing. A humble God chose a humble maiden to star in the drama of His humiliation. Mary could only guess that God chose her because of her unworthiness. She said, “The Lord has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.”

So let’s ask the question: What would Jesus say to Rudolph? More importantly, what would he say to the Rudolph inside you and me this morning? The first thing I believe Jesus would say to us is that God will use our weakness. God still enthrones himself in the midst of our human weakness. And believe it or not, our weakness may be our secret weapon.

At University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, they have a legend, a woman named Grace. Grace came to faith in Jesus Christ on Christmas Eve at a Salvation Army hall, while her live-in boyfriend, a member of a motorcycle gang, was out robbing a bank and shooting a security guard. Grace says, “My faith in Christ and my prison ministry began on the same night.” She does street ministry on University Boulevard in Seattle. In her purse she carries a note which says, “Dear Purse Snatcher: I am sorry that life has brought you to the point where you have to steal to support your habit. I hope you will please return my purse and my driver’s license, because it is such a hassle to replace them. But along with my money that will help you for a few seconds, I want to give you my Lord who will help you throughout all eternity. My phone number is \_\_\_\_\_. I am home most evenings after 11:00 p.m.” Her central ministry is what she calls her “School for Prostitutes.” Her motto is “Leading women of the night to the Lord of light.” In her quest to help them, she finds her way into places no one could ever imagine.

You may be thinking, “My life isn’t anything special. God can’t use me. I’ve messed some things up or have gotten my priorities in the wrong order. I don’t have much to offer.” Are you sure? Look at this woman, Grace. In

Seattle, they even talk about “bringing Grace to the streets.” Martin Luther was so overcome that God would stoop to use a man like him that he once said, “God carves rotten wood, and He rides the lame horse.” God uses people like us in all our weakness.

The second thing I think Jesus is saying to Rudolph is that God still loves to turn the world’s pecking order upside down. It is a wonderful experience to take a fresh look at the Christmas story. Did you realize that the cast of Christmas is introduced to us in order of their world status? The first line says, “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus.” Mighty Caesar, the ruler of the world is number one. And the story goes on, “At a time when Quirinius was governor of Syria....” The governor is number two. Third comes the male head of the family, the humble carpenter Joseph, who is of higher status than his wife, a peasant woman named Mary. Last of all is a tiny little baby born in a feed trough. The rest of the Bible is the story of how God reaches out His mighty hand and turns that pecking order upside down! He takes the baby in the feed trough and makes him “king of kings and lord of lord.” He takes the humble maiden and lifts her up to be the blessed mother of the Son of God. He puts the carpenter in a supporting role to his wife. Quirinius and Caesar are nothing but afterthoughts in the dustbin of history.

On Christmas night God even upended the created order and placed inanimate objects and animals above human beings. We humans are so scarred by sin that we were the last to get the message about the coming of the Son of God. While Herod amassed an army to kill the baby, the stars in the heavens took on a special twinkle in honor of God’s Son. The animals in the stable, Rudolph’s cousins, stood in awe and wonder at the birth of the Holy Child. Legend even says that on Christmas Eve, God gave the animals the gift of speech so they could praise His son.

Recently I heard a wonderful story from a Presbyterian pastor, Joel Baker, about the immigration of his grandparents to the United States. He writes, “My grandmother grew up on a farm in Austro, Serbia around the turn of the century. Her father, an abusive man, beat her. One day, my grandmother was sent to sell some cattle in the village. She received money for the cattle and fearing for her life, ran away to the coast where she boarded a ship for the United States. When she arrived at Ellis Island, the ship’s passengers were divided into two long, parallel lines. Scared and alone, she stood in her line. An immigration official passed by, checking for documents; of course, my grandmother had none. Discovering this, the official pulled a large block of chalk from his pocket and placed a large “X” on her shoulder. That meant