

## ***Forgotten Stories***

A Sermon for Morning Worship on the Third Sunday of Advent  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
December 13, 2015  
Text: Luke 1:5-25; 57-64

Do you have a favorite Christmas story? One you just have to hear every year sometime during the Christmas season or it's just not Christmas? Perhaps it's a favorite movie like *White Christmas* or *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*. It just doesn't seem like Christmas if you don't hear Bing Crosby croon "Counting your Blessings" to Rosemary Clooney. Or the holiday's incomplete without that wonderful courtroom scene where the judge rules Kris Kringle must be Santa Claus because the US Postal service has just delivered all Santa's mail to the courtroom.

Perhaps it's a favorite book which has also been made into about a half dozen different screen versions because the story it tells is just so timeless. I'm speaking of Charles Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*, of course. My mother had an antique copy of the book which used to sit out on her coffee table during the Christmas season when I was little girl and we watched the 1938 version with Reginald Owen every year. The ghost of Christmas future was always so terrifying with its bony finger pointing Scrooge into the empty grave. You almost felt like the ghost was talking to you too. But then that was the point. Dickens wanted us to realize that we are all Scrooge to some degree. That's what

good stories do. They pull us into them so we feel like we are part of the story. That's the magic of stories and how they can transform us in an instant, reminding us of what's important and what isn't.

Family stories are part of Christmas too. Memories attached come flooding out as you pull each decoration from the box. These window candles went up the first time the year you moved into your home. The children's stockings hold the stories of Christmases past, soaked into every square inch of fabric. The ornaments and lights on the tree, even the way you trim the tree each year calls to mind all the trees you've enjoyed in years past. Peter and I can still remember almost every detail of the Christmas tree we had in 1978. We were living in a little apartment outside of Washington, DC where Peter was just getting ready to begin grad school. His parents came to our apartment for Christmas that year and we were so excited. I especially remember how very much his Dad loved the tree and wanted to know the story behind every ornament we had put on it. We'd only been married two years then, so we didn't have that many Christmas stories as a couple yet but Win wanted to hear them all. A gift for us, it turned out, since Peter's Dad died very unexpectedly just a few weeks after that special Christmas. That's why the story of that long ago Christmas is still with us every year.

That's the way it is with stories. The good ones, the ones that really matter, take on a life of their own somehow. Some of these stories are our own cherished memories of special times in our lives that come to life again each Christmas as we remember them. Some of these stories are fictional – like Santa Clause or Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer but even these secular stories bring the spirit of Christmas to life for us when we hear them. They remind us of what Christmas is supposed to be all about. For example, it hardly matters which of the many hundreds of stories about Santa Claus or Rudolf you encounter, the plot will revolve around some catastrophe threatening to cancel Christmas that is somehow overcome. The story has a happy ending and that's the way we like our stories – with happy endings – because that's how we want to imagine life unfolding for us, isn't it. We want happy endings all the time, and that's just not real life. But at Christmas time, all these wonderful stories remind us that happy endings are still out there, still waiting for us, still possible for us no matter how bad things seem.

Then, of course, we have all the stories about Christmas in the bible. We almost forget about that story – the original Christmas story – the “keep Christ in Christmas” Christmas story, in the midst of all the craziness that passes for Christmas these days. But here in the church we do work at holding on to it. We remember it when we come here to church on Sundays during

Advent. We remember it as we see the nativity scene begin to unfold here on the altar. We remember it every Sunday when we light the candles on the Advent wreath. We remember it through all the things we bring in to donate to those in need this Christmas season. The biblical story of Christmas is part of us, that's for sure. But do we really know it as well as we think we do?

This morning I'd like us to consider that there are parts of the Christmas story we hear so seldom that we have forget about them, sometimes with good reason. For example, the slaying of the innocents that comes at the tail end of Matthew's version of the Christmas story – the one with the Wise Men – is seldom remembered or told on Christmas Eve or Epiphany. After all, who wants to hear a Christmas story that talks about children being murdered by an evil king on a rampage looking for a baby born a king? We also tend to forget about all the places the angel Gabriel pops up in the Christmas story. We remember him visiting Mary to tell her she would become Jesus' mother. We remember him visiting the shepherds out in the fields to tell them this special baby had been born. Technically we don't know if that was Gabriel or not. In Christmas pageants the world around, Gabriel is always there, but the bible doesn't say he was there. If he was, he stayed in the background, which seems very un-Gabriel like.

But, Gabriel was in another of the forgotten stories of Christmas in the bible. Do you remember the story of the angel

appearing to Joseph before he and Mary even traveled to Bethlehem? Gabriel wasn't named as the angel here but the visit fits his profile. Joseph had decided he did not want to proceed with his marriage to Mary when he learned she was with child but an angel appeared to him in a dream to explain what was going on. So, Joseph agreed to take Mary as his wife in spite of her unusual situation. Then there was the angel who appeared to Joseph in a dream once again warning of Herod's impending attack on all the babies of Bethlehem – that murder of the innocents story I mentioned earlier. Again, this angel wasn't named as Gabriel but it sure sounds like his kind of thing! And his visit worked. Joseph took Mary and the baby and fled to Egypt just in time.

Now we come to my favorite of the forgotten bible stories of Christmas -- the text we read this morning from Luke's gospel, the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth? I love this story because it's such a beautiful counterpoint to the rest of the Christmas story with its focus on a faithful, older couple suddenly and unexpectedly in the middle of a miracle. This story is an important part of the Christmas story too because it reminds us that persistence in prayer and reliance on love makes all the difference when life hands you a situation you never expected to encounter.

Elizabeth was Mary's cousin and you will probably remember it was to Elizabeth that Mary traveled when she learned from Gabriel that she was to give birth to this special baby. But Elizabeth had her own miracle in the making and it began six months before Mary's visit. Her husband Zechariah had had his own angelic visitation. Gabriel, named in this story so we know it is the same angel who would soon visit Mary, visited Zechariah right in the middle of his performing his duties as a priest officiating in the Temple, something he would only have gotten to do twice a year! Zechariah was a Levite, part of the priestly tribe of Israel, and it was his turn to lead worship in the Temple. He was in the inner sanctum making the ritual offering of incense when the angel appeared to him and told him his wife, who had been barren, was going to have a son who was to be named John. Zechariah had trouble believing this would actually happen given his age and Elizabeth's and told Gabriel about his reservations. Gabriel did not react well, telling Zechariah that because he had not believed what he had been told by an angel of God, he would be struck mute until after the child was born.

Now, this probably seems a little harsh and maybe it was. But then again, Gabriel was no golden ringlets and flowing white robes kind of angel. He was a messenger angel, trusted by God to convey God's messages to humans. He was not going to be patient or understanding with a priest who questioned the

message he was conveying from the God Zechariah had been praying to all his life. Was Zechariah just going through the motions all those years or did he really believe God could do what God said God would do? That became a key question in that moment for Zechariah and he blew it. So Gabriel decided Zechariah needed some quiet time to ponder God's message, leaving him mute. This means that when Zechariah left the inner sanctum to return to the courtyard where the worshippers were waiting for him to bless them, he literally had to go through the motions of the ritual without his voice. Luckily the people figured out he must have seen a vision, so they accepted his peculiar situation without question.

Sure enough, Elizabeth became pregnant and remains in seclusion for five months, but the text doesn't say why. Maybe because she doesn't want to take any chances with her extraordinary pregnancy? Maybe because she was confused and anxious? But the ending of this five month period of seclusion is where her story intersects with Mary's story. Mary's story picks up in the next paragraph which begins with "in the sixth month." But this is not the sixth month of the calendar year which is what we usually think because we usually pick up this story beginning with that 26<sup>th</sup> verse – "in the sixth month the Angel Gabriel was sent by God .. to a virgin." It's the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. That's because we, the readers, are to immediately see that the

two stories are directly connected because the two pregnancies are directly connected. Each pregnancy is a miracle in its own way. Each baby to be born is destined to fulfill a unique role in God's unfolding plan. And their mothers support each other in their unique situations.

The climax of Zechariah and Elizabeth's story comes a little later on, after Mary's visit to Elizabeth had ended and she had returned home to Nazareth. Elizabeth's baby is born and on the 8<sup>th</sup> day is ready for circumcision and naming. The men asked Elizabeth for the baby's name and she says John. The men are confused because usually the baby would have been named for her husband or his father. So they thought the baby's name should be Zechariah. They turned to Zechariah for an answer and he asked for something to write with. When they gave it to him, he wrote, "His name is John" and immediately he was able to speak again just as Gabriel had promised.

This forgotten Christmas story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is worth our remembering it. It's the story of two people who loved God and each other to an extraordinary degree. Their mutual faith formed the foundation of their lives and guided how they reacted to every situation that came their way. In those five months Elizabeth remained in seclusion with Zechariah with their precious baby on the way, I can see Elizabeth chattering away and the mute Zechariah just smiling, placing his hand on her growing



belly. I can imagine Elizabeth saying the prayers Zechariah no longer could as he mouthed the words silently beside her. I am sure Zechariah was as excited as Elizabeth to hear Mary's news when she came to visit and this time I'm betting it was Zechariah who calmed her fears and eased her confusion even more than Elizabeth could have. After all, Zechariah had seen and talked with Gabriel too. Now that's not an experience you can share with just anybody. And when Zechariah finally regained his own voice after the naming of his tiny son, the first words he spoke were some of the most beautiful in the bible. "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people," that extraordinary text begins and who would know that better than Zechariah?

So, dear friends, as you head back out into your busy week and all the preparations for Christmas I'm betting it will hold, I urge you to be on the alert for the forgotten stories of Christmas. They might be stories of your own long forgotten. They might be stories you knew as a child and haven't thought about in years. They might be stories connected to a friend or relative you haven't spoken with for a long time. Whatever those stories might be, dear friends, search them out and examine them for the promises of Christmas I am sure they hold. Especially be alert for the love hiding underneath the memories and between the words because

maybe, just maybe, that's God's angel with a message of love just for you, just when you need it most. Amen.