

In all of my classes, my instructors have told me that the hardest two services are Easter and Christmas. Anyone that knows me knows that I have a tendency to overthink situations. Take that and the fact that this is the first Christmas service that I'm behind the lectern for, I started pressuring myself about the Christmas service in early Thanksgiving.

The first thing that I decided was to treat the entire advent season and Christmas day as one really long service. I wanted to incorporate points from each week and build on them until I got to Christmas day. In theory the idea sounds great. But, to pull it off, I would need the help from the congregation.

So, the first thing I did was ask people about Advent and what they liked or didn't like. I asked what they would like to see differently or what I could expand on to really make this a memorable season. The most common statement was about getting different banners for the choir loft. And fortunately, with the help of Worship, we accomplished that.

The next point I wanted to address was the actual Christmas day service. I asked multiple people throughout the congregation about what a typical Christmas day service was like. To be honest, I haven't attended a Christmas day service in over thirty-five years. So, I was really counting on everyone's feedback.

The more I spoke with everyone the more I realized that I wasn't really asking a fair question. We haven't had a minister live in town for a number of years. So we haven't had a consistent Christmas service. And most of the responses reflected that. But, there was a common string through my questions about advent and Christmas. Everyone talked about Christmas Eve instead.

I heard so many great stories about coming to church on Christmas Eve. Some shared stories about coming with their children. Others shared stories about setting up the luminaries. We talked about music and candle lighting. Coming for Christmas Eve service is a strong tradition that many families share.

I've learned one thing with all of the places that I've lived over the years, and that is that lowans love their traditions. I cannot think of anywhere that I've been that holds on to their traditions as much as lowans. And that especially holds true here at St. Paul's. When we discussed changing the advent candles to blue, I was really concerned because it was tradition to have purple. There were some strong opinions voiced on that subject.

Generally I talk about forming new traditions. The world has changed a great deal over the past ten or even five years. Between the derecho and covid, we no longer do things the same way. And unless we are willing to make changes within ourselves, the world will pass us by.

But that isn't what I'm going to talk about today. No, for once, I'm going to talk to you about holding on to tradition. I want you to hold on to those traditions. Grab them with both hands and don't let go. We can change with the world any other day, but tonight is about us.

I say this because there are some traditions that we just need to save. Every person I spoke with about the upcoming service shared a story about their family going to church on Christmas Eve. They shared stories and expressed pure joy about being with their family.

Tonight there will be a number of different stories shared. Some people will talk about Santa Claus and staying on the nice list so there will be presents in the morning. Others will share O. Henry's short story "The Gift of the Magi" and how the true gift of Christmas is love and not items that we purchase in the store. And some will discuss the present under the tree for Jesus, since he was our gift we shouldn't forget that Christmas is about his birth.

One of my favorite traditions is watching "A Charlie Brown Christmas", when Linus recites Luke 2:8-14. ***⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,***

¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace!"

I think that the reason I like Linus' speech so much is because of how organic it feels. He's just having a conversation in a casual tone. He isn't preachy or shaming. He is simply telling a story.

So many times, people appear to be concerned that any conversation about God or Jesus is going to be preachy. They go in with the idea that they are going to be lectured. I honestly don't believe that lecturing someone is the right direction to go.

Our traditions are what bring people back to the church. We just need to show them that no matter where they are in life's journey they are always welcome here.