

Christmas Eve Meditation

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

24 December 2022

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Luke 1:26-2:20

Matthew 2:1-12

*“So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph,
and the child lying in the manger.”*

~ Luke 2:16

Prayer

God of Christmas,

Startle us with your loving Presence among us tonight.

Fill us with awe and wonder

As we welcome into our hearts the story of faith and love

That drew us to this sacred place on this holy night. Amen.

Merry Christmas and a warm welcome to all on this Christmas Eve. I am delighted to see our pews crowded once again with church members, friends and visitors on this holiest of nights. Welcome back to this sacred space where we remember the wonder and ponder the mystery of the Child in the manger.

After keeping us from gathering in-person to celebrate Christmas for two consecutive years, COVID disrupted our Christmas Eve service yet again. Some of our staff and church members tested positive last week. I am particularly disappointed that our choir director, Pip Moss, cannot be here with us tonight. For the last four decades, Pip has selected the magnificent anthems that open our hearts to the miracle of God's love coming into human history in the babe of Bethlehem. This would have been Pip's last Christmas Eve service at Acton Congregational Church. He will be retiring next June. Thankfully, Pip is well. He is isolating at home to protect others. We are grateful that Ann Moss, Pip's daughter, gracefully agreed to sing and conduct the Senior Choir tonight. To Pip, our choir members and all those who because of positive tests or for various other reasons are worshipping with us online our heartfelt wish for a peaceful and joyful Christmas.

Every year, before or after COVID, preachers all over the world, from the Pope in Rome to the pastor in a small village church in Africa, face the same formidable challenge on Christmas Eve. Ours is the daunting task of rescuing the story of the birth of Jesus from the familiarity of candlelit traditions and the lachrymose sentimentalism of the poetry, music, and decorations that have grown around Christmas.

No other birth in history has been depicted in as many paintings, celebrated in so many poems, eternalized in such a wide variety of carvings, translated into so many

masterpieces of classical music and re-enacted in as many plays as the birth of the Christ Child. If we had written the Christmas story ourselves, it is very unlikely that we would have had the Son of God be born into abject poverty, to two nobodies of the Roman Empire, in an obscure small town in Palestine and in a country under occupation by a foreign military superpower. With her signature irreverence, comedienne Joan Rivers once joked about putting up a nativity scene at her house. She got the wise men, the sheep, and the manger with the baby, but added a nanny to the crèche to make sure Mary had help. She also redressed the baby's mother. Directing her sartorial criticism at Mary, Rivers pointed out that "**Mary didn't look good** [with the headscarf and in her boring dress]." If she was the Mother of God, Rivers thought, Mary should look the part. So, she put Mary in a Chanel suit, Manolo Blahniks, and gave her a Louis Vuitton pocketbook. Then Rivers told her audience that if Mary had looked like that, she would have gotten into the inn.ⁱ

Hidden behind Joan Rivers' notoriously outrageous humor is the undeniable truth that our attempts to re-create the birth of Christ often distract us from seeing both the holiness and the humanness of the real story. Christian artwork and music make it very easy for us to be seduced by the romantic notion that the first Christmas Eve was a silent night when all was calm and bright in the world. In our nativity sets, Mary, even if not dressed to impress, is always looking impeccably well put-together and saintly for a very young woman who had spent anywhere between 12 to 19 hours in labor, giving birth to her first child. Not one single hair in her head is out of place. There is not a single drop of sweat on her forehead. Joseph kneels near the manger showing only a faint semblance of dutiful love for a child that is not his own. The baby is washed, clean, and wrapped in swaddling clothes. On the hay in the feeding trough, the little baby Jesus doesn't cry. He sleeps in heavenly peace. Mother, father and child never touch each other. The manger, rather than a site where humanity's hopes and fears meet God's love in human flesh, is enveloped in religious schmaltz. This Christmas story re-created by our traditions sounds almost like a fairy tale that is quite different from the real world of first century Palestine.

I have always loved how the professor of homiletics Edmund Steimle, who became nationally known for the inspiring sermons he delivered on the radio show "*The Protestant Hour*" in the 1960's, explained and even justified our tendency, even in the Church, to think of Christmas as a magical time of the year. The multicolored lights on the doorways and the candles at the windows, the wreaths and the tinsel, the incessant music in the air, the impressive window displays at the stores, the Christmas trees, the holly and mistletoe, the ridiculous decorations on the lawns that are too big, too brassy, too much, too tawdry, the efforts to re-enact the fantastic scenes of shepherds, magi and a stable and all the excesses of our Christmas preparations and celebrations both conceal and reveal the deepest longing in the human soul for love to reign in the human heart and peace to silence the drums of war on earth and for joy to make humankind gladder and for hope to keep the whole world believing that there is a bright light of goodness and justice that the darkness of our history and in our own lives cannot put out. Christmas reminds us – the believer, the unbeliever, and the half-believing – of that impossible possibility that the Jewish child that was born in squalor on the periphery of human civilization came with a

message that humanity desperately needs and wants to believe which is that we all can do our bit and a tad more to make the world kinder, fairer, better, more just, more equal and more peaceful. All the energy and time we put into the preparation for Christmas; all the cooking, organizing, gift shopping and wrapping, all the baking, cleaning, decorating, the Herculean effort to get along with all the family members, and the annual trip to the church to hear the story we know by heart and sing carols that speak of angels and a holy night are the way people give shape, taste, color, scent and sound to our collective and most earnest hope for a world transformed, redeemed and saved by love.ⁱⁱ I imagine this is the reason why Christmas, despite our best efforts to romanticize, commercialize and secularize it to death, continues to capture our imagination and grasp our hearts. All of us want to believe and, perhaps, even be completely caught up in the story of the child that released God's life-saving love into the flow of human history.

Christmas may sound like a magical time, but the story of Joseph, Mary and their firstborn child has the power to change the world for real because if you and I believe, this story will give us a different kind of life in which little by little, step by step, we will come to the realization that the best way to live our days on earth is by loving; by spreading God's love and sharing our love with other people and reaching out across all the barriers that divide humankind with love and allowing our love to become the gift of new life to every human being and to all non-human life on our whole planet. But, be forewarned, this Christmas love that became flesh in the Christ Child comes with strings attached. Joseph was asked to believe beyond a doubt that Mary's child was God's Son and not the consequence of his fiancée's betrayal or, worse still, of sexual violence. Mary, the young girl from Nazareth, conceived a baby out of wedlock and faced the possibility of a brutal death by stoning if Joseph had not accepted her version of the story of her unplanned and unexpected pregnancy. We can imagine what was going on in Joseph's mind while he and his heavily pregnant bride walked south roughly 20-miles a day, for four days, toward Bethlehem. The imperial census meant only one thing for a Jewish peasant – more taxes, longer working hours to pay for the Roman occupation, less money to put food on the table, tough economic days and more political unrest ahead. Joseph knew better than to try to buck the system. The Romans were almost as efficient at record-keeping as they were at killing those who questioned or opposed Roman rule and power. With a child on the way, Joseph had to make wise and careful choices to protect and feed his family. He had to show up to be registered. But going back to Bethlehem also meant that Joseph would have to face his extended family and there would be whispered remarks of condemnation and looks of strong disapproval awaiting him and the pregnant girl he was about to marry.

“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.” These are among the most beloved and magical words we want to hear on Christmas Eve. We imagine the travel-weary couple Joseph and Mary, exhausted from their long journey, eager to find a safe place to rest for the night, feeling completely helpless when an innkeeper tells them there's

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

no room available at the inn. The couple's only option for overnight shelter is an animal shed out back where Mary goes into labor and gives birth to her child, alone.

The Gospel of Luke does not give much detail about the night of Jesus' birth, but Palestinian innkeepers in today's Bethlehem question the way Western Christianity continues to portray the first-century innkeeper, especially because no figure of an innkeeper actually appears in the Christmas story. In first-century Palestinian culture as it is still the case now, no pregnant woman about to give birth would have been denied a safe, clean and warm space to deliver her baby. Our imaginary innkeeper is as one female Liberation theologian put it, "**logistically challenged at best, or inhospitable, at worst, when it comes to their response to Mary and Joseph.**"ⁱⁱⁱ The truth however is that there was no careless, unfriendly or unwelcoming innkeeper in the first Christmas. As it was the custom at the time, Joseph would have stayed with relatives and not with strangers at a guest house, at some kind of first-century-Airbnb, in his own ancestral hometown.

Jewish family homes in the first century were usually a single room building with a compartment for the livestock and an upper room on the roof for guests and visitors. It is very likely that Mary's complicated story may have been the reason for Joseph to be given the living space, the compartment, where, at night, the livestock was brought in for warmth and safety. We do not know if the manger was surrounded by cows, oxen, donkeys, and sheep, but we know that the Greek word the evangelist used to describe the place Jesus was born is best translated as a room in a house rather than an "*inn*." And what this means is that Mary wasn't alone when her contractions started to come so fast that she felt as if she were unable to breathe. I like to think that the women in Joseph's family came around to help Mary bring Jesus into the world and as Mary squeezed their hands, moaned, grunted, cried, breathed and pushed, all their cultural prejudices and religious condemnations were moved aside to leave room only for solidarity, love and new life. Rather than the perfectly clean, bloodless, detached and lonely family of our nativity scenes, I like to imagine a worn-out Mary, a thankful Joseph and a crying baby Jesus encircled by people they knew and loved on the night Christ was born. I imagine the women who served as midwives cutting the umbilical cord and handing the newborn to his mother, so Mary could wrap her nameless child in the bands of cloth she had brought along. This is not the Christmas story we grew up with, it is much closer to what may have happened on the first Christmas Eve. I love to think that Joseph's kinsfolks hugged and congratulated him, and they found within themselves the kind of forgiving and life-affirming love that allowed them to welcome Mary's child as a gift to humanity.

Poet David Whyte described holiness as "***the rehabilitation of the discarded; the uncelebrated and the imperfect, into new unities, perceived again as gift.***"^{iv} It is no wonder that despite all the world's attempts to dress up for Christmas as if this were a magical mid-winter festival, people still see holiness in this season, in this night, and in the story of Joseph and Mary and their child. At the heart of Christmas is a holy love that hopes for nothing else but to rehabilitate the discarded of the world, all the uncelebrated,

the imperfect people like you and me so we may begin to see one another as gifts even if we do not wear Chanel suits or carry Luis Vuitton pocketbooks.

Friends, it's Christmas time and I am delighted to see so many of you hear tonight donning your best Christmas attire and enjoying our first Christmas back in the sanctuary but let me say very respectfully to you and to those online that the purpose of Christmas is not to entertain you or make you feel good but to change all of us, to open our eyes to the holiness of God's love revealed in Christ. My prayer is that tonight, as you go back into the night of Christmas Eve and then wake up on Christmas Day, that you may see underneath all your gifts and family gatherings something of the forgiving and life-affirming love of God that can remind you that no matter the circumstances of your life, you are deeply loved. I pray that this holy love makes you brave enough to reach out to a friend, a neighbor, a child, or a grandchild who may feel uncelebrated to tell them they are a gift; and I hope you really mean it. I hope that you can carve out a place in your heart for Christmas and, like Mary and Joseph, make a loving commitment to your spouse or significant other to hold on to each other, especially in moments when darkness appears to have extinguished the light around you, and never allow the other to feel discarded. My friends, I pray that when you walk away from the service tonight, you will not put Christmas away with the decorations. I pray that you will come back and join us here at Acton Congregational Church where we keep pushing the holy love of Christ into the world again and again and celebrating every life as a holy gift from God. This is what Christmas is really all about.

Feliz Natal! Feliz Navidad! Merry Christmas.

ⁱ Joan Rivers live at the Apollo, Part 1 [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNULzi46OI&t=498s>].

ⁱⁱ Edmund A. Steimle in *From Death to Birth*, "The Beating of Unseen Wings," p. 107, 112.

ⁱⁱⁱ By Kelly Nikondeha in *A Modern Innkeeper in Bethlehem*, Plough, 23 December 2019, [https://www.plough.com/en/topics/culture/holidays/christmas-readings/a-modern-innkeeper-in-bethlehem?fbclid=IwAR0uQ-ZJn9j9UgAiwL8fz5_ho59S2atjTb0Yx1ee5chHgXc1yPQ4S4N3FsM].

^{iv} David Whyte in *Finding the Holy in the Holidays*, Mid-Winter Thoughts 2022.