

# Hold the Baby

Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 2:7

Dec 24, 2021

Peter Hiatt (portraying St. Nicholas of Myra)

*Video and audio versions available online:*

<https://relentless-love.org/sermons/hold-the-baby/>

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*This document was prepared by Brett Eades using Peter's notes and the video version of this sermon. If you encounter any significant discrepancies or errors in this document, please let Brett know. Thank you!*

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## Message

### **Matthew 1:18-25:**

**Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup>And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. <sup>20</sup>But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup>She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: <sup>23</sup>"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). <sup>24</sup>When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, <sup>25</sup>but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.**

### **Luke 2:7:**

**And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.**

Song: Santa Claus is Coming to Town  
J. Fred Coots and Haven Gillespie (1934)

You better watch out  
You better not cry  
You better not pout, I'm telling you why  
Santa Claus is coming to town

He's making a list,  
And checking it twice  
He's gonna find out who's naughty and nice  
Santa Claus is coming to town

He sees you when you're sleeping

He knows when you're awake  
 He knows if you've been bad or good  
 So be good for goodness sake

Oh, you better watch out  
 You better not cry  
 You better not pout, I'm telling you why  
 Santa Claus is coming to town

Video clip: *Santa Claus is Comin' to Town*  
 American Broadcasting Company (1970)

*Santa Claus (Mikey Rooney) sits in his loaded sleigh, ready to take off in his sleigh for Christmas night. He checks with Winter Warlock (Keenan Wynn) for a weather report.*

Santa Claus	How goes it Mr. Warlock?
Winter Warlock	Winter please. I've got my magic power working just fine. I can cast up a big freeze, yes sir. I think I can guarantee a white Christmas
Santa Claus	Wonderful! Then let's be off. Awaay we go.
S.D. Kluger (Fred Astaire)	And that is the story of Santa Claus. And remember, behave yourselves 'cause Santa can still look into his magic snowball and see just what you're up to.

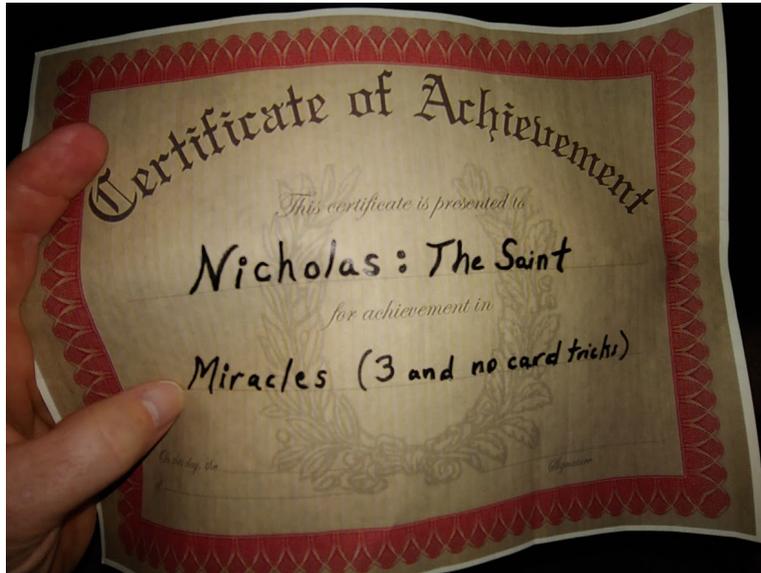
Wow! That's kind of ah creepy don't you think? Maybe I should set the record straight. Long ago, a father peeked outside, late at night, to see somebody climbing the lattice to his daughter's window. Scheming to fix this intruder, he picked up a big chunk of firewood and crept outside. He was in a terrible mood; He'd lost all of his money and had no gold to pay the require-ed dowry so that his daughters could be married. So now he was planning to sell them as prostitutes; that's naughty & not nice.

As he crept outside, he heard a thud: The intruder had thrown something in his daughter's room and now was scurrying down the lattice. The father chased him and tackled him. He was very surprised to find that the intruder was a well-dressed teenage boy. Just as he was about to clobber him, his daughter came yelling, "Look! Look what he threw in my window!" It was a leather bag full of gold—just what was needed for the dowry.

This father yelled, "What is the meaning of this?" And the young boy explained, "I am a Christian. My wealthy parents died recently and left me a large inheritance. I give because Jesus has given everything to me. He told us that we should sell our possessions and give to the poor." This father had a hard time believing that, so he said, "Why are you sneaking in the middle of the night?" The boy said to him, "Because Jesus tell us that when we give, we are not to let our right hand know what our left hand is doing, but to keep our giving a secret." Then the boy begged the man not to tell nobody. In time, the boy did the same for the other two daughters—when he threw the gold into the room of the youngest, it landed in her stocking!

For the secret joy of giving, this boy kept giving gifts in the middle of the night. He kept about nothing for himself. He even joined a monastery to live a poor monk's life. But people learned who the gift giver was, and before long, he was made Bishop of Myra. (Myra is in Lycia, a province of the Roman Empire.) Even as a bishop, he especially loved the poor children.

He got in trouble from time to time for letting the street children wear his fancy bishop hat. It was very nice. I should know because I am that bishop. I die in 342 A.D. in Myra. On May 9, 1087, they took my bones to bury in Italy. By that time, they were telling crazy stories about me and my bones. You, see? My name is Nicholas, and I'm a saint. Now, I know you say "all of Jesus' people are saints," but you see, I'm certified. I got my paper from Rome:



Says: "Saint Nicholas" (Three miracles and none of them card tricks.) I'm the patron saint of just about everything: unmarried girls and children (of course), but also merchants, sailors, even pawn brokers, perfumers, and something they call "apothecaries," which means, kind of like "drug dealer," which goes along with the fact I'm patron saint of New York.

Some of you are nervous thinkin': "What are you doin' here? Aren't you suppose-ed to be doin' something tonight?" Some of you are thinkin': "Where's your clothes?" Well, these are my clothes. But ok, I'll do the hat just for you. See? They just painted me all dolled up like this in the Middle Ages because they figured that's what saints would be wearing in heaven. They figured heaven look like a giant Santa Claus convention. Some of you are thinkin': "What are you doin' here and now in church? You are a secular person; you aren't welcome here, especially on a Christmas Eve." Well, that hurts my feelings a lot. This is a hard time of year for me. Where I come from, I get teased a lot.

You know St. Peter? He's the patron saint of a lot of stuff too. But did you know he's also the patron saint of stupid jokes? He's in all those stupid heaven and hell jokes: "And St. Peter says to the guy: 'Angelina Jolie is chained to you, not because she's your punishment; you are her punishment!'" Ha ha ha!

Well, St. Peter loves stupid jokes. He's always pokin' me this time of year: "Hey Nick, your special day is a comin' up, December 25. Why don't you invite Jesus to your party? Maybe you could give him a toy train." He thinks he's so hilarious, but it's embarrassing. Jesus, He always say to me, "Just ignore him, Nick. Peter opens his mouth all the time without thinkin'! It's a

thing with Peter.” But you see, it’s all so very embarrassing for me, because you have turned me into, like an idol, on Jesus’ birthday. In your country, I’m like the patron saint of greed—an idol.

An idol is something you make to suite yourself. And so, you turn me into a jolly old elf, because a jolly old elf is nice and safe. And so, you make me so chubby so that when they say, “Have another piece of pecan pie,” on Christmas day, you think, “No, I shouldn’t,” and then you say, “Well, jolly old St. Nicholas has a big belly, so sure... Give me the whole pie!” You change my story, like the way you like it to be.

In your country, a couple of a hundred years ago, these crazy Dutch people combine my story with the legend of a Nordic folkloric magician, who punished naughty children and rewarded nice children with gifts. Geeza Louisa!!! That man, pimpin’ his three daughters as prostitutes, was very naughty, and I gave him those gifts anyway—that’s the point of Christmas. I’m not a Nordic folkloric magician, and I’m not an elf, and I’m not fat. OK, I could stand to lose a few pounds but please stop the confusion!

You sing: “He sees you when you’re sleepin’. He knows when you’re awake.” That’s creepy! You make all the little children, like, how you say? Neurotic? “He knows if you’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake.” Well, if you’re being good because you want to get a gift, then you’re not being good “for goodness sake,” but good “for badness sake” –for greed’s sake. Like if you’re being good because you want to go to heaven and not go to hell, then maybe you’re not being good “for goodness sake” but “for badness sake.” You’re not loving God; you’re using God like a prostitute to get his stuff.

You sing to your kids: “He’s making a list and checkin’ it twice. He’s gonna find out who’s naughty and nice.” You use me to bribe and threaten your children—to go to bed—like the way preachers use God to make the people do what they say. You turn me into an idol on Baby Jesus’ Birthday. Your pastor told me that when he was a boy, he said to his Mommy and Daddy: “If Santa Claus is so great—makes reindeer fly and fits in our chimney, why don’t we worship Santa Claus instead of Jesus?” That’s what really perturbs me: I’m getting confused with Jesus on His birthday! The legend that you think is me, is what you want God to be: God should be a “Jolly Old Elf” who only shows up once a year, and you don’t even have to talk to him, just give him milk and a cookie, and he’ll give you some toys and leave.

He’s makin’ a list, checkin’ it twice, gonna find out who’s naughty and nice. You better hope God is not “makin’ a list and checkin’ it twice” to “find who’s naughty and nice” so that He only gives good gifts to the nice. According to Jesus, we’re all naughty and only One is nice; Only God is nice: “No one is good, but God alone,” said Jesus. So, you better hope that God is not like Santa Claus, or we’d all be goin’ straight to hell. Ho Ho Ho and Merry Christmas to you! We don’t deserve a gift, and if we did deserve a gift, it wouldn’t be a gift. The point of Christmas is that God gives good gifts to very naughty people. So, God is not Santa Claus; God is more like the Anti Claus. The Anti Claus; God is not Santa Claus..

So, who is God? What does He want? Well, God is a baby named Emmanuel, it means “God with us.” God is a baby “wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” He is a peasant baby who’s got nothin’—not even a toy train or one cookie. God is not just the Creator of

everything who is good for everything. God is a baby who is good for nothing—A baby is good for nothin’.

Santa Claus is good for everything, from toy trains to makin’ your kids go to bed. Like Most Religion is good for everything, from fixin’ your marriage to raising the money for the new church building. But a baby is good for nothin’. A baby is good for nothin,’ because a baby is just good. Like the Breath of God is just good. A baby is just Breath of God without much accumulated dust, just a person without much of a resume.

- A baby has not had time to even try to make himself naughty or nice.
- A baby has not the knowledge of nice and naughty.
- A baby is a person just barely attach-ed to this world.

So, a baby is hard to manipulate, hard to use. I mean, you take a baby to a nice Italian restaurant and that baby will cry if it wants to, bang on the highchair if it wants to, go poo poo, if it wants to, and that baby will not pick up the tab and pay for your dinner no matter what. A baby is very hard to manipulate, hard to control, hard to use. But a baby is very easy to love! And God became a baby! God must want you to know He’s a person.

- Not to use like Santa Claus, but to know like a baby.
- Not to use like a prostitute, but to know like a baby or a wife or husband
- Not to use like some religion, but to love.

We all try to use God; We want to know about God, so we can use God. But few people want to just know God. We want to use God and not know God; It’s a very, very old problem. You can read about it in Genesis chapter 3. In my day, there was a man named Arius who studied Greek philosophy. He started sayin’ that Jesus, that baby in the manger, wasn’t really God. And that God was like some sort of force field or something—something that wouldn’t want to get too close to any one of us. Emperor Constantine called the greatest church meeting of all time to think this one through. We met just north of Myra, in Nicea, at the Council of Nicea, 325 A.D. It’s where we started writing the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible;

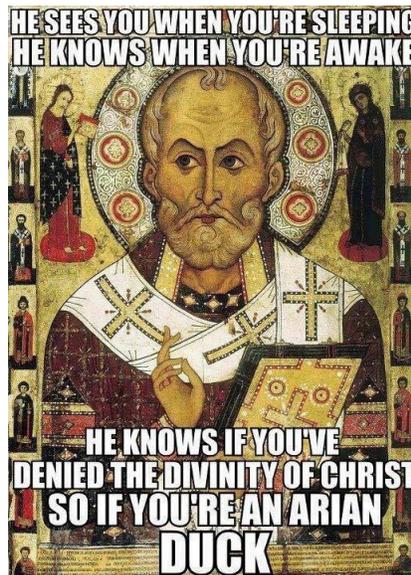
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets. And we believe one holy catholic (universal) and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

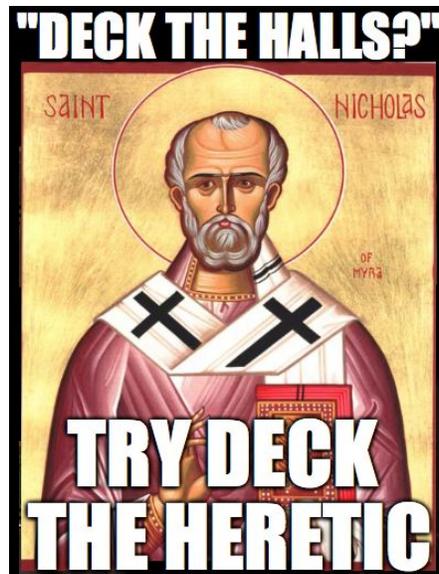
Many of us there had scars from being tortured with hot pokers and pinchers because we believed that the baby in the manger was God—"God with us," and even suffering with us. Well, during the council, one day, Arius started singin' one of his songs about Jesus. He sang, "God begot Him, and before He was begotten, He was not."

Now, I'm ashamed to tell you (but you can Google this and find out for yourself) I got so mad, I walked up to Arius, while he was singin', in front of everybody, and I just punched him (really hard) right in the mouth. And he punch me and a knock my tooth right out. I'm a just a teasing; he didn't punch me; but I did a punch him. I punch him hard!

And I'm so sorry because I know it doesn't make a very good Christmas card: Jolly old St. Nicholas punching out heretics at a famous church meeting. Somebody made this and put it on your inter-web-net:



"He sees you when you're sleeping. He knows when you're awake. He knows if you've denied the divinity of Christ, so if you're an Arian... duck!"



Deck the Halls? Try Deck the Heretic. That's a funny, but...

I'm so sorry I did that because that's not like Jesus. And I'm so sorry because I lost my job as bishop for a while. But it got me so mad because, you see for me, everything depends on the fact that God was actually in that food trough in Bethlehem—that God was a good for nothin' baby because that means God is a person, and not a proud person, but a humble person.

It means God is a person, and God wants what all babies want. He doesn't want your gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Stupid Wisemen! A baby could choke on frankincense and myrrh!) God wants what all babies want—He wants to be held close to your heart. It's hard to hold the Uncreated Creator; It's hard to hold the Eternal Consuming Fire but it's easy to hold a baby. And God became a baby. You know...

- When Joseph hold baby Jesus, he was holding God.
- When Mary nurse baby Jesus, she was nursing the Uncreated Creator.
- When the shepherds sang lullabies to baby Jesus, they sang the Eternal Fire to sleep.

And that was perhaps the first time that God was ever truly loved by the people that He had made; I mean just Him and not His stuff, just His heart: Jesus, "from the bosom of the Father."

Your pastor told me: one Christmas, he was so busy, and everyone wanted something from him: "I need this. I need that." But one night, as he was tuckin' his little girl, Becky, into bed, he leaned over, she grabbed his head, and pulled it down on her tummy as she said, "I'll be the big mommy, and you be the little baby." She stroked the back of his head and held him close to her heart. And your pastor, he say to me, "Nick, for a moment, I had such peace—heavenly peace. She made my Christmas."

See? When those stinky and ornery shepherds held baby Jesus, and sang Him to sleep, they sang God to sleep: “Sleep in heavenly peace.” They made His Christmas. Maybe you could make His Christmas too. Christmas means: God is lonely for you—just you: not your gold, frankincense and myrrh—and He hopes that you would be lonely for Him too.

So, “Who is God?” He is a baby in a manger. And “What does He want from you?” He wants you to hold Him close to your heart. And “What does He want to give you?” He wants to give you His heart. Fasten your seatbelts! Do you understand what I just said to you? “What does He want to give you?” He wants to give you Himself! Like I say, A baby is good for nothin’—just good. And all a baby can give you is himself. So, God wants to give you himself and He is Good. See? God gives good gifts to naughty people, and He is the good gift. He is the goodness; He is the nice. And He makes you nice.

Actually, nothing is more naughty than thinking that you make yourself nice, because, Jesus IS the nice. So, thinking you make yourself nice is like stealing baby Jesus from the manger. But being nice is like holding baby Jesus close to your heart because you are like a stinky manger; you are the naughty, and he is the nice. So, God make you nice with Jesus.

When you hold the baby, the baby changes you. And when you hold the baby, you cannot hold onto other things—like your money, your addictions, your self-centeredness, and your ego. When people hold babies, they cannot hold onto their dignity; they make funny faces, they blow bubbles, they say, “Hey baby, goo-goo ga-ga.”

Proud people and people who ask, “What do I get for holding babies?” usually don’t hold babies; they don’t know what goodness is; they don’t know what nice is; they don’t know what Heaven is. I’m sayin’, “You don’t get a gift for being good! The Good is the gift you get; Love is the gift you get; God is the gift you get. And now, I hesitate to say this, because I don’t want to corrupt your motives. But when you hold The Baby, when you get Him, you get all things with Him, for then you will be able to enjoy all things with Him—every thing.

Your scientists now say, “Wow! It looks like every-thing came from no-thing.” So, they cannot ask, “What thing did that? What did that?” They have to ask, “Who did that—that Big Bang?” St. Peter, he thinks it’s the best joke: “Who did that?” “The Baby did that!”

So, God is a baby in a manger. And what does He want from you? He wants you to pick Him up and hold Him close to your heart. But maybe you’re still thinking: “I can’t hold Him close to my heart; I’m naughty and not nice. And He’s ‘making a list and checking it twice!’” Listen: The Bible say, “God is Love,” and “Love keeps no record of wrongs.”<sup>1</sup>

The Baby isn’t a keepin’ a record of your wrongs; but the devil, he is a keepin’ a record of your wrongs. Baby Jesus grow up and was a nailed to a tree to cancel out your “certificate of debt”—your “record of wrongs” He fills us your wrong with his right. He fills up all of your badness with his goodness and makes you good. Now, God, the Father, He look at the list, and He checks it twice, and He say, “My goodness! How nice! Nicholas is a saint! He would never punch nobody. He just like my Baby Boy Jesus.”

Jesus is not makin' a list of bad deeds; he's cancelling a list of bad deeds. But Jesus does have a list: a list of names (not deeds; names). It's called "the Lamb's book of Life." Everybody in that book, pick him up and hold him close to the heart. And so their naughty becomes His nice. You probably don't know this, but we get movies in heaven. And this scene is my favorite movie scene. It's Mother Mary pickin' up Jesus and holding Him close to her heart.

Video clip: *The Passion of the Christ*  
New Market Films, Icon Entertainment. (2004)

*Mother Mary (Maia Morgenstern) kisses the cheek of the recently deceased Jesus at the foot of the cross.*

She holds him close to her heart, when He seems to be good for nothing, just good. She loves Him, and not just his stuff; She knows him, just him.

- So, who is God? → He is Jesus.
- And what does He want? → He wants you to hold Him close to your heart.
- And where is He? → Well, He is everywhere.

But how can I explain it you? You don't know shepherds and mangers, but you do know hobos and Denny's. They even have Italian Food—they got the spaghetti and meat ball. Just a few years ago, a woman named Nancy from your city (a true story—your pastor told me, and his friend told him) Nancy, she stopped at a Denny's restaurant around about Christmas Eve. She was with her husband, Dennis, and her one-year-old baby boy named Eric. Well, Eric was bangin' on his metal high chair, and then, bangin' louder. They could not stop him. He was a smilin' and laughin' at somebody—they look and saw who. It was an old hobo, sitting by the door. His clothes were dirty and torn. His hair and beard were matted and greasy. And he was drunk. To me, he would've look just like a shepherd.

He started yellin': "Hi baby! Hi baby! Goo Goo Ga Ga." Across the restaurant: "Do you know 'Patty Cake' baby?" But it wasn't cute—it was embarrassing. Any kid would tell you: He was a naughty man. Dennis said to Nancy, "Let's leave. I'll pay, and you take Eric to the car." Nancy was hopin' to get out of there without talkin' to this hobo. But as they approached the door, Eric's eyes locked on his new friend and so he lunged toward the old hobo. Nancy caught him but found herself face to face with this smelly old man.

He said "Lady, can I hold your baby?" Not: "Can I have some money?" But: "Can I hold your baby?" Before she knew it Eric had left her arms; and so, this very old naughty man, and this innocent baby boy, they just hugged each other in the Denny's. Eric, he press his clean little cheek into that old grimy coat. And, with those dirty old, calloused hands from a very hard life, the old man, he stroked the back of Eric's head and then held him close to his heart. As he did, tears came to his eyes. He looked at Nancy and said, "You take care of this boy." She mumbled, "I will." And then he pulled Eric away like he was ripping his own heart from his chest, handed Eric to Nancy, and said, "Thank you ma'am. You made my Christmas."

Well, you are that Hobo. And God has made your Christmas. And so now you are also Nancy. And now you can make somebody else's Christmas, if you would let them hold the baby. And God? He is the baby. So that we—Nancy, Dennis, the Hobo, each and every one of us—could make his Christmas. God is the baby and God is Jesus.

Jesus took bread and broke it saying this is my body given to you. And he took the cup saying this is the covenant in my blood. In the morning, and nailed to a tree, he seemed to be good for nothing. A naked man, a naked hobo, nailed to a tree seems to be good for nothing.

When he seems to be good for nothing—but just good—would you pick him up and hold him close to your heart? He may seem to be good for nothing. But He is the SOMETHING that makes everything good and everybody good. Pick him up and hold him close to your heart, and soon you will find yourself sneakin' around giving good gifts to naughty people...and every good gift is him.

Would you sing this song? And then we will pick Him up and hold Him close to our heart.

Song: O Little Town of Bethlehem

## Communion

So, although we took his life on a tree in a Garden, called the cross. He has always given his life—even fore-given his life, to us from the foundation of the world.

I know this is a shocking picture on Christmas Eve, but this is why he came. To take bread and break it saying, "This is my body given to you. take and eat and do it in remembrance of me." And in the same way to take the cup saying, "This is the covenant in my blood. Poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it all of you and do it in remembrance of me."

So let's remember him. Would you pray with me?

## Prayer

Lord God, we confess that you are love, you are life, you are the good, and you are truth. You are everything that we most deeply desire. And yet, we have taken you, manipulated you, used you, consumed you, as if you were a thing—we confess our sin. Lord God, we also confess your Grace—that although we take your life from you, you have always given yourself to us. And so tonight Lord God, even if it's just with a mustard seed of faith, we say that we trust you and we want to trust you. We want to belong to you because you're Good and you are Life. Thank you, Lord God, for who you are, thank you for giving yourself to us. Make your home in us tonight and always. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

If you want Jesus, you are invited by Jesus to take his body and blood and hold him close to your heart.

Song: Silent Night

## Prayer

So God, with at least a mustard seed of faith, we want to say, we like you, we love you. Thank you for being you and Merry Christmas. Amen.

## Benediction

Thank you so very much for coming to the service. I think Jon mentioned this, we didn't pass a plate but if you have something for the offering you can put it in the baskets by the stairways. And before you go, let me just say this: I agree with Nick—I didn't know what he was going to say but I agree with him. And I think God would really like for you to make his Christmas. So tonight, just take a few minutes—it doesn't even have to be long—but just sit and think about him. I mean, that's what Dad wants, he wants you to think about him. And maybe you can even imagine picking him up because I think we're all utterly terrified of God, but he became a baby. So just imagine picking him up and holding him. That's what he wants. And if you can't imagine that then picture Jesus holding you. That's what he wants. And when you hold him, one day you'll discover you're holding all things with him. In Jesus's name, believe the Gospel. Amen.

## Endnotes

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1 Corinthians 13:5 NIV