I have always loved Christmas. Like any child, the anticipation of presents Christmas morning was very exciting. That wasn’t the only thing, of course. I loved the tree, carting that same artificial tree up from the basement every year (then initially being VERY upset the year it was determined that the holes where the branches attach to the pole had become so worn over the years that it was time to retire that tree). Taking cover with my sister while my parents untangled the lights and tested them to see how many still worked, in the painstaking 1970s way of individually screwing lights – and foil reflectors - into each and every socket. Finding favorite ornaments to hang, and then the garland, as cookies baked in the oven.

Then came...the waiting. In those days before Netflix, or DVDs (or even VHS), we’d have to hope to catch the Christmas specials when broadcast on the 7 channels we got on TV, or miss them for a whole year.

The waiting...those last few days of school before winter break. Waiting for Christmas Eve, going to Mass then so we could stay home Christmas morning.  Waiting – no, bracing – for that same lady with that awful perfume to sit next to me at church.
Waiting to open **those presents** in the morning. Waiting for my **grandparents and uncle** to arrive for dinner. Waiting for my aunt to ask us to show and explain the gifts we opened, which was always exciting to me, since invariably there were **Beatle** albums new to me that were favorites of hers. Waiting to FINALLY have those Christmas **Cookies** after dinner!

Then came that **sigh at the end** of the evening. Family would go home. The house would get quiet. I didn’t have the expression when I was a child, but would later hear Amy’s brother, Peter, say, **“Ah, another Christmas has come and gone.”**

Yes, there was always, to some extent, the Christmas **“Letdown.”** This is not to say that the day, the time with family, or the presents were a disappointment. No, the Christmas Letdown meant that sense of sadness that all the **buildup** excitement and anticipation had come to be, had **come to pass.** We enjoyed the time, the music, the stuff, the decorations, but we knew that the calendar would usher us from the fun and festivities back to the **realities of January.**

Perhaps somewhat like counting on that perfumed lady sitting too close in my pew, my waiting for Christmas turned to **bracing for** the job I dreaded and resisted most: **taking down** the Christmas tree and decorations.
Chances are, the verses I read from Luke tonight are familiar to us. Maybe you have heard them every Christmas Eve you can remember, with a pastor recalling the story of the humble birth of the singularly most precious baby to ever be born.

Maybe you read Luke’s account in the quiet of your own meditation, and wonder what that birth could possibly have been like for the people who were there.

Maybe when you hear the words, you are like I am, and cannot help but expect to hear them through the voice of Linus from Charlie Brown’s Christmas Special.

“That’s what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.”

Jesus: born far away from Joseph and Mary’s town. No doctor or midwife. No grandparents doting on them. No other couples from their Lamaze classes. Who does arrive? Shepherds. A necessary if not noble profession. Not the type to be floating among the nicest of social circles.

The shepherds, the outsiders, the rough around the edges types, are the first to be told to go and see this baby.
“Good news of great joy…to all people,” Yes, even you, shepherds! Society may think little of you, but you are the first to hear about this.

Savior...Messiah....Lord...
through Whom you are promised Peace!

In many ways, Christmas can be seen as the start of our faith story, the start of a whole new life. Wikipedia was not around at that stable in Bethlehem, so we cannot be sure December 25th is actually the birthday, of course. It is convenient for us to have Christmas so close to the end of our calendar year, prodding us to take stock of where we are and where we may hope to go in the New Year.

Christmas as... The Start.

Some of the people I visit as chaplain are quite interested in what I share in my sermons. “What’s the message this Sunday?” they ask. One of them was very eager to hear what I expected to say on Christmas Eve.
I told her we have two services and that I prefer to have two sermons. Some of us attend both services; I can’t give you a rerun!

So, I told her the direction I was heading with the 5pm message: That the Reason for the Season, the Reason for Jesus coming into the world, is...YOU!

*Rita smiled and said, “Jesus is the Gift that Keeps on Giving!”*

I promised Rita I would give her credit for the 7pm sermon title!

We are familiar with Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus. We wait for hearing it, along with the sights of the season and the tunes of the carols and hymns we associate with Christmas.

Unlike my childhood sighs, given voice a generation later with the expression, “Ah, another Christmas has come and gone,” our faith tells us we do not need to have a “Christmas Letdown.”
Yes, the **sights and sounds will change**, but the story does not **end or even stay in that desolate stable in Bethlehem**! The pages of our calendar turn. So do the pages of our Bibles.

*So will our unfolding journey in faith. And hope. And love.*

*Tonight is a celebration! It is, hopefully, one of our “mountaintop” experiences in worship and fellowship.*

Christmas is, hopefully, a time to discover what is **bright, and meaningful, and positive, and hopeful**...in a world that all too often trying to be anything but bright, meaningful, positive, or hopeful.

*God sent Jesus into this world,*

*teaching us to love God and one another.*

*God sent Jesus into this world to transform everything.*

*God sent Jesus into this world that we might know what it is to be reconciled, to be at peace,*

*with our very selves,*

*with each other, and ultimately with God.*
Yes, Christmas is a season. December 25th is a day on our calendars. But it does not end there any more than Jesus stayed his whole earthly life in that stable.

Enjoy with awe and wonder the beauty of this night, tomorrow, the Christmas season.
Once you have unwrapped the last gift, eaten the last cookie (unless I beat you to it), and carefully stored away the last ornament until next year, make sure to hold close to your heart some precious aspect of Christmas.

Christmas is the presence of God breaking into our lives. Being born into our midst. Not for a moment, but for the everlasting reason of God’s purpose of changing the world, and each and every one of us living in it by the grace of God’s love.

Yes, holidays come and go, but Jesus is the Gift that Keeps on Giving!

Thanks for reminding me of that, Rita!