

A HANDS-ON CHRISTMAS

1 JOHN 1:1

In the early years of our marriage, Kathy and I invested in an artificial Christmas tree. The size of the tree fit a young pastor's budget - *it was a four-footer*.

And that under-sized evergreen tree served its purpose. Each year it brought Christmas cheer to our living room, *until the year we moved*. Our new house had a cathedral ceiling, and Kathy was quick to point out that our four foot tall tree just didn't look right.

For the first two years in our house my wife dutifully agreed with my common sense approach, that we didn't need another Christmas tree. Our trusty four-footer *was paid for - it's all the kids knew* - we could take the money we saved, and invest it in more gifts.

Kathy understood my logic - *but it brought no comfort to her heart...* Our tiny tree was her burden to bear!

When the third year in our house rolled around I was worried she wouldn't make it another Christmas with that squatty, elf-size Christmas tree. There are some things too severe for even a submissive wife to handle.

So one morning in early December, while Kathy was running errands and my older kids were at school - my youngest son, Mack, and I, took off in my Toyota Corolla for the Christmas tree farm in Covington.

I was determined to do right by my faithful wife and come home with a respectable tree. I would ease her pain - no

more fake, pint-sized trees. Mack and I were going to find a real tree - a big tree - a gigantic tree - a cathedral-sized tree to fill up a cathedral ceiling.

I'll never forget, my son and I walking up and down the rows of trees until we spotted it. It towered over its neighbors. Mack sawed a little, and then I sawed a lot.

I yelled "*Timmberrr*" as that monster hit the ground.

Mack and I both drug it out of the woods and back to the car. We had the attendants wrap the tree in twine, and strap it on top of my Corolla. No kidding, the tree was longer than my car. This isn't a picture of our car, but it gives you the idea. I drove from Covington to Snellville at 20 MPH - all the while praying the log on my car wouldn't roll off, and cause a massive pile-up.

Mack and I had just pulled into the driveway, and were unstrapping the tree, when Kathy came home. I'll never forget the look on her face. She was so happy. Her men had surprised her with her heart's desire.

And wow, did that colossal tree fill up our living room.

It was probably an inch or two shorter than the Christmas tree they light on top of Stone Mountain.

I had to cut, over a foot, off the bottom so it would fit into the house - and its girth - it had a 12 foot diameter.

Every time one of our other three kids walked through the living room that year - and had to shuffle sideways to avoid the tree - they'd chuckle, and look at me and Mack, and

marvel, “Wow, that’s a really big Christmas tree.” Kathy beamed the whole season.

She was so proud of that tree. My wife saw the effort that went into *picking it out, and chopping it down, and hauling it out, and tying it on, and driving it back, and making it fit.* That tree was a **hands-on** expression of love from her husband and youngest son.

This December I want to talk about **how to handle Christmas** - *the best ways to approach the Holiday Season.* I want all of us to get a handle on Christmas.

And this morning, I want to start by talking to you about **a hands-on Christmas.** I want to suggest we all make Christmas a more **hands-on holiday.**

Let’s read 1 John 1:1, “**That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life.**”

The Greeks who read John’s letter were an observant people. They studied the natural world and noticed that it operates according to universal laws.

They concluded there had to be a master plan - a logic or intelligence responsible for nature’s order and symmetry. They coined a term for the ultimate purpose behind creation - **the logos** - or in English, “**the Word.**”

This became the preoccupation of Greek philosophy, to identify the *Logos of life.* The Greeks examined the *seeable world* to determine its *unseen purpose.*

Yet despite their great wisdom, none of the Greek philosophers - the renown Plato, or Socrates, or Aristotle - were able to answer life's ultimate question.

But the Apostle John had good news! Faith had succeeded where the philosophers had failed. John had discovered the Logos. *The Word* had been *heard*.

The unseen had been revealed. John had touched the Logos with his own two hands. In 1 John 1:1 the apostle refers to *Jesus* as “**the Word of life**” He writes in verse 1, “***our hands have handled the Logos of life.***”

Just as words are outward expressions of our inward thoughts - the invisible God has expressed Himself tangibly in the person of His Son! Jesus is the Word.

John is telling us that there is a God, and He has made known His nature and personhood in a way that we can touch, and hear, and see, and handle.

The reason behind our reality - the logos behind the cosmos - what the Greeks and all other humans search for is not a *primal force*, but a *person named Jesus*. Jesus of Nazareth is the residence of absolute truth, and of undiluted love, and of eternal life. Come to Jesus, and you'll find *the reason for **your** reality!*

Though, it's not John's writings that are usually read at Christmas time, the apostle does much to help us understand the true meaning of Christmas...

Yes, John skips over *the angel's visit to Joseph, and Mary's miraculous conception, and the couple's journey to*

Bethlehem, and the birth of the baby in the stable, and the announcement to the shepherds - and even the visit of the wise men... yet John does help us understand exactly *Who* it was in that manger!

John's Gospel (1:14) says of Jesus, "The Word (or Logos) became flesh and dwelt among us." The Greek word translated "*dwelt*" means "to pitch a tent." The Almighty camped out with us in the person of Jesus?

Peterson's Paraphrase renders verse 14, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." In short, God moved into the hood.

The mastermind and meaning behind this grand, glorious, mysterious universe - *the Word or Logos* - was born in a Bethlehem stable and laid in a manger.

It's mind-boggling to think that the colossal, invisible hand of God... The hand that paints sunsets, and hung stars, and corrals oceans, and parts seas - shrunk in size, and materialized. The hand of Almighty God took the form of five metacarpals - clothed itself in ligaments and tendons - even grew skin and gelatin nails.

Have you ever marveled at a baby's hands?

The fingers are so tiny, the palm is so soft. Imagine, the *hand of God* was reduced to a *infant's hand*...

But what's even more astonishing is that God was willing to be touched by other human hands... This is what really impressed John. He writes of it in our text!

He had heard the Word with his very own ears...

He had seen the Word with his very own eyes...

He had touched the Word with his very own hands... John hugged the logos. He embraced the Word of life!

What philosophers missed with their brilliant intellects, John touched with his grubby, humble, fisherman's hands. The same hands that got hooks out of fish, and cleaned dirty nets, touched the Almighty.

At times John grabbed Jesus' arm to steer Him through the crowd... Like any bunch of guys, I'm sure the disciples and Jesus had playful wrestling matches around the campfire... John patted Jesus on the back, and shook His hand, and bumped into Him in the boat.

John even leaned against him at the Last Supper.

Jesus was God - the holy, spotless, perfect, unapproachable God. The OT said no human being could see God and live. His holiness is too intense.

And if no one could look on God and survive the experience; then touching Him was surely out of the question. *How could sinful hands touch a sinless God?*

Yet when God became a human a new possibility occurred. **He Himself grew human hands, and became accessible and vulnerable to other human hands.**

Now folks with *feeble hands, and greedy hands, and sticky hands, and desperate hands, and pushy hands, even violent hands* reached out and grabbed Jesus.

In the very beginning it was just Jesus' earthly father and mother, Joseph and Mary, who touched Him.

Joseph had carpenter's hands. They were rough and gritty - bruised by hammers, and calloused from work.

But there was no midwife at the birth of Jesus - so the coarse hands of Joseph were needed to pick up the newborn baby and lay him in His mother's lap.

And who would think that Mary's hands would be allowed to touch the newborn King. They belonged to a teenage girl, and were use to combing hair, texting friends, twirling curls, and playing with rubber bands.

Yet it was those hands that laid God in the manger. Changed his diaper. Cuddled Him, and nursed Him.

And remember Simeon's hands... He was the old man in the Temple who saw Jesus when Joseph and Mary brought Him to Jerusalem to be circumcised.

Old Simeon's hands were gnarled and withered with age - perhaps crippled by arthritis. They might've even trembled like a Parkinson patient. Yet Luke 2 tells us "he took (Jesus) up in his arms and blessed God..."

It's interesting to me that Joseph never tried to stop Simeon from taking the baby in his hands. It could've happened so fast he didn't have time to think. Mary must've shuttered when his old hands held her baby.

I had an aunt who had multiple physical handicaps, and she spent her latter years in a nursing home.

She was the only child of five who was actually born in a hospital, and the family always thought her injuries were caused by a nurse who dropped her on the floor.

How vulnerable was this baby called Jesus in Simeon's weak and fragile hands? His old hands could've given way, and dropped the Savior on a slab.

Jesus narrowly missed trouble at the hands of the evil King Herod. Herod ruled Judea with an iron fist.

The earthly king was determined to crush any rival to his throne - even if the threat came from an infant. His jealousy led to the slaughter of Bethlehem's babies.

Herod died with innocent blood on his hands.

In the years that followed you wonder *how many hands... and what kind of hands...* touched Jesus.

His ministry began when the sturdy hands of another John latched to His shoulders and baptized Him...

Leprous hands touched Jesus...

Repentant hands wiped His feet with tears...

Frantic hands, afraid of the sudden storm, woke Him from sleep... The drowning hands of a fearful disciple grabbed *His hand* and was pulled back into the boat... Worshipful hands poured fragrant oil on His head...

A withered hand that seconds earlier had been crippled and paralyzed amazingly reached out with healing faith and touched Jesus with deep gratitude...

The desperate hand of a woman who'd been hemorrhaging for fifteen years reached with faith and touched the hem of His garment, and was healed.

Mark 3:10 says the Lord Jesus “healed many, so that as many as had afflictions pressed about Him to touch Him.” Sick, desperate, human hands touched Jesus.

Mark 6:56 describes a familiar scene, “Whenever (Jesus) entered, into villages, cities, or the country, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged Him that they might just touch the border of His garment.

And as many as touched Him were made well.”

When God became a man it was a hands-on celebration from the very beginning! And a relationship with God remains a hands-on experience even today...

Children are tactile learners. They learn by *touching* and *handling* and *feeling*. Visit our nursery on Sundays, and you'll see babies grabbing for toys with their fingers - squeezing them - sticking objects in their mouth... This is how they learn... *by touch*.

As adults we become more cognitive in our approach. We think and decipher abstract thoughts.

But there are still issues in life that need to be handled, and personally touched to comprehend.

Think of *the lessons taught by suffering - the responsibility of parenthood - the cost of freedom - the joy of marital love...* there are many experiences in life that a person has to handle and touch to appreciate... *And knowing God is one of those experiences...*

Here is God's plan for *His kids*. We don't just *admire* "the **Word of life,**" or *believe* in Him, or even *worship* Him - we reach out spiritually and touch Him. As John puts it, Jesus is "the **Word**" "our hands have handled."

Jesus is **a hands-on God!** He is still touched with *fingers of faith*. This is one of the lessons of Christmas.

And I believe this is the truth that should make Christmas - the festival that commemorates Jesus' entry into the world - **a hands-on celebration**. To really experience the meaning of Christmas you have *to do* more than just talk, or study, or even believe. You have *to touch!* Your hands have to handle Christmas.

Christmas is about God undertaking a bold and daring deed. He left the confines and comforts of His heavenly throne for the outback of Earth. He showed up on Mean Streets - was touched by mean hands.

You don't celebrate a move that gallant with actions that are timid and tame. A true Christmas celebration requires more than tossing a strand of tinsel over a tree limb - or offering up a toast with a cup of eggnog.

You've got to get *hands-on*. Christmas is about touching. **It's about touching God, and touching others.**

It reminds me of the family that was late one year setting up their front yard nativity scene. Their toddler got confused with his terminology... The word "*nativity*" was not yet in his vocabulary. So he asked, "**Mom, when are we going to set up the Activity Scene?**"

But I like that! Nativity and activity should go hand in hand. Christmas should be *a hands-on celebration*.

Every Christmas season needs to be an activity scene. Christmas is **an opportunity to touch people**.

Christmas is about taking your kid into the woods and chopping down a giant tree that'll fill up a cathedral ceiling - *and fill your child's mind with memories... and fill your wife's heart with an expression of your love...*

This Christmas I want you to get *hands-on*.

Do something unusual and special. Make a memory with your kids or grandkids. Teach them the real meaning of Christmas. Impress on your teenager a real life lesson... Join with a friend or friends and do something that'll reflect to the world that hope is come.

When my kids were young every Christmas morning we had a birthday party for Jesus. Kathy baked a cake, and before we opened presents we all sang *happy birthday to Jesus*. The cake even had candles.

We would blow out candles, and eat a slice of cake. *Hey, a piece of birthday cake at 6 AM is good for you!*

Our custom though, made an impression on our kids.

I heard of another family that kept a similar custom with their little girl. One Christmas afternoon the five year-old was asked if she'd gotten all she wanted for Christmas. She replied, **"No, but it's not my birthday!"** That's the message we want to impress on our kids.

Parents, if you drift through the Christmas season without being deliberate with your kids, and your family time, don't be surprised if their attitudes end up as secular and superficial as the world around them.

This is why we need to take a *hands-on approach* to Christmas. Let's take the offensive and look for ways to impact our kids with lessons that'll stick in their minds.

George Armstrong Custer was a famous Indian fighter. His wife, Elizabeth Custer, kept a diary. In it she wrote of her Christmas celebrations in the Wild West...

“Sometimes I think our Christmas on the frontier was a greater event to us than to any one in the states. We all had to do so much to make it a success...”

One universal custom was to spend all the time we could together. All day long there was talking, laughing, or humming bars of Christmas carols... We played childhood games that made the states and our homes seem a little nearer... With a determination to be merry, notwithstanding the isolated life and utterly dreary surroundings, the holidays were made something to look forward to the whole year round.”

Here's what strikes me most from her comments... **“We all had to do so much to make it a success...”**

Could it be the reason our Christmas celebrations are so hollow, and empty, and boring is that everything gets done for us? We buy a tree already chopped down... or we pull it from the box... we cater a dinner that's pre-cooked... we buy bows that are already tied.

To have a *hands-on Christmas* it requires extra time, and added effort. Here's my point, **to get more out of Christmas you've got to put more into Christmas.**

There's another of Mrs. Custer's comments that strikes me as important. She recalls a "**determination to be merry, notwithstanding the isolated life and utterly dreary surroundings.**" She didn't let difficult surroundings or circumstances spoil their Christmas.

We forget the first Christmas was also celebrated in the midst of less than desirable circumstances.

Joseph and Mary were being taxed by Rome and forced to Bethlehem. They'd just completed an exhausting journey. They couldn't find a room in the inn. These too were "**utterly dreary circumstances.**"

Christmas is all about making the best of a grim and gloomy situation. God entered a dark and hopeless world to shine His marvelous light. And a *hands-on approach* to Christmas will willingly do the same.

I believe the Christmas season is a time for **lighting candles** - *not complaining about the darkness...*

Elizabeth Custer made one other comment I didn't mention. She always regretted giving her husband, George, his last Christmas present... *an Arrow shirt.*

This Christmas why don't we get off the couch - and away from the TV - and have a *hands-on Christmas...*

Don't worry about your less-than-perfect circumstances or your undesirable situation, go ahead and spread some cheer - be an influence for good.

String some lights... make a memory with the children... do a kind deed for a neighbor... send a gift to a soldier... or a prisoner... introduce the immigrant family down the street to a Christmas custom... write a letter to a missionary... visit a nursing home... help a single mom... Here's my point, this year why don't you find a way to impact someone with the love of Jesus?

Kathy recalls making gingerbread houses with our kids. A few days pre-Christmas she turned the kitchen table into a gingerbread house construction site.

She would take sheets of graham crackers, and icing, and leftover Halloween candy - and let the kids loose to sculpt, and eat, and apply their creative juices to building a house. It made for a *hands-on* Christmas.

I recall my son, Nick, and I dangling off the roof of my house - stringing Christmas lights, and stapling them to the eaves. It too made for a hands-on holiday.

And check this out... the tradition continues (pic).

Here is this past week, my daughter-in-law sent me photos of my son, Nick, making the same hands-on memory with his son, Colt. Good memories can stick!

Once a little guy forgot his one and only line in the Christmas play. He was suppose to quote Jesus, "I am the

light of the world.” But his mind went blank. He was paralyzed. His mom, on the front row, tried to help.

She kept mouthing his line, “I am the light of the world.” Finally, he caught on to what she was doing. The boy belted out, “*My mom is the light of the world.*”

Mom and dad, never forget, to your kids you are the light of the world. I hope this Christmas you’ll take a *hands-on approach* to the holiday, and make Christmas spiritually significant to you and your family.

One of the ways the Adams family always tried to make Christmas a *hands-on* experience for our kids was by keeping a specific Christmas morning tradition..

Before we opened the first present we re-enacted the Christmas story with a set of ceramic figurines given to us by grandma... One of the kids read from Luke and Matthew, while the others acted out the narrative - with angels, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, even wise men. Of course, the highlight was Jesus’ birth.

I don’t know how it started... but one year the kids realized the ceramic Mary was hollow, and so the ceramic baby Jesus would fit inside the ceramic Mary.

That year when it came time for Jesus to be born, one of my sons held up the Mary figurine - *gave it a shake* - and out plopped the baby Jesus... And for years afterwards, every Christmas out plopped Jesus!

I’m sure some of you are shuttering... you’re thinking a *ceramic baby Jesus* falling out of a *ceramic Mary* is a little sacrilegious. Our pastor is being irreverent.

And I admit that's how it might sound... But you try re-enacting the Christmas story with three rowdy teenage boys... You'll be a little more understanding...

I'm just glad they wanted to participate - *even if it all happened a little differently than I thought it should...*

In fact, when I ponder what happened that first Christmas, the whole story is different than I'd expect...

God gets born in a barn?

He chooses peasants for parents?

Bleating goats and mooing cows welcome the King?

No doctor? Not even a midwife?

No fanfare? No supernatural protection?

The most important baby ever born is laid in a dirty, unsanitary, feed trough? Then shepherds are chosen as messengers? None of those scenarios would be in the script I would've submitted to the publisher!

But this is what happens when God lets human hands touch Him. Situations get marred, and muddied, and end up less than desirable. Messy fingerprints smudge what should've been pristine portraits.

On that first Christmas God took a risk.

He put Himself in human hands. He became vulnerable - and touchable - and very, very *hands-on*.

God became accessible to human hands and their very human intentions - good and evil. *Apparently this is how God likes spending His Christmases...*

Here's what you have to beware of with a *hands-on Christmas*... Human hands are grubby, selfish, and dirty - and when humans get their hands on Christmas, situations don't always turn out the way you planned.

I've tried to help people at Christmas that in the end didn't really want my help... I've been heckled while Christmas caroling... I've run into a Scrooge or two while trying to do a good deed... I've even tried to show love to a relative who wasn't ready to receive it...

In Mark 9:31 the same Jesus who was touched by so many loving hands predicted, **"The Son of Man is being delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him."**

Again, Jesus is touched by human hands, but this time those hands want to harm Him, and kill Him.

Evidently, a hands-on Christmas can be dangerous!

When Mack and I went to chop down that giant-sized Christmas tree for Kathy - an accident occurred when I strapped the tree on top of my car. This really was a huge tree, and I was trying to man-handle it myself.

A four year old wasn't much help. And when I slung the tree on top of the car, the tip of the tree swung too, and flicked Mack right across his face. It scarred him.

My son had a cut that ran all the way down his face.

Every picture we took that Christmas shows little Mack with a scarlet thread running from his brow to his chin. This photo is old and faint, but you can see it...

I was just a father trying to show love to His bride, and in the midst of his actions, this father inflicted on his own son a

serious wound? What a minute, but isn't that exactly what happened that very first Christmas?

God loved you and I enough to allow evil hands to grab His Son, and inflict a mortal wound. A whip flicked across His back - razor-sharp edges opened His skin - nails and thorns were driven into His hands and feet.

Jesus took the sin that was done by our rebellious hands, and paid its penalty by nails in His hands.

And after bearing our sin on the cross, the hand of God had one more miracle to work! God raised His buried Son from the dead - never to die again.

Recall when the disciple named Thomas doubted that the Lord had risen, Jesus appeared to him, and once again God invited human hands to touch Him...

And it was John no less - the same John who called Jesus, *"the Word of life our hands have handled"* that records in John 20, Jesus inviting Thomas to *"Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing."* The living Lord invited a doubting disciple to literally reach out and touch Him...

And Jesus offers the same invitation to us today!

If you doubt Jesus loves you... Or if you doubt He can do what He says He'll do... Or if you doubt He wants to do it because of all the evil you've done...

Then today, rise up in faith, and reach out with all your heart, and touch the God who's made Himself touchable! Make this Christmas *a hands-on Christmas!*

With one hand reach out to Jesus, and with the other hand make an impression on someone Jesus loves.

But whatever you do, don't sit back, and watch this Christmas season pass by. Roll up your shirtsleeves - get active in some way - get *hands-on* this year!

If you want this Christmas to be the best Christmas you and your family have ever had... *hands-down*...

Then make it a *hands-on* Christmas!