

Treasured Words

A Meditation for Christmas Eve
United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Tuesday, December 24, 2019
Text: Luke 2:1-20

These words from the Gospel of Luke are the essence of Christmas. They are also the climax of one of the best loved Christmas specials of recent memory -- *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. I think it's safe to say that this beloved Christmas show – I'm old enough to remember the first time it aired on television – is the only Christmas special you will see on any channel other than the Christian ones which quotes Luke as part of the dialog at a key moment. Now you might think at least one of those versions of *A Christmas Carol* must quote from Luke but since Dickens doesn't, they don't either. Dickens dances around the words and their meaning, for sure, but other than a Christmas carol or two sung by carolers on the street or in church, you won't find Luke's words anywhere. This is pretty curious since Luke's words are the definitive answer to Charlie Brown's existential question about the meaning of Christmas which all those other Christmas specials and Hallmark movies and concerts, etc., etc., etc. are supposed to be answering. Except they don't. Not really.

Oh sure, they all have some sappy story line about someone's dearest Christmas wish coming true for everything from a "daddy" to a bebe gun to an engagement ring to – well, you get the idea.

But none of that really gets at the meaning of Christmas, the magic of Christmas. This magic of Christmas has nothing whatsoever to do with wish fulfillment no matter how noble the wish. The magic of Christmas has nothing to do with the ridiculous antics of the Elf on the Shelf, or a red-nosed reindeer or a toy shop at the North Pole or a delightful old guy in a red velvet suit, black boots and a long white beard slipping unnoticed into houses to leave gifts. We tell ourselves that the magic of Christmas is connected to these things, and perhaps it is to some small degree. But, most often, these jingle-belled symbols of Christmas magic focus on the stuff of Christmas rather than its substance.

The truth is, we need the magic of Christmas more than ever this year but how are we to find it? I would argue that we've been looking for that magic, that true meaning of Christmas, in all the wrong places. You're not going to find it listed on Amazon. You're not going to find it on a shelf in your favorite local store. You're not going to find it in any inflatable yard decorations, even the manger ones. Dear friends, you can't possibly find the magic of Christmas, the meaning of Christmas, in any of those places because you can only find the meaning of Christmas in one place. And, that you know, dear ones, is deep inside your own heart. You can only find it there because that's where wonder still lives hidden under all the stuff of life you inadvertently stacked on top

of it. That's where imagination awaits rekindling as you hear the miraculous words of Luke's story. These special words, woven together to form a story that has come to us over thousands of miles and millions of days, these treasured words contain all we need to know about the miracle and magic of Christmas.

We know these words so well, even if we only come to church now and then. We know these words so well we could almost say them along with Julie as she read them tonight. Knowing them "by heart" is how we used to describe such words that become part of our psyche. The story these particular words tell is as good as any you'll ever hear. A young unwed mother and the man who has agreed to stand by her are forced into an arduous journey just as her baby is due. When they arrive at their destination there is no place for them to stay so they end up in the stable out back. The baby is born and somewhere out in the fields angels sing and shepherds listen. After the angels leave, the shepherds go find the baby, just as the angels promised. They tell the frightened parents how and why they came to see the baby and then they leave once more, telling anyone and everyone what they saw. You know this story! If you're here this night, it's already a part of your spiritual DNA and hearing it once more just awakens all those cells of longing and memory deep inside you making the story resonate in your very soul. It's enhanced certainly by the liturgy, by the carols we sing, even by the candlelight which will end the service in a few

minutes. But it's the story – Luke's story of Baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph – that contains all anyone needs to know of Christmas.

This is not new information. In fact, it's pretty basic information when it comes to Christmas. Perhaps that's why we tend to skip over it so quickly to get to the Christmas tree and the lights and the shopping and the presents and the – well, you get the idea. And you know what? I think Mary knew all this was going to happen as Jesus' story – all his stories – were told and retold as word about Jesus spread. I think Mary knew we would be quick to forget what matters in the stories but she was determined she wouldn't. Luke tell us that, just as his story is ending. “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. She knew what happened because she was there. And, she knew the story was spreading and would continue to spread across the miles and the years. She knew because the angel told her who this baby she had just birthed really was. She knew this was Emmanuel – God with us. She knew God was in this child in a way that had never happened before and would never happen again. She knew the story inside and out because she *was* the story and still Luke makes very clear that she worked hard to hold on to its importance. We know this because Luke tells us she treasured all these words about her newborn son, and she pondered them in her heart. She thought about them. She turned

them over in her mind again and again, wondering just what would become of him, this beautiful baby she loved with all her being. Did she guess what awaited him? Did her pondering allow her to imagine his future a little too clearly? We don't know. But we do know one thing for certain – these words of Luke's incredible, beautiful, gentle story – are meant for us to treasure too. We are to treasure these words – indeed all the words we hear about Jesus, pondering them in our hearts all the time because only then will we recover and reclaim the magic of Christmas, the mystery of God become flesh, the reality that God loves us every moment of every day more than we can possibly fathom, the truth that new life is always possible when we let God into our hearts. Treasured words – these treasured words of Luke's Christmas story are here for all of us, for each of us. We can read them any time we want. We can make them part of our being. These treasured words are yours. Always and forever. Merry Christmas. Amen.