



**A Christmas Eve
December 24, 2015**

**Sermon by Brent J. Eelman
4 p.m. Family Service**

A Child is Born

Many years ago, on Christmas Eve, I arrived early at the church I was serving in Northern New York. Early is probably not accurate; I was about three hours early. Yes, the sermon was written, this was not a last minute rush. I arrived early to spend some time and enjoy the quiet. Christmas is spent by those of us called clergy, making the season meaningful for others, and this evening, I had three hours for myself before the 11:00 service. This would be time for me to experience the gift of Christmas peace.

It was a cold evening. The temperature was in the single digits and the sky was absolutely clear. The moon gave a glow to the world, and the fresh snow covered the ugly concrete and pavement with a pure white blanket. I parked my car in the lot, and walked toward the door of the church. The snow crunched under my feet as I walked. I looked up at the stars and moon, and gazed at the State Office building next to the church. There was a light on in one of the offices, and I surmised it must have been an auditor, a modern day scrooge, who had completely lost the spirit of the season.

As I walked up ramp to the back entrance of the church, I saw a large cardboard box. The box was wiggling about. My curiosity piqued and I hastened my pace. When I got there and peered into the box, I was greeted by 4 all black puppies that someone had left on the steps of the church. They were about 7 or 8 weeks old, and they obviously thought that box was a wonderful playroom because they were romping around and playing with each other, keeping each other warm with their energy.

I do not know their story that led up to that moment. They were abandoned, unwanted, and left with the hope that someone would want them... and that on Christmas Eve a church would not turn them away. I took the box inside, into my office. I realized my three hours of "Christmas quiet time" would be lost, and I would be spending a great deal of time trying to figure out what to do with these abandoned puppies that were now my responsibility.

I put the box in the corner of my office, and contemplate my strategy. My thoughts were interrupted when the phone rang. It was someone from the State Office building.

"Thank you for taking in those puppies. I saw them left there and I was hoping that someone would pick them up. If you hadn't come, I was going to take them home."

There was a sound of relief in his voice. That evening I made phone calls, and the conclusion of the story is that three families in the congregation received an unexpected Christmas gift in the form of a puppy. One family took in two.

The story has always seemed "right" and "Christmassy" to me, but I could never figure out why until a few years later. I was given a book entitled *Found Dogs*. It is a collection of stories and pictures of dogs that were abandoned at shopping centers, racetracks and roadsides. These stories are special because one wonders why these dogs were ever abandoned. They were found... and entered into the lives of human beings. These adopted, "found dogs" transformed the lives and families they had joined. Their presence made a powerful difference in the lives of those who found them. Why? Because these "found dogs" had a tremendous capacity for giving unconditional love. The book was filled with stories of the transforming power of unconditional love. The found dogs were transformed by their owner's love... but more, their owners were transformed by these abandoned mongrels and mutts.

The story of Christmas is the story of the power of unconditional love from a child born many years ago. Let us not forget that the child Jesus, whose birth we celebrate this evening was a child abandoned and neglected by society. There was no room in the inn... and so life began in a box: a manger in a stable. Abandoned and neglected, a child was born who brought into this world, to those who would claim him, the transforming power of unconditional love.

But there is one ironic twist to this entire analogy, and I will leave it with you to ponder. We are not the ones who find the child Jesus. We are the ones who are found by the child born this day. This is the Good News of Christmas!