

UNEXPECTED GIFTS

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
December 24, 2023 – Christmas Eve Service with Communion
Text: Luke 2:1-20

Wow. It has surely been a week in my house. Hospital trips. Bridge-mageddon traffic. Sad news. Upsetting stuff. Endless presents to wrap. Beautiful notes and cards from friends of long ago that I want to respond to but just can't find the time. The regular stuff of life that just never goes away – bathrooms needing cleaning, floors needing a vacuum, dog needing a walk, meals needing prepared. So much I need, so much I want, I hope to do that I just can't seem to get to. Geesh. It gets overwhelming, doesn't it. But you all know this! You all feel the same, I'm betting. Christmas is the time of year when joy is supposed to be tangible but is too often overwhelmed by anxiety and the never-ending task list. And peace? Peace? That's something most sought after but seldom found. Hope? Love? Who has time for either of those? Real questions for all of us these days.

But, here's the thing. If I have learned nothing in life, I have learned this – no one will ever just hand you the gifts of these things we attempt to uncover, recover, and celebrate at Christmas. No one will just give you joy – or peace – or hope – or even love because none of these is a one way emotion, even though we often act as though they are. All of these, the intangible, and often unexpected gifts of Christmas, require something of us as well if we are going to be able to receive them. They require that we be looking for them, that we believe they exist, that we know we – us, you and me – are worthy of them, that we are capable of gifting love, hope, peace and joy to others every day. Even on the bad days, the awful days, the days we wish we did not have to endure. What makes these particular Christmas gifts so valuable, so precious, is precisely that they are transcendent gifts.

What do I mean by that? I mean that they are gifts which are meant to transcend time and place, circumstance and happenstance. If you want hope as a guiding light in your life, you have to believe hope is possible, all the time, especially when it feels like all hope is gone. If you want peace in your life, peace in the world, you can never stop seeking it for yourself nor wanting it for the whole world, especially when that literally seems impossible – like right now when the land where Jesus was born is engulfed in a bloody, brutal war where tiny babies are being killed by bombs, viewed as an unavoidable casualties by both sides. If you want joy in your heart, you have to believe it's out there somewhere and you can find it. To do that, first you have to know what gives you joy. Do you know that? Do you actually know what joy feels like and can you identify the circumstances which make you feel that way? I bet that is more of a struggle for you than you might want to admit because we just never stop to think about joy, what gives it and how we respond to it. And, last but not least, love. If you want love in your life, dear friends, you first have to know what it is. You have to be able to feel its presence, and its absence. You have to know how to love and how not to love. Now that's the tricky part.

These four gifts of Christmas – hope, peace, joy and love – are what we remember and celebrate during the season of Advent, our time of preparation for celebrating the birth of the Baby Jesus on Christmas Day. Each candle on the Advent wreath represents one of these – as we recalled just a few moments ago when we relit them. If you'll notice, the flames on those candles are fragile, easily impacted by a breeze, becoming ever more so as they burn down from week to week. How like us they are in that respect. Life burns us down as the days, weeks, months and years go by. Moments of hope, peace, joy, and love are experienced surely, but they are all too fleeting if we're

honest. Not because we don't appreciate them but because that's just life. Life happens. Hope fades even as it becomes more embedded. Peace in the world remains elusive, but in our souls not so much, especially if we invest ourselves in seeking after it through prayer and meditation. Still, it too never lasts that long. Joy? Of course we experience moments of joy. At least I hope we do. When a special milestone moment with family and friends lifts our spirits and carries us forward on a tidal wave of happiness. Or sometimes in a quiet moment when the sense of our blessings just overwhelms us. And what of love? Now that's the one we constantly hear about this time of year and other times too. We toss the word around so much we scarcely remember what it's supposed to represent. "I love that car!" or "I love what you've done with your house" or "I love to shop at that store because they always have such good bargains" and so on, and so on. All this may be true but it makes the concept of love, the need for real love in our lives, very muddy – lost in the confusion over what it actually means.

So, as Christmas dawns tomorrow and we anticipate the birth of the Christ Child – God With Us – into our very lives, what difference does Christ's birth make, really. That dear ones, is a legitimate question, especially this year. I'm not sure about you, but I have seen far fewer creches on lawns this year, replaced instead with grinchies and baby yodas in Santa hats. The world in general feels too much of the time like Jesus is MIA. Wars in Gaza and Ukraine – both with religious overtones, blatant and implied – stain the faith we claim with the darkness of hate instead of love. Too many people in this country turn to guns and violence to solve disputes without a second, or seemingly even a first thought. There are more homeless people in this country now than ever before in its history, cities and small towns reeling under the weight of it yet still seemingly unwilling to do much

about it. *Jesus, where are you???* *We don't need a cute story about you being born in a stable with shepherds and angels and cows and sheep! We need you! Right now and in the flesh!!! Where are you???* *We need to know! We're unraveling here! Where are you...*

That's when, if we're listening, a quiet voice will break the raging silence in the darkness. "I'm right here. I never left. You just lost sight of me for a bit, and I get that. Really, I do. Too much awfulness in the world. Too much hurt and confusion and fear. Too many things to worry about it. It drowns me out too often. But I'm always right here. I never left you, and I never will. Even in all those moments when you forget about me, I'm still here." This, dear ones, is the unexpected gift of Christmas – that even when Christmas is long past and the Baby Jesus and his manger are back in the box in the basement or the attic – Jesus is still here. He never leaves.

The thing is, it's our responsibility, our challenge every day, to put the effort into not only remembering, but trusting that Jesus is in our own lives every day. We see him in the smiles that come our way when we thank a server or a store clerk. We hear him in the laughter of children and the giggles of teenagers and kids home from college. We feel him in the warm glow of the fireplace, even if its not real! We touch him when we respond with kindness instead of anger or frustration – like when we're sitting in ever worsening bridge traffic in Providence or negotiating crowds at the store or the airports. We know him in the love which comes our way on the darkest days of our lives through the soothing hugs and gentle words of friends and church family members. Dear ones, Jesus is all around us, always. Not just when we see the tiny baby in the manger on Christmas. Not just when we celebrate his empty tomb on Easter. Jesus is here, because Jesus is God's unexpected, un-asked for gift to us which never gets old or breaks or goes out of style. Emmanuel, God-With-Us,

walks with us through every moment of our lives. When sadness overwhelms, when a loved one dies, Jesus' tears fall along with ours. When anger bruises relationships and hearts, Jesus feels our hurt and anguish. When health scares come, Jesus offers hope beyond all reason, healing ever possible. Dear ones, Jesus never leaves.

So as Christmas Day dawns tomorrow, look for Jesus in the smiles of loved ones and strangers alike. Remember that when you pack that creche away, you're never putting Jesus in the box. Not really. Easter proves that no box can hold Jesus! Only your heart has that task.

In closing, I'd like to share a poem that was shared with me just this week by Carolyn LeRoy. Titled "Kid Stuff," it was written by Frank Horne in 1942.

*The wise guys tell me that Christmas is kids stuff ...
Maybe they've got something there –
Two thousand years ago three wise guys
Chased a star across a continent
To bring frankincense and myrrh to a kid
Born in a manger with an idea in his head.
And as the bombs crash all over the world today
The real wise guys know
That we've all got to start chasing stars again,
In the hope that we can get back
To some of that Kid Stuff born two thousand years ago.*

Merry Christmas and may your search for Kid Stuff be fruitful indeed.
Amen.