

No Room for Us

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

December 24, 2022 – Christmas Eve

Text: Luke 2:1-14

Christmas Eve again?? How is that even possible? Doesn't it seem like we were just here, celebrating Christmas and wondering what the New Year would bring? Sure does to me. One of many things I have learned as I move into this season in life – the one the writer of Proverbs refers to as the time when “gray hair becomes a crown of glory” – is that time does in fact move much faster the older you get. It's quite odd, actually. You can tell by the clock and the calendar that time is moving at the exact same pace for you as it is for folks decades younger. And yet, it still seems to fly by at breakneck speed. Perhaps it takes being older to be able to discern the pace. Whatever the case, Christmas is a time when we are all awash in memories and the passing of time marked by Christmases past.

For me with 30+ years of ministry in the rear view mirror, I have so many Christmas memories that surround me this time of year, dancing at the edges of my awareness like Scrooge's visit with the Ghost of Christmas Past. When I was very small, my parents observed the old German tradition of waiting until after we kids went to bed on Christmas Eve to put up the tree and put out the presents. We literally went to bed with no Christmas anywhere to waking up to Christmas everywhere! No way any of us could pull that off now!

I also remember performing in too many Christmas pageants to count, in every conceivable role. My mother was usually the director, meaning I was assigned the part she had the most trouble filling. I never did get the role I most wanted – the Angel Gabriel who had an awesome solo of “O Holy Night” as the Christ Child was laid in the manger. My mother told me it would be like she was picking favorites if she gave it to me. So, she never did. Sigh...

I also remember producing too many Christmas pageants to count in my first years in ministry as a Minister of Children and Family Life. A few

are just unforgettable. Like the year Baby Jesus and his entire family (we used real babies and their families for the Holy Family) came down with the stomach flu the morning of the Christmas pageant. We ended up drafting two tall Confirmands and a beat up doll from the nursery for Baby Jesus. The doll, which had been “decorated” using indelible markers left reachable by small hands, had to be swaddled head to toe. Then, there was the time we used adults to play the kings. They entered dramatically, one at a time, singing their respective verses as they proceeded down the center aisle. One of those kings, a dear friend, died this past year. Time does march on relentlessly, leaving precious memories in its wake. I am sure you all have your own Christmas memories, some sweet, others not so much. I urge you to savor them, thinking of them as a gift from God from days long past and people long gone.

I do confess, however, that, at least for me, Christmas in recent years feels pretty different than it has in years past. I don't think this is just because I am older, with a lot more Christmases to reflect back on. There is just something else very different. For one thing, the commercialism of Christmas has only gotten worse as the years have sped by. Everything from outdoor decorations to themed Christmas trees and ridiculous Christmas memes on Facebook and other social media sites indicate that the real meaning, the purpose, of Christmas has been forgotten – or at least pushed so far to the side as to become irrelevant.

For example, have you been on Route 49, between Route 2 and the entrance to 95 in the last few weeks? Have you seen the inflatable Christmas decoration there? This is the house with the toilet fountain in front. Now for Christmas they have an inflatable outhouse with Santa emerging. Yep. Worth the trip to see it. Then there was the meme on Facebook where someone had created a life sized stuffed Santa and tied it to the front of their Jeep Wrangle to make it look like Santa had been mowed down by the Jeep. I had to post something in response to that one. Imagine how many children will be traumatized by this, I posted. You won't be

surprised to know my comments were ignored, except for the guy who hit on me in the comments section. As the Wicked Witch of the West says in the *Wizard of Oz* movie, “what a world, what world...”

And yet, it’s the world we’re stuck with. So, where do we go from here. Well, for one thing, we need to pause and think about some things a little more deeply than we tend to do. This is exactly what David A. Graham does in his article appearing in *The Atlantic* this week. Entitled “The War on Christmas Is Winning,” Graham takes this right wing trope and turns it on its head when he observes, “conservatives aren’t reacting to nothing: Christmas is becoming less of a religious holiday for millions of people. If a war on Christmas exists, it’s gaining ground in a long battle of attrition.”¹ I have to say, I agree with Mr. Graham’s conclusions. The original story of Christmas, the one recorded in the Gospel of Luke which we read a few moments ago, is almost lost these days, obscured by inflatable lawn decorations, plastic reindeer and nutcrackers. In fact, all the stories of Christmas have been mashed together like they’ve been put through some gigantic cosmic food processor, the resulting mess glopped onto front yards and inside homes with little awareness of what the holiday is supposed to be celebrating. Baby Jesus is not there. Or, if he is, it’s like my neighbor’s display with not one but two silhouettes of the Holy Family in the stable, each illuminated by different, ever changing strobe lights.

Many homes still have creches of course. Our own Misfits Creche this year reminds us of just how the Christmas story has evolved over the years. The original story of Christmas often appears in our holiday celebrations through these creches in our homes. But even these creches seldom tell the whole story. Blond haired, blue eyed Baby Jesus and Mary, surrounded by cherubic pudgy blond angels with rosy complexions do not provide an accurate depiction of how Jesus entered this world. Neither do the creches created when cats and dogs are dressed up in someone’s idea of biblical costumes to tell the story of the birth of God’s son. Don’t get me wrong, I

¹ David A. Graham, “The War on Christmas Is Winning,” *The Atlantic Daily*, December 23, 2002

am all for folks creating creches which depict the birth of Jesus in ways that represent their own ethnic identities. This is one important way folks take this crucial, central story and make it their own. But, dear ones, there are limits. Or are there? I confess I wonder about this...

But we are still left with the story from Luke's Gospel. This is *the* story from Luke's Gospel. It was written to fill in a chunk of the back story on Jesus, long after he was crucified and these Gospel stories were written down. It's worth remembering that Mark, the oldest gospel, does not include the birth narrative at all. Matthew includes it, but much more briefly and focusing on it from Joseph's perspective. John also doesn't include it, writing instead a cosmological essay focusing on the light of God coming into the world as the Word incarnate. In other words, we have no idea whether this story we cherish as the story of the first Christmas, the day when Christ was born, is even true. It's entirely possible it was a beautiful story created by storytellers who knew and loved Jesus and wanted to know everything about him they could. They took the facts they had – Jesus' mother loved him and never, ever deserted him; he grew up in Nazareth the son of a carpenter – and they imagined the rest as it must have been for Jesus to be whom they knew him to be. The birth narrative of Jesus, as theologians and biblical scholars call it, is a magnificent story. It invites all of us into this moment when God made a commitment to change the hearts of humankind by sending Jesus into our midst. This is the central story of Christmas, the one truth of Christmas. The only one that matters.

The thing is, the world wants us, those who try to follow Jesus as best as we are able, to believe there is no room for us in it. The sacred story of how Jesus came to us is intentionally being obscured by those who insist Christmas is about inflatable Santa outhouses, garish Christmas trees and spending money we don't have on stuff we don't need. But, dear ones, it is not only this gross commercialism of Christmas that leaves no room for us, the people who treasure Jesus. We are also ignored and marginalized by those who claim the name Christian by insisting they have the only truth on

who Jesus was, who Jesus is and who Jesus loves which is only people who look and think like them. No. Just no.

Dear ones, Christmas is so much more than either of these perspectives because Jesus is so much more. The story of Jesus' birth as we hear it in Luke is a gift to us, an invitation to enter into the earliest moments of the life of this man we call Jesus who quite literally changed the world. The story is ours to love, to cherish, to celebrate. We know this. Really, we do. We just forget about it as we get all wrapped up in our own expectations for Christmas. Did we buy enough presents and were they the right presents? Did we write out enough Christmas cards? Have we made the right decisions on everything from the Christmas tree to the menu choices? It is so easy to lose ourselves in the chaos of meaningless details that is Christmas in these frantic, hectic days that we forget to leave room for the most important thing – pausing at the manger to gaze in wonder at this gift of Emmanuel – God With Us. With US, right here, right now. The Christmas story is our story – we who love and follow Jesus.

Here's the simple truth of Christmas -- there is plenty of room for each of us, for all of us, just as we are, gathered in wonder at the hope reborn in the world this night. Whoever we are and whatever we bring with us to the manger -- doubts, misgivings, worries or joy that feels too good to be true. Whoever we are, whatever we bring with us this night, the story of Christmas is ours, if only we chose to receive it as our own. Now that's up to you. Merry Christmas. Amen.