

Sermon + December 25, 2021
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It was a cold morning. Billowy clouds of water vapor floated up from the icy, blue waters of the Atlantic as our prop plane roared off the runway. Within minutes, the Nova Scotian landscape looked like a miniature replica that one finds on the table on an elaborate toy train set. The plane headed southwest, over the frosty ocean. We peered down into its vastness, the early morning sun almost blinding us at times. If you were lucky, you would catch a glimpse of the whales swimming off shore; if not the whales at least a few lost icebergs.

We were going home. It was Christmas Day, 1973, and we were going home. According to our ticket agent, the flights would all go smoothly and we would be sitting in my parents dining room in Kenosha enjoying our Christmas dinner shortly after noon.

Within an hour after take-off, our plane landed at Logan International Airport in Boston where we would make connections for our flight to Chicago. Our "new" plane was a 747. Because it was our first flight on a jumbo jet such as this, we were anxious to board. The ship was incredible and the awesome sight of the exterior was rivaled only by the interior of the plane. And on this Christmas morn the plane seemed even larger as we soon discovered only 50 people, passengers and crew, would be making the flight to Chicago.

We were off again. The massive structure of steel and aluminium seemed to almost defy all laws of science and gravity as it lifted off the ground with rocket-like power, it was Christmas Day and we were going home.

Gazing out at the cotton-like clouds my mind began to recall Christmases past . . . my grandma and grandpa . . . uncle and aunts who were no longer living . . . grand celebrations . . . then I began to anticipate that present Christmas Day. It had been some time, now, since we had been home. How would my family look? What new buildings had gone up in town? Would any of my friends be around? I was overcome with almost childish excitement as I looked forward to seeing my family and being home for Christmas.

The flight to Chicago lasted only a couple of hours and we began to circle the airport while we waited our turn to descend and land. We had circled for about twenty minutes when the pilot's voice broke through on the intercom. He informed us that Chicago was experiencing an ice-storm and we would be unable to land at the present time. We would continue to circle the airport, he said, in hopes that the storm would break. The pilot ended his communication by telling us that it could be hours.

Within a few seconds, the hopes and expectations of all on board the plane were crushed. We were to be held hostage by the weather in the skies over Chicago. I can end the story quickly by telling you that we circled O'Hare Airport for four hours, flew to St. Louis to re-fuel, and then back to Chicago where we circled for another half hour and then eventually landed.

But my reason for relating this story is to tell you what happened during those four and a half hours.

Up until the time we arrived in the airspace over Chicago, all of the people on the plane had pretty much kept to themselves. There was no reason to converse with others as we were all going home for Christmas and our minds were filled with our own personal thoughts of family and friends. But suddenly things had changed. We were being forced to spend Christmas Day with complete strangers!

At first, everyone grumbled and complained; some talked of writing letters to the airlines. But soon everyone realized that there wasn't a thing we could do but wait. What happened next was spontaneous and natural.

A 747 holds 452 people and the 43 passengers had been sitting all over the plane, mostly by the windows.

I can't remember who started it, but everyone began to walk to the rear of the plane and silently assembled around the Christmas tree that had been erected in the small lounge area near the piano-bar.

We sat in silence for a time and then we began to introduce ourselves. There was a music student from Boston University who was going home to Rockford for Christmas break. There was a young mother with her infant child. They had left Africa some twenty hours before where her husband was stationed in the army. She and her child were on route to spend a month with her family in Denver. There was an elderly couple, anxious to be reunited with their family after many years apart.

One by one everyone told their story. By this time all of the stewards and stewardesses had joined us and, they too, told of where they would be spending the holiday. As we talked, we freely shared about why Christmas was important to us.

As the time passed, the music student pulled a flute out of her briefcase. Surprised to see the instrument, I told her I used to play. She handed it to me and then sat down at the piano and began to play. I accompanied as best I could. We played the old Christmas carols and hymns and everyone joined in. A better Christmas choir has never been assembled.

Someone noticed that the small aluminium tree had not been decorated. Others began to assemble make-shift ornaments from left-over food trays and cups. We decorated the tree and it was beautiful! We talked of how we celebrated Christmas in our own homes and shared the facts of our religious backgrounds.

In a few short hours, 30,000 feet above Chicago, we had become family. And we prayed. We prayed for world peace and for our families and loved ones. We recalled the first Christmas and how it still affected our lives. We had become community. In a most unique manner, we celebrated the birth of Christ. A more diverse congregation could not be

imagined. While all of our expectations for that Christmas Day would not be realized, we were aware of the spiritual force that bound us together . . . a force that transcended our lives . . . the love of God shown to us through God's Son . . . the true meaning of Christmas.

The first eighteen verses of John's Gospel express what Christmas is really all about—the celebration of the Word, the fact that Jesus was distinct from God and yet inseparable from God. Those who acknowledge this word become God's children. They understand themselves as God's creatures and know what they must do . . . they must love their neighbors and their God.

Christmas puts us in touch with our humanity and our Creator like no other single event. Yearly, we are made aware of what distinguishes us from the other creatures on this planet. Yearly, we sit in awe and wonder of a God so great that this God would give us the gift of a Son. Yearly, we tell and re-tell the story of that first Christmas so that we will remember and be humbled by it. This is a unique day. Our God has visited us in person and we shall never be the same.

Christmas day, 1973, was celebrated on a jet by a group of people who will never see each other again. But that congregation knew they had to celebrate the Word made flesh or that day would hold no meaning at all.

May Christmas Day, 2021, be a meaningful day for you and your family. Let your celebration be a natural one. Take that love that was born to all of humankind and share it with others.

May your Christmas be filled with all the blessings the season has to give.

May God bless you one and all.

Merry Christmas!