

“KEEP HOLDING THE BABY”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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John 1:1-5

Well, I wouldn't have believed it unless I'd seen it with my own eyes! Valentine's Day decorations are up in some stores already! Can you believe that? Christmas is over as far as those stores are concerned. Time to move on to the next holiday! (Forget the fact, that we're only on the 5th day of the 12 days of Christmas!)

It's a strange world in which we live, isn't it? We build up and build up to Christmas for so long. I mean, the all-Christmas music, 24 hours a day, started at least a week before Thanksgiving on many radio stations, and stores went crazy with pre-Christmas sales for at least that long.

For a month, we decorated, shopped, wrapped, baked, partied, rehearsed, worshiped - all in preparation for that great day when we celebrated the birth of our Savior. And then boom, the world tells us it's over. Time to move on to the next holiday! Wrap it up! Take down the trees, put away the presents, send thank you notes, finish up all the goodies, and move on.

Well my friends, that may be what the world says, but I have something different to say to you this morning, and it is this: “Keep holding the baby!” That's right - keep holding the baby - keep celebrating. Christmas isn't over, either technically or literally.

Technically, the season of Christmas in the church **is** twelve days long - from Christmas to the feast of the Epiphany on January 6th. That's what the song “The Twelve Days of Christmas” is all about. So you've got a while longer to celebrate. I never take down my decorations before January 6th. I want to cherish every single minute of the Christmas season.

So technically, Christmas isn't over for another week yet. But literally, Christmas never ends, and thus my invitation to you - “Keep holding the baby.” Don't let your celebration end when you put the manger scene away. “Keep holding the baby!”

And as you do, as you keep holding onto the baby born in Bethlehem, our Savior Jesus, I would invite you to keep holding onto a few other things as well.

First, keep holding the joy of Christmas. I think probably that Christmas is **the** most joyful time of the year. Oh I know, there's a lot of stress involved in the season too, and the pressure of family and friends, and time constraints. But by and large, it is a joyful time. A time when children's faces are lit up with anticipation and excitement . . . a time of twinkling lights and wonderfully decorated houses . . . a time of carol singing and hot chocolate drinking . . . a time of picking the perfect present, and receiving gifts from those who love you . . . a time of lighting candles in a room full of your church family members . . . a time of beautiful, beautiful music . . . a time of families coming together . . . a time of holiday movies and specials . . . a time of days off from the regular routines of life - so much joy at Christmas time!

Keep holding onto that joy, as much as you can! Carry it with you into the new year. Choose joy, in the midst of a world with so many other negative choices. Be a person of joy, and watch how contagious it is!

I read once about something that Tony Campolo did that is the very picture of joy! He got in an elevator, and I think I've told you before that sometimes when Tony gets in an elevator, instead of standing facing the door, he stands facing others in the elevator, and starts conversations with them.

Well, on this occasion, he was apparently feeling pretty frisky, so he gets on the elevator, faces the people and says, "Hey folks, we're going to be riding together for a little while, so why don't we make the best of it?" And he starts to sing "You are My Sunshine." And soon enough, everybody joins in.

Well, the elevator came to Tony's floor before the song ended. He got out and another man got out with him. Tony turned to him and said "Oh, we both have meetings on the same floor, huh?", the man replied, "No, I just wanted to finish the song!" (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 55)

You see? Joy is contagious. Keep holding onto the joy of Christmas. Embrace it, keep it, and pass it on. Our world needs joy so badly these days.

My second invitation to you is that you keep holding the care you poured on others at Christmas. Around here, especially, the care never ended during Advent and Christmas. From Angel Tree gifts for the children of incarcerated parents, to sponsoring the Rotating Shelter for a week so that homeless men, women and children would have food and shelter, to mittens and scarves for the Help Center, to quarters for the Board of Child Care, to Secret Santas for families who needed help providing gifts to their children, to a special offering for the victims of Superstorm Sandy - well, I could go on and on - the care that has been

poured out in this season here has been incredible. And that's not even to mention the care that all of you have shared in other ways outside of the church.

The Christmas season seems to bring out the best in most people, and caring takes place on a grand scale at this time of year. But statistics show that when Christmas passes, the good will slows down as well. It seems people don't think about it so much after Christmas is over.

I invite you to do otherwise. Keep holding onto the care for others that marked Christmas. Look at the world through the eyes of love and faith. Care for that lonely neighbor of your's. Look at the homeless and listen to them, instead of turning the other way. Take time to spend with the struggling teenager.

It's a matter of seeing the need around you. James Moore tells about a young executive who had been so successful of late, that he rewarded himself with a brand, spanking new Jaguar. He was in love with that car, and he loved riding around showing the world how successful he was.

Well, one day, he was riding through a neighborhood, when suddenly a brick came flying out of nowhere, and hit the front of his car with a thump. He was livid! He immediately slammed on his brakes, then pulled over to the curb, parked the car, jumped out of it, and ran in the direction from which the brick had flown!

There he found a little boy. He started screaming at him. "What did you do that for? Do you know how much this car cost me? Do you know how much it will cost to fix it?" The little boy was shaking as he replied, "I'm sorry mister, but I had to do it. I had to throw the brick to get someone's attention. My brother rolled off the curb and fell out of his wheelchair and he's laying over there on the ground. I can't lift him up. Can you help me get him back in the wheelchair? He's hurt, and he's too heavy for me."

Well, the young man swallowed the lump in his throat, and went over and picked up the boy and put him back in the wheelchair and made sure he and his brother were okay. The brother said "Thank you and God bless you," and he turned and started to push his brother's wheelchair back down the sidewalk.

The young executive stood there speechless for a moment, and then walked back to his Jaguar. There was quite a dent in the car, but you know what? He never got it fixed - intentionally. Why? He wanted it there to remind him of this message, in his words: "Don't go through life so fast that someone has to throw a brick at you to get your attention." (James W. Moore, *If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Picture Is on It*, p. 134)

My friends, remember those words, and keep holding onto the care you

shared with others at Christmas. It will be a wonderful reminder to them of the love and care God poured out on all of us in Jesus Christ, the baby born in the manger of Bethlehem.

And then, my final invitation to you this morning - keep holding the peace of Christmas. Christmas is such a peaceful time. It has a way of keeping us focused on love, and care and giving and goodness. Other things that busy our lives and make them difficult take a back seat, as we focus on the Prince of Peace.

Keep holding that peace. Be a person of peace. Walk into the new year determined to be a peace maker, which is so needed in our world of conflict. We need only turn to the newspapers of the past months to see how badly our world needs peacemakers. A mean and vicious election season, wars raging around the world, robberies in our own neighborhoods, senseless killings of innocent people.

Our world needs peace, and while we may not be able to take on all the problems of the world, we can be people of peace in our own little corner of it. We can start in the way we treat other people, the way we talk to other people, the way we resolve conflicts with one another. We can think the best of others, instead of assuming the worst. We can compromise, instead of always having to have our own way.

What an amazing thing it was, when during the horror and destruction of Superstorm Sandy, President Obama and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie treated each other with dignity and respect (when in times past their relationship has been far from cordial). What an example that was to everyone that we can be people of peace. May you and I keep holding onto the peace of Christmas - the peace that Christ came to bring to this world.

St. Francis of Assisi said it so well: "Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy."

Lord, indeed, make all of us instruments of thy peace. Enable us to keep hold of the peace that is Christmas through every day of the year ahead.

So, friends, go ahead. Take down your Christmas tree, put away your decorations, send your thank you notes, finish up the Christmas goodies, buy the half-price wrapping paper for next year -

but **KEEP HOLDING THE BABY!** Keep holding the joy of Christmas, keep holding the care for others foremost in your heart and mind, and keep holding the peace, and pass it on as a follower of the Prince of Peace Himself.

so. Friends, as now you move into a new year, keep holding the baby! May it be

Amen.