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Title: Waiting for Christmas: Worth the Wait

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Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

Text: [Luke 2:1-20](#)

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Finally, we're here. Christmas Eve. The wait is almost over, not quite, but nearly so. A few more hours left to wait. I promise you it will be worth the wait. Gifts are always that way: better the longer you wait. You know this because you have experienced it. Let's get in touch with this.

Think for just a moment about what the best Christmas present you've ever received. What was it? I asked this question throughout the week. I got a lot answers. Someone got a piano that was hidden in the house in plain view and it was still a surprise. Another wanted a brother or a sister and ended up getting a puppy instead. There was a GI Joe aircraft carrier and Fishers Price castle. What comes to mind as your best Christmas gift? In both of the groups, everyone mentioned the best Christmas gift from the iconic movie. You know the one. It is so famous that you can watch this movie for a 24 hour marathon. Not sure you know what I'm talking about? How about this for a hint. "You'll shoot your eye out." What is it? Say it out loud. That's right. A Red Ryder BB gun. ¹

When you were a child, you knew exactly what you wanted and the anticipation of the gift, waiting for it made it even better. The very best Christmas gift is always worth the wait. If I had the privilege of knowing you when you were a child and asked "What do you hope to get for Christmas" you could answer.

What about now? Have you carried hope from childhood into your adult life now? Can you answer immediately? Some may be able to; you've made your list. I know several family who exchange lists as part of their Christmas family tradition. You circulate your lists, assign the gifts and proceed in a neat and orderly fashion. This isn't our tradition but I can see its advantage. While you are never surprised on Christmas, you also aren't disappointed.

What do you hope to get for Christmas? It's too late to add your list. What you get under the tree is what you'll get. The stores are closed. What are you waiting for, what do you hope for? Of course, I'm not talking about the Santa Claus type of hope. I'm talking about the hope we sing of. "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

What are you hoping for tonight? Every time we come together on Christmas Eve, people bring a room full of hope. Throughout this week, I've listened to people answer this question, even if they didn't know that they were answering it. Someone early in the week said, "I hope our family can be together. We are always physically together but we might as well be miles apart. I hope this Christmas we can really connect."

Another said: "My mother is in hospice; she is failing fast. I hope she holds on until everyone coming for Christmas can be with her." Still another said, "My wife is hoping to make a perfect Christmas memory, something so precious, so heartwarming, that our children will treasure it forever, the perfect Christmas. I just hope she doesn't crash and burn."

One more offered soberly, "With what happened in Ankara and Berlin this week, I'm worried about terrorism. My hope is the world will somehow find peace."

What brought you to church this evening? What is on your heart? "What are you really hoping to get this Christmas? Together, we might create a long list of hopes. But a few of you aren't sure. You don't necessarily have to have an answer. You simply have **a strange indescribable tug on your heart** which is as difficult to describe. That answer is more than adequate for me.

A brilliant, articulate university professor made that statement more than 1,600 years ago. "Our hearts are forever restless until they find their rest in God."² It was Saint Augustin's way of describing what bring us here tonight on Christmas Eve. There is a hunger in the human heart for a transcendent experience of God.

Do you know that? Whether or not it is clear to you, you have found your way to church because you are spiritually needy. Some of you know that. Some of you are surprised by that. You who doubt that need to hear it the most. Right at the core of our being there is a hunger for something that is hard to define, almost embarrassing to confess, but which still remains it. Material when all material needs are taken care of, a strange, indescribable, tug on the heart.³

I think this strange, indescribable tug on the heart is there in the description of the first Christmas. We see it in the shepherds who hear of the announcement of birth and then say, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." (Luke 2:15b) We hear it in the question of the wise men who spend a lifetime searching, trying to address the tug on their heart. "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." (Matthew 2: 2) But of all the characters of Christmas, I believe that Mary experienced the **strange indescribable tug on heart** when holding her child and welcoming her guests, we hear, "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." (Luke 2:19)

Poets and scholars throughout the ages have mused about this tiny yet profound verse. This young girl, giving birth to God's only Son, foretold to her by the angel Gabriel, says not a word. Mary is filled with questions at the annunciation. Mary sings *The Magnificat* when visiting Elizabeth. In profound experiences, she is not often at a loss for words. Here she is silent. "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." (Luke 2:19)

At the first Christmas, Mary opens her heart to her newborn child pondering what has been told her. Why ponder what you already know, what you have spent nine months contemplating, what the angel Gabriel announced to her? She knows that she holds the "holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." (Luke 1: 35c) "...call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). (Matthew 1: 23b) Mary is experiencing that **strange indescribable tug on the heart**.

She is pondering what we ponder tonight--our deepest and most unspoken desire. We want it to all be true. Deep within our hearts, there is this great longing for Christmas to be the greatest and most absolute truth of the universe. We *want* God to love us so much that God would indeed send God's Son to rescue us. We want to be redeemed from a counterproductive way of living, from impure thoughts, from ungodly desires that make life complicated and difficult. We want to be as pure and innocent as we were when we were first born. And even if we can't say it this way, there is still that **strange indescribable tug on the heart** that pulls us toward God.

When I was a child, one of my special Christmas gifts was a science kit. It had a microscope and a beaker and a thermometer, along with a book on experiments. I had a lot of fun with it. But the best fun came when the thermometer broke and I got to play with the mercury. A few of you can remember what it is like to play with mercury. Mercury once was not

considered a highly toxic element. Before the Center for Disease Control and the Environmental Protection Agency defined it as dangerous, we used to delight in separating a glob of mercury, a ball here and a ball there and then watching it come back together. It wants to come back together, to unite. There is this energy, a tug, a longing for mercury to be whole.

We do too. Like children wanting to get home for Christmas, like parents wanting their offspring around the tree, each and every one of us have this internal longing, an ache in our heart to connect with something greater in life. Our hearts are forever restless until they find their rest in God." Mary is no exception. She has the same desire to be with God as you and I. She has a desired to be delivered to the one who created her. Mary opens her heart to the most profound of all thoughts. The one she has just delivered... will eventually deliver her to God. This mother holds a baby in her arms that will eventually wrap his arms around her as he takes her to her eternal home.

We all have this **strange indescribable tug on the heart** which is why we are here on Christmas Eve. It is one of the reasons I love this day so much. It is one of those really special times at work when the church starts off quietly. Early in the morning, few of the staff are around. They have a long day ahead of them. There is no need for them showing up at the crack of dawn when they will greet Christmas Day with candles raised.

But I like to prowl around the church on Christmas Eve. This tradition started for me when I was a young pastor in a small congregation in California. I'd arrived early on Christmas Eve, put on a cup of coffee, work on my sermon and when finished, I'd drive down the street to the Glendale, CA Galleria. I'd go to Nordstrom's and shop for Ann's Christmas gifts. I'd say, "I'll take this, this, this and that. Wrap them." Believe me, I was a favorite in the women's department. While they were wrapping the gifts, I'd walk the mall, soaking up the atmosphere. There is so much hope and expectation in the air. Christmas Eve shoppers are far less surly than earlier in the month. They are either getting a final gift or they are quick decision makers, like me. Our church is too large for me to shop on Christmas Eve any longer. My day is no longer that leisurely.

On Christmas Eve, I was surprised to see a member of our congregation sitting on a bench in the mall. He was a doctoral student at Cal Tech and was one of the brightest men that I've ever been around. He still looked like a hippie, even though the hippy look was more than a decade out of style. I sat down beside him.

"John, what's up? Getting a little shopping done?"

"No, I'm looking at Christmas."

"Yeah", I said, "Isn't it great. I love coming down here on Christmas Eve. Everyone is so into it."

"That's what I'm looking at. I don't get it. I've never really bought into the whole God in a virgin thing. Peace on earth. What a joke. We get out of Vietnam and immediately start covert action in Nicaragua. What I don't get is what they see" waving expansively across the mall. "What's in it for them other than a racked up MasterCard bill and bought more stuff that they don't need?" "I can't make sense of what THEY feel."

We talked a bit. Frankly, I don't think I was very effective. I was a very young pastor and I was a little irritated that John had decided to have his faith crisis on my Christmas Eve shopping trip. I stood up and offered a final thought. "Everyone is trying to open their hearts to the love of God, a longing to connect. It is the genius of God coming like a baby. People have room in their hearts for a baby. I'll see you tonight."

He looked at me with sad, confused eyes and said, "Don't count it. I just don't see it. I don't have any hope for Christmas." And he walked off. He'd made his decision, right there in the mall.

He made his decision that Christmas Eve. You have a decision to make too. You know it and I know it too. You have to decide tonight if you are going to open your heart to God. There is a reason for what you are feeling. You are hard wired to feel it, to feel that **strange indefinable tug on your heart.** It's in your genetic code. It is the imprint of the Creator, the touch of God. It is God calling you to be with Him and it why God came to be with us.

You have a decision to make. You have to decide tonight if you are going to open your heart to God act on the restless urge, address the strange indefinable tug on your heart. For some of you this is an overwhelming powerful moment. It may be the first time in your life that you have ever let him in. I want you to know that everyone here is praying for you to open your heart tonight, to let God in. Your life can literally change tonight. For others of us, we are here because we know we need to open our hearts up again and again, year after year, Christmas eve after Christmas Eve, renewing our commitment to our Savior.

We all have a decision to make. We have to decide if we are going to act on the "strange indescribable tug on your heart." God made it incredibly easy on us. God came to us as a baby because everyone has room in their hearts for a baby.

The decision point comes at the same time every service. At the close of this service, just after communion, we turn off the lights, sing Silent Night and pass the light of Christ to one another. It is an intensely personal moment, a moment of decision about that tug on your heart. People all over the world are acting on the tug, lighting candles, reflecting personally on this baby. I've done it in every church I've served, including that church in Glendale, California on that Christmas Eve after John made his mall decision not to attend--except that wasn't John's decision.

Just as we were finishing communion and turning off the lights, John walked in. His wife sang in the choir so he came down the side aisle to the front row, near the choir loft. This meant that his wife could come out of the loft and join him. It also meant that John would be the first person in the congregation to receive the light of Christ. As the organist began to play Silent Night, I took the light of Christ to John. I mouthed the words, "You came." He nodded then he leaned forward to whisper in my ear. I felt his whiskered cheek rub against my face as he said, "I just felt this strange tug on my heart to be here." That Christmas he got the best Christmas present ever and to this day, he will tell you, "It was worth the wait."

O, that all of us who hunger for God, who feel that tug on the heart, might have the same experience, might act on the tug of the heart and find our rest in the child of Bethlehem, Jesus, Christ our Lord.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58DnxT54STU>

² Augustin Confessions,

³ Pulpit Resource, William H. Willimon, Vol. 31, No. 4, page 54. The "strange indefinable tug on the heart" is his phrase, reworked in this sermon.