

Christmas Eve Homily

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

24 December 2021

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Matthew 1:18-25

Luke 1:39-56

Luke 2:1-7

Luke 2:8-20

John 1:1-4

“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”

- John 1:4

Prayer

Holy God,

O Come to us again and abide with us,

O Lord, Emmanuel, Wisdom of God in human flesh. Amen.

Last Monday night, after the difficult but necessary decision was made to cancel our in-person Christmas Eve services the audacious words of Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick, the Presbyterian minister who founded the Riverside Church in New York City, put me in the right mood to prepare for tonight, ***“It is a great time to be alive! The world is breaking up.”***^a

Another virtual-only service on the holiest of nights for Christians around the world is not what any of us wanted for Christmas. The last thing the world needed at the end of 2021 was a new highly transmissible variant baptized with yet another letter of the Greek alphabet to thrust us back to the same place of uncertainty we were a year ago. It feels strange to have to take this step back. It feels like a setback in our attempt to learn to live with COVID. It is unsettling to have to worship remotely on Christmas Eve a second year in a row. If you feel exhausted, frustrated, burned out, disappointed, bereft of joy, angry or even just COVID-indifferent, you are not alone. We all have been struggling with COVID fatigue. Having to ask ourselves again whether it is safe to gather with family and friends or to attend a church service on Christmas Eve makes it a little harder to imagine our lives beyond this pandemic. At times, it does feel as if our world were falling apart.

Still Christmas persists! We are not gathered in-person and we had to cancel our Christmas Eve concert tonight and make last minute changes to our service – still Christmas draws us together. Out there, the COVID-anxious are terrified of a new surge, the COVID-deniers continue to live as if the pandemic were a hoax, the testing lines are getting longer, the transmission rate is spiking, hospitals are overwhelmed, and the culture-warring around the vaccines is flaring up everywhere – still Christmas is

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coming into the world. Wealthy nations are hoarding 90% of the life-saving vaccines, the pharmaceutical companies are raking in hundreds of millions of dollars in profits by selling the vaccines to rich countries, Africa remains unjustifiably unvaccinated, 40% of Americans still refuse the shots even though this country is awash in vaccines, and rich nations assume that we can make our way out of the pandemic with booster shots – still Christmas insists on demanding our attention. Our world is breaking up and it is a great time to be alive because Christmas is still coming into our lives, inviting you and me to pay attention to the story of hope that snatches us from the coziness of our private holiday celebrations to listen to familiar lines about shepherds and the manger; the story of peace that angelic voices sang on this night two thousand and twenty-one years ago; the story of joy at the birth of a Jewish child that came to change the world; the story of love that asks us every year what kind of gift we want to give each other for Christmas.

The gauzy sentimentality and the consumer culture that frame Christmas as a wondrously glittery year-end holiday season distract us from the tempestuous and harrowing circumstances that enveloped the lives of the people who, against all odds, gave their hearts and bodies as a Christmas gift to humankind.

Joseph understood well what it meant to have your world and everything you took for granted come undone. The first Gospel lesson Bree Dietly read tonight describes Joseph as a man who is faithful to the Law, which means that the carpenter from Nazareth was a religious man devoted to God and committed to living ethically. As a poor Jewish male living under the rule of powerful and ruthless men in Rome and Jerusalem, Joseph did his best to follow the rules and live a quiet and well-ordered life. His family had arranged his marriage to Mary, a teenage girl from the same village. Joseph had already paid the bride-price to Mary's father and, under Jewish law, the couple was legally pledged to each other, but they were not living together yet. Soon however, Joseph would take the big step in his life. He and Mary would have a wedding ceremony and Joseph would start his own family.

Then one day, this hardworking, down-to-earth, God-fearing man who wanted nothing more than the same simple life his friends and neighbors in Nazareth enjoyed finds out that his soon-to-be-wife is pregnant. His world comes apart! He cannot bring himself to believe in his fiancée's absurd claim that the baby's father is the same God whom he worships. You can imagine Joseph's reaction when Mary breaks the news to him, "**Joseph, I'm pregnant but it's not what you're thinking. The child's father is God.**" And Joseph replies in disbelief, "**Right!**" What Joseph does know for sure is that, as a man, he is entitled to a virgin bride. He is not ready to overlook what he thought was Mary's sexual indiscretion. Joseph is well-aware of the Jewish Law regarding engagement and marriage. In the book of Deuteronomy, the Law is clear: if a man marries a woman and discovers that she is not a virgin "**she is to be taken to the door of her father's house and the men in her village shall stone her to death.**"^b Surprisingly, Joseph plans in his head to divorce Mary quietly to spare her life. He makes the bold choice to elevate compassion and kindness above hateful violence dressed up as law. Joseph leans hard into the prophet Micah's words, "**O human...**

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?^c and rather than mere punitive justice and death, Joseph sides with compassion, merciful love and life. And when the angel speaks to him in a dream about the divine nature of Mary's pregnancy, Joseph jumps headfirst into a new life that he does not fully understand to protect the life of a vulnerable mother-to-be, to give legitimacy to Mary's pregnancy and to raise her child as his own. The religious man with an impeccable reputation gives up his notions of purity, holiness, male honor, and the life of his dreams to embrace the scandalous arrangement between God and Mary. Instead of being afraid of the complicated, the inexplicable, and the impossible, Joseph chooses to believe in what God was doing through his and Mary's lives. When his whole world was breaking up, Joseph's faith enabled him to discover a new purpose for his life. His openness to God's alarmingly messy plan to bring Christmas into human history transforms him into the man who makes it possible for the Christ child to be born and become Emmanuel – God-with-us. Every time you and I read the story in the Gospel of Matthew, sing carols about the Child of Bethlehem, and pray that Christ may find a place in our hearts on this holy night, we receive Joseph's Christmas gift.

At its heart, the Christmas story is not a lovely romantic religious tale that we remember in the bleak midwinter to make us feel good and be a little kinder or to add some candlelit enchantment to our holiday festivities; at its core, the Christmas story is a divine gift that stirs in us the courage to become agents of God's love in our families, in our church, in our neighborhoods, in our towns and in the world. Christmas persists in coming every December even when our world appears to be breaking up so we do not forget that the purpose of this story is to open our hearts to the light of hope and love that came into the world in the birth of Christ. Christmas comes again and again to remind you and me that the God Almighty entered the world as a helpless infant, the Maker of the universe became a fetus in Mary's womb to show us that human vulnerability is a gift that teaches us not to be afraid of acting with compassion, siding with kindness, embracing the unexpected and try as much as we can to love as God loves.

One of the most deeply touching moments of the Christmas story in Luke takes place in the unlikeliest of places. Mary, young, pregnant, unwedded, at risk of being stoned to death, goes to her older relative's house in the Judean hillside seeking refuge. Elizabeth who is now six months along in her own unexpected pregnancy welcomes Mary with open arms ready to receive her with unconditional acceptance. When they greet each other, Elizabeth marvels at Mary's willingness to become the Bearer of Christ. She looks at her young pregnant relative's awkward and controversial circumstances and, amazingly, Elizabeth sees the womb-sized Savior in Mary's uterus. Nine months before Jesus is laid in the manger, Elizabeth celebrates the fruit of Mary's womb. In a world that would consider Mary's growing belly a moral failure and a religious disaster, Elizabeth's blessing is a Christmas gift to Mary. Together, these two women at the opposite end of the life span find within themselves the gutsiness to

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believe that God could use their bodies to give humankind hope for peace on earth and goodwill among all people.

I love this female-centered part of the Christmas story. I love to imagine Elizabeth and Mary dreaming of a world transformed by God's love-in-human-flesh where the lowly are lifted up and the hungry have enough to eat and the powerful, arrogant rich are scattered, brought down from their positions of authority and sent away empty.

It is humbling to know that the gift of Christmas began to take shape, to come into our lives, not in Rome or Jerusalem, but in a small house in an inconspicuous corner of the Roman Empire where two pregnant women with swollen breasts, morning sickness, back pain and false contractions dared to conspire with God to give us the gift of love, not as a theological abstraction, but as a real person of flesh and blood, as Jesus the Christ and Savior. If tonight we can re-tell the story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, we have to thank Elizabeth and Mary for their audacity to make Christmas a very personal story. Even though they were the very powerless among the powerless, Elizabeth and Mary made space in their lives for this absurd story that we gather to hear every year. They believed against all evidence that in a world dominated by older men, God would come to us through the strength, faith, and body of a Jewish peasant girl. These two women who lived in a country occupied by Rome had the spiritual imagination to envision God coming into the world not through the religious elite in Jerusalem, but completely unnoticed through a young family from Nazareth with a rather convoluted past. In a world where imperial decrees and violence enforced submission to the wealthy and powerful, Elizabeth and Mary believed that God would come as a child utterly dependent on Mary's milk and Joseph's care to survive and become the Living Christ. These women's subversive faith is a Christmas gift to you and me and to the Church.

Friends, tonight the Christmas story comes to you and me again and meets us here where we are – here where the hopes and fears of all the years are met tonight; here in this uncomfortable and disconcerting time still defined by COVID variants, transmission rates, breakthrough infections, booster shots and a worldwide public health crisis that appears to have no end in sight. The story comes to remind us that we are not alone, God is with us, but the Giver of the story invites you and me to make Christmas part of who we are. This story about Joseph, Mary, Elizabeth, angels, shepherds, and the Christ Child is not meant to be celebrated once a year, but to be shared as a divine gift with humankind every single day of our lives. Much like it was with Joseph, Elizabeth and Mary, the best Christmas gift you can give are not the ones underneath the tree tonight, it is the gift of your compassion, your kindness, your faith, and your love. You are the Christmas gift God wants to share with humankind. It is through your heart, your body, your mind and your imperfect life that God hopes to put real human flesh on God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. Tonight, the Christmas story is still unfolding only now it is unfolding through your life. You are the gift that can make Joseph's compassion, Mary's courage, Elizabeth's faith, the angels' song, and the miracle of the Child in the manger leap from the pages of the Bible into our world. You

are the one who can embody the story and keep the miracle of Christmas alive in human hearts tonight.

Friends, the world is breaking up and what humanity needs most in these uncertain times is someone exactly like you. Someone who is willing to make space for Christmas in your life. May God's love empower all of you worshipping with us to offer the gift of your selves to those around you. May the Child of Bethlehem stir deep in your soul the courage, the capacity, the willingness to believe that this is indeed a great time to be alive because it is here and now that God is still making Christmas happen through our lives.

And so, with the shepherds, let us run to Bethlehem to find the Child that turns our very lives into Christmas gifts. Let us dare to open our hearts to Christmas once again tonight and with the great poet W.H. Auden say to each other:

***“Run to Bethlehem.
Let us run to learn
How to love and run
Let us run to Love.”^d***

This is a great time to be alive! The world is breaking up. Let us run, all, all, all of us, run to love.

Feliz Navidad! Feliz Natal! Merry Christmas to you all!

^a David Pultz, editor. Fosdick at First Church, published in A Preaching Ministry, location 427 [Kindle edition].

^b Deuteronomy 22:21.

^c Micah 6:8.

^d W.H. Auden in For The Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio, p. 38.