

“... Close by Me Forever”

A Message for Christmas Eve Worship

on December 24, 2020

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Christmas. Just this one word unleashes a flood of images and memories in our brains. This is true for people the world over and of many faiths beyond Christianity. As I said it just now, something popped into your mind and heart – a happy memory or a sad one, a favorite Christmas decoration came into focus or a traditional cookie or drink made your mouth water at the thought. How is it that Christmas has such a powerful hold on our minds and hearts? That has always intrigued me, because even people that don't like Christmas, don't celebrate it in any way but instead hunker down and hide out until it's over – even these people can't escape its overwhelming presence come the 24th & 25th of December. Why is that? Especially when you realize that at this point in the 21st century there are now two competing stories of Christmas which may or may not overlap with each other.

One Christmas story involves a “fat jolly old elf” dressed from head to toe in red velvet with white ermine trim. Called Santa Claus, and many other names around the world, he lives in a magical place somewhere in the North Pole surrounded by tiny little elves who spend all year making toys for all the good little boys and girls. Come Christmas Eve he loads all these toys into a magical sleigh (somehow they all fit) pulled by eight or nine reindeer (depending on whether or not you count Rudolf with the unusual nose) and then in one night, visits every home with children in the world – coming down chimneys or using magic keys to gain entrance and then filling stockings and leaving gifts under the Christmas tree. During this magical night, the reason he is a “fat jolly old elf” is explained as every house leaves him a plate of cookies and a glass of milk which he dutifully consumes, taking the carrot sticks sometimes left up on the rooftop to give to the reindeer parked there. And then its on to the next house and the next and the next. What a delightful story, celebrated in songs and decorations the world over.

Of course, then there is the other Christmas story, the original Christmas story – the one we heard read just a few minutes ago from the Gospel of Luke. This is the story of the birth of Jesus who would grow up to be the Savior, the long-awaited Messiah – at least for those of us in the Christian tradition. This too is a magical story with the Son of God’s own self conceived in the womb of a young girl by the power of the Holy Spirit, a story we know because in this story’s telling we witness the angel Gabriel telling Mary, Jesus’ mother, exactly this. We also see another angel, in Matthew’s Gospel, telling Jesus’ earthly father Joseph that he needs to go ahead with the plans to take Mary as his wife even though she is pregnant with a baby not his. The next chapter in the story unfolds as Joseph and the very pregnant Mary have to travel to the town of Bethlehem to be “enrolled” in a sort of census ordered by the Roman authorities. They finally arrive but there is no room for them in the inn. The innkeeper points them out back to the structure where the animals are kept – a stable if you will – and it is there Mary gives birth to the miraculous child. Meanwhile, out on the hillsides, the shepherds are disturbed from their nighttime reveries by a “heavenly host” singing the joyous good news of the baby’s birth. The shepherds take them at their word and scurry off to Bethlehem to see this child described by the angels. After seeing him, they return to the hills and their sheep, telling everyone they encounter about what they have witnessed this night.

So, there you have it – two stories of Christmas each steeped in myth and handed down from generation to generation. Two stories which are the foundation of all the Christmas craziness that infests our lives this time of year. But, lovely and compelling as they both are, they are very, very different from each other. Why is that? And why do some folks focus on one to the exclusion of the other? And how is it that so many of us try to blend the two? This, to me, is the real miracle of Christmas – and its greatest mystery. Or is it? To me, the difference between the two stories is obvious as soon as you pause to really consider them in any detail.

The Santa story is all about us – about you and me. It’s all about gift receiving from a magical source where no cost is involved and our heart’s desire just appears in a tangible material way. Oh sure, we focus on children receiving gifts from Santa because they have been “good,”

whatever that means, but, come on, who are we kidding. The gift receiving is for everyone. Dear ones, the Santa story for all its magical loveliness is a story about accumulating stuff on an individual basis. To be fair, the Santa story didn't start out that way. Legend has it that the original Santa Claus was in fact the 3rd century Bishop of Myra, the modern day city of Demre in Turkey. St. Nicholas as he became known cared passionately about the poor and needy. On occasion he would walk about the city after dark and throw coins into the open windows of the homes of poor people. One time some of them landed in the stockings of children hung by the fire to dry and the legend of St. Nicholas was born. Over the centuries St. Nicholas and the stories about him grew and grew as the countries and cultures where the story spread made St. Nicholas their own. His name changed from St. Nicholas to St. Nick and eventually to other derivations such as Sinterklaas and our own Santa Claus here in the US. Gift giving to the deserving children remained a part of the legend even as other traditions grew around the original story of a kind- hearted bishop who lived just two and half centuries after Jesus was born.

That's the point, though. The legendary St. Nicholas lived two and half centuries after the story of the first Christmas was committed to paper by a man who had never even met the adult Jesus. The story of Jesus' birth had no doubt been circulating for decades by word of mouth along with the rest of the stories and memories of the man who changed the world with his message of love and peace, about an entirely new way to think about God. Jesus indeed taught a radical notion that God loved each and every one of us, that each of us was indeed precious to God. Each person is so precious to God that sins could be forgiven without intervention by the Temple priests. But, along with this new understanding of how much God loves each of us came the notion of personal responsibility for showing God's love to the world. Jesus taught in no uncertain terms that making God's love real and tangible in the world was and is the responsibility of every single person who claims Jesus as Savior, as our gateway to living the life God wants us to live. This, dear ones, is a far cry from the Santa Claus story and its emphasis on gifts received instead of gifts offered. In the birth stories of Jesus, found in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, the emphasis is always on Jesus' poverty, on the simple circumstances in which he was born and in

which he was living by the time the three kings showed up on the scene. Yes, this amazing and miraculous child received gifts from the three kings (not the shepherds as modern re-telling tries to convince us) but remember what those gifts were. Frankincense and myrrh foreshadowed his death since these were unguents used almost exclusively in preparing bodies for burial – a strange baby gift if ever there was one. And gold? Most likely a tangible recognition of the preciousness of the gifts the adult Jesus had already brought to the world at the time this story was first written down.

So what are we to make of these two competing Christmas stories? How is it they are both part of our Christmas celebrations? Dear ones, I have no answers to this dilemma except for one – perhaps these two competing stories of Christmas are our invitation every year to hold on to our perspectives, to hold on to the essential truth of Christmas. That truth, dear ones, is that God changed the world forever through the courage of a young unwed mother, a poor laborer and a tiny baby whose first bed was a trough where farm animals fed. That truth is to recognize and hold on to God's promises with all of our energy and strength and commitment, especially in these crazy Covid days of 2020 and the election that just won't end. That truth, dear ones, never changes, never dims, never leaves us unless we forget it, unless we bury it under all the demands and expectations of life each day. And that is just too easy to do.

Many of you know that our son Jack was born the day after Christmas. I was, in fact, in labor on Christmas Eve – a fact I chose to ignore because Jack wasn't due for several more weeks. The labor stopped for a bit but then resumed on the day after Christmas and Jack came into the world just before midnight that day. He was our very own Christmas miracle. What many of you don't know is that Jack had a lot of medical issues when he was little, and please know I share this with you with Jack's knowledge and permission. Little Jack was in the hospital quite a bit as a child, and usually for long stretches. So, we know what it is to have a sick child at Christmas. We know what it is to have doctors tell you they are not sure what's wrong or if this precious child will survive. We know what it is to be terrified by what we don't know and what we do. As I said, Jack was pretty little for all of this so he doesn't remember much of it. What he does remember is what I used to sing to him as he laid there in that hospital bed.

I sang “Away in a Manger.” It became his lullaby and my way of holding on to my sanity. It became our lifeline, his and mine, one that pulled us through all his medical problems as the doctors practiced their craft so expertly year after year until what you know of Jack tells nothing of what he has already endured.

I am telling you this part of Jack’s story because it summarizes for me the truth that the miracle of Christmas is with us every day of the year. It doesn’t begin at dark on Christmas Eve and then evaporate away at midnight on Christmas Day. The miracle of Christmas – the real one – is God’s love for us which knows no bounds even as it calls us to be more than we ever dreamed we could be. This is what “Away in a Manger” means to me because, dear ones, I sang this song to my child year round. I sang it in the winter as the snow flew outside his hospital room. I sang it in the summer as we coped with one medical crisis after another. I sang it the night before school began. I sang it to myself with every accomplishment he has achieved in his amazing, blessed life. I especially love and hold on to the third verse: “Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay close by me forever and love me I pray; bless all the dear children in thy tender care and fit us for heaven to live with thee there.”

Jesus – close by me forever – there is no greater gift on Christmas or any time of the year. Merry Christmas. Amen.

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.