**Christmas Eve, Dec. 24, 2014; Is 9:2-7; Ps 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20; Rev Mary S. Trainor**

I had to have that bicycle. At age 10, I saw a bike at a store and that was it -- I had to have it. Each day, I hounded my parents about it. Christmas finally came, and there it was under the tree: my perfect bike. I knew that now that I had that bike, my life would be complete and everything would be happily ever after! It is THE night of the year when we focus a lot on gifts; we love receiving gifts and we love giving gifts. Looking at a Christmas tree with beautifully wrapped gifts underneath is really fun! The happiness we see on people's faces when they have received a gift they really wanted is priceless. Yet, have you noticed how quickly the novelty wears off? There is a term for this: "**hedonic adaptation.**" Hedonic adaptation is what happened to me and that bicycle that I thought would make my life perfect. Time went on, and the happiness that the bike gave me gradually totally disappeared. Hedonic adaptation refers to how the novelty of a new thing wears off. We love new things, but we very quickly get used to the new thing and so it is not new anymore...and then we need something else new.

Tonight, you left your warm home to come to this place where there are no gifts under the Christmas tree for you. But, oh my, you are to receive a special gift this evening: a gift that is different than other gifts. It is a gift does not ever, ever experience "hedonic adaptation." The gift that you will receive tonight is a person, a person who broke into the world in the form of a baby to save you. Oh yes, Jesus Christ is really present here tonight, is always new, never loses the sense of freshness, and is the best gift you could ever receive. We don't think of Jesus as a gift, but oh my this is the best gift!

Now you might be saying to yourself, "**well, I'm doing fine without Jesus in my life.....I don't need that gift**." You might be here because if you weren't here tonight, it would cause a family scene -- so you came along. You might be here tonight because you like singing Christmas carols or you like the sense of spirituality that you experience in a church on Christmas eve -- but you don't want any more than that. Maybe you are a person who wants to be spiritual, but not religious. This seems to be because of disillusionment with religion. Why is this? Isn't this the case because of sin?: sins committed by the church, by ministers, by religions, by church people. Many people see church/religion as judgmental and hypocritical....because they, or someone they love, have experienced this personally. I am here to tell you that the church is a human institution, and as such it makes mistakes - and needs to apologize for those mistakes. I am here tonight to ask for your forgiveness if the church has hurt you or someone you love. Yes, I sincerely apologize for all the hurt caused by the church: the abuses, the judgmental comments, the lack of welcoming, the untruths shared that hurt.

I am also here to tell you that the church, this church, is a place where you can be healed of hurt, where your spiritual side can be majorly fed, and where you are accepted regardless of what you believe. You can be spiritual here....for here you are invited into a personal relationship with the most spiritual person who ever lived, and that is Jesus Christ. This is not a boring relationship! This is not a gift that will experience "hedonic adaptation." It can be as exciting as a fast snowmobile ride or as challenging as water skiing barefoot, it can be closer than the closest friendship or marriage. As the angel said, ***"...for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy: to you is born this day...a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."*** This relationship between you and Jesus is all about love and acceptance, and mystery. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, wrote "**It may disorient you, challenge you, cause you to question things you have always taken for granted. This relationship may be frightening, as it requires risk."**  You are invited to be present in this relationship and see where it takes you.

Bud and Margurite, both in their 90s, were interviewed the other day by the Appleton paper. They said, "**the secret to a long and happy life is faith....we always had God in our life. So many things happen, and you don't know how you're going to get through it. We always wanted to hear from the Lord what to do."** Why should you listen to Margurite and Bud for advice about life? Well, they just celebrated their 72nd anniversary! Margurite and Bud accepted the gift of Jesus into their hearts, and allowed this love relationship to grow and grow each year. You can see the peace of God in their faces.

Our Isaiah reading tonight said, "***The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined."*** Have you experienced some darkness in your life in the past year? Have you experienced loss, pain, frustration? Tonight, this child Jesus born for us pulls you out of the muck of life, out of the deep darkness -- and shines light in, around, below, and through you. The light isthe person ofJesus.He carries your burdens! He is your wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace.

Will you choose to receive the best gift of all? You don't have to take this free gift-no one will force you, it is up to you. Jesus, waits to be invited into your life. How do you receive Jesus? In two ways: (1) in a few minutes, when we have Holy Communion, come forward and receive the real presence of Christ, (2) simply say to God in your head … *“***Lord Jesus, I invite you into my life today. Forgive me for the times I have pushed past what I knew was right. Please change my heart today. Walk beside me every step of my journey. Thank you that I can find a new way to live with you as my guide.” Amen.**