

Christmas at Luke's House

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

10 December 2023

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Luke 1:3-20

Luke 1:26-38

"I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus"

~ Luke 1:3

Prayer

**God-with-us, we give you thanks for the story of Christmas.
As we prepare to celebrate the miracle of Bethlehem once again,
Be our companion on our journey to the manger.
May the words of the evangelists inspire us
To offer up our whole selves to Christ,
Especially during this time
When the smells and sounds of the holiday season
Can so easily distract us from the Good News of the birth of your Child. Amen.**

What is at the heart of the Christmas story?

If anyone asked us this question, it is very likely that the answer some of us in this worship service this morning might offer is faith – faith is at the core of Christmas. After all, it is only by faith that we can affirm, celebrate and seriously contemplate the mystery of the Incarnation, which is beautifully captured in the poetic words of John's Gospel, "***And the Word became flesh and lived among us.***"¹

A few others might say that it is hope that infuses the story of the Good News of Jesus Christ with meaning. The writer of Matthew's Gospel certainly elevates the ancient and unflagging Scriptural hope that through Abraham God will bless all the families of the earth. The second evangelist encouraged the early Christians to hold on to the old stories of Scripture and challenged his community to look at the birth of Jesus through the lens of God's covenant with Abraham and Israel. Then, Matthew urged his readers to place their hope not only on what God did in the past when God brought deliverance to God's people but also and especially to put their hope on what God is doing in the present and will do in the future through the Good News of Jesus Christ to offer salvation to humankind.

I am certain that a great number of Christians would say that peace is what lies at the heart of the Christmas story. For many people, even those who seldom darken the church doors, Christmas is a holy time when we remember to be kinder and share

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.

some of what we have with those who have less. It is a time to gather with the people we love most and exchange gifts and light a candle and sing a carol that embodies the longing for peace in our hearts. ***“Silent night! Holy night! All is calm, all is bright.”***

The world is rarely a calm and bright place. Last week, I was thinking about how many of you were born around the time of the Second World War; were in High School during the Korean War; how many got married while the Vietnam War was raging on, sent your kids off to college when the US invaded Iraq, welcomed grandchildren into your life when the war on terror was launched, watched from the comfort of your homes the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan after twenty years of ongoing conflict and millions of dollars spent on armament, and now, in retirement, you are witnessing your grandchildren grow up while America bankrolls the Ukrainian resistance and gives unwavering support for Israel’s brutality against the civilian population in Gaza. Not unlike the writers of the Gospels, we too are choosing to believe in the possibility of peace on Earth even though we have lived our whole lives in a permanent state of war. And not unlike the writer of Mark’s Gospel, we too are choosing to embrace the faith of Jesus, the Son of Mary, who never assembled an army, never picked up a weapon, who called ordinary men and women not to fight and kill, but to be preachers of Good News and ministers of reconciliation. For those of us who allow the Christmas story to shape our faith, peace never comes from emperors, presidents, dictators, politicians, armies, and weapons, but from the life and teachings of Jesus, the Child of Bethlehem, God’s Son, the Prince of Peace, in whose footsteps we seek to follow.

The vast majority of people around the globe, whether Christian, non-Christian or not religious at all, would probably give a simple answer to the question about what’s at the heart of Christmas. It’s love – God’s love. For most people who still remember the story, Christmas is a compelling, riveting, powerful, timeless, and beautiful love story between God and humankind. But in Luke’s house, Christmas is all about the irrepressible joy of the Good News about Jesus Christ.

The third person to ever take on the project of writing about the life of Jesus relied on ***“those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word”***² to compose his Gospel. While the Church Fathers attached Luke’s name to this book sometime in the first half of the second century, no one knows for sure if it was Luke, the physician that accompanied Paul on several of Paul’s missionary journeys, who wrote the third Gospel. What we do know is that this person was the first church historian. Luke put into writing the story about Jesus’ beginnings and his ministry and the evangelist also documented the history of the Early Church in the Acts of the Apostles.

In the opening lines of his Gospel, the writer dedicates his book to someone named ***“Theophilus.”*** We have no idea who this individual was or if he ever existed. It was a common practice in ancient Greece for authors and artists to have patrons who sponsored their literary pursuits and creative endeavors. Some New Testament

scholars believe that Theophilus, which was a very common Greek name at the time, might have been a disciple of Luke or a Gentile Christian who supported the evangelist financially while he worked on putting together an orderly account of the things in which Theophilus was taught. Since the name “Theophilus” means “*lover of God*,” it is possible that in Luke’s mind, he was writing to anyone who, like him, wants to understand better how to love God through Christ.

Luke was a new convert to the Way of Jesus, most likely a Gentile himself, and he penned his Gospel with the growing number of Gentile followers of Christ in mind. This may well be the reason why Luke introduces the word “grace” to his readers who want to be true lovers of God. The third evangelist was clearly familiar with Mark’s Gospel. He probably also knew about Matthew’s account of the life of Jesus. And Luke was very much aware that both writers had failed to include or at least name, point to the concept of grace in their books. In Luke’s house, the author made sure that Christmas is synonymous with grace. The beginning of the story about Jesus Christ is Good News because it reveals, manifests, and shows beyond doubt God’s favor, God’s love, God’s willingness to reach out to humankind for no other reason but to bless us, to love us, to save us from ourselves, and to empower us to be lovers not only of God but lovers of humanity also.

God’s grace is the wellspring of the exuberant and contagious joy at the heart of Luke’s Christmas story. In the town of Nazareth, Gabriel’s first words to Mary are commonly translated as “**Greetings favored one!**” but this choice of translation can be a bit misleading. The words of the angel in English make it sound as if Mary were somehow more deserving of becoming the mother of God’s Child than all the other women in Palestine, Rome or on earth. In Greek, on the other hand, and Luke’s Greek is quite polished and elegant, the first word out of Gabriel’s angelic mouth is “*chaire*,” which is better translated as “*be glad*” or “*rejoice*.” Being a playful and skilled writer, Luke then uses a Greek verb that describes Mary not as “**favored**” but as a grace-gifted young woman. And both the angel’s greeting and his description of Mary share the same root in the Greek noun “*charis*” that means “grace.” In other words, everything about the birth of Jesus has to do with God’s grace and Luke says that Gabriel comes to Mary and proclaims that joyous news – “**Be glad, rejoice, Mary, because you have received the grace to bear God’s holy Child.**” Christmas is not about Mary but about God’s surprising and joy-filled grace.

In Luke’s house, there is great joy in the celebration of Christmas because this lover of God knows that without the joy that springs forth from the deep well of God’s grace, faith is frail, hope is hollow, peace is impermanent, and love is shallow.

The Gospel according to Luke gives us the Christmas story we know best and love most. This is the Gospel of the Annunciation and Visitation, of Mary’s *Magnificat*, Zechariah’s *Benedictus*, and Simeon’s *Nunc Dimittis*. It is Luke who inspired St. Francis to set up the very first nativity scene in 1223 with the Christ Child wrapped in bands of

cloth lying in a manger surrounded by sheep and cows. Despite there being no room in the inn, Luke makes us imagine the stable as a holy place where shepherds who had been watching their flocks in the fields gathered to see, touch and hold the Good News of God's Son with their own eyes, hands and arms. It is here in this account of the beginning of the Good News about Jesus that we hear the choir of angels sing in the night sky, "***Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom God is please.***"³

Christmas at Luke's house is what we long for when December comes around and we start planning the pageant and Christmas Eve services. At Luke's house, we hear the familiar carols we cherish. We watch the Charlie Brown Christmas special and smile when Linus recites the words from the second chapter of Luke to remind Charlie Brown of what Christmas is all about. In Luke's house, Christmas gives us what we need most around this time of the year: a sense of peace, the warmth of hope, the beauty of a story of faith, and the message of God's love.

We have spent so many Christmases with Luke that the wild joy of the Good News of Christ's birth the evangelist sought to preserve in his orderly account of Jesus' life sometimes gets blunted by the sentimentality, coziness and romanticism of the traditions we built around his story.

You and I are culturally and religiously conditioned to think of Christmas as a season to be merry, but for Mary, Gabriel's words sounded terrifying. How could she be glad when Gabriel was asking her to do something so improper and downright dangerous? How could she rejoice if pregnancy out of wedlock could mean a death sentence to her and to her unborn baby? How would she explain her unexpected pregnancy to Joseph, her family, her neighbors and the priests? Mary had every reason to be perplexed and to send Gabriel back to heaven with a resounding "no" as an answer. But in the few verses I read this morning, Mary is clearly a force to be reckoned with.

Unlike Zechariah, the veteran priest who also receives a surprise visit from Gabriel but cannot believe in the good news of John's birth even though he had been praying for a child all his life, the young peasant girl from Nazareth does not allow the shock at the angel's proposal to mute her curiosity. Zechariah, despite his training, credentials and ancestral pedigree, expresses doubts that God might do something so improbable as causing his post-menopausal wife to conceive. He wants a sign that what Gabriel is promising will happen. Mary, without any formal religious training, presumes the words of her angelic visitor to be true. She marvels at the possibility that she might bring God's Son into the world. Zechariah cannot embrace the good news, the grace, the free gift that comes his way. Mary, on the other hand, is thoughtful and poised. While she listens to Gabriel's message, Mary makes sense of the angel's words through Scripture. She undoubtedly remembered the women in the Hebrew Scriptures – Sarah, Rebecca, Hannah – whose pregnancies were as miraculous as Elizabeth's and hers

would be. Mary reflects quietly on all those familiar stories she had grown up with and she imagines God doing something similar but also different in her own life. All of a sudden, what appeared to be bad news for her becomes Good News. Mary hears and feels the grace of God in Gabriel's Annunciation. Unlike Zechariah, Mary has chutzpah. With much trembling and courage, Mary chooses to let the impossible happen in her life and through her body. I believe that Mary was filled with the untamable joy of Christmas when she said to Gabriel, "***Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.***" This is not a passive, submissive response. This is Mary, filled with defiant joy, saying to the angel and the world that she knew she was up to the challenge and no man, no religious tradition, and no cultural norms would keep her from receiving the grace of God.

Christmas in Luke's house makes us ask ourselves if we can feel the joy, not just happiness or coziness, but the deep grace-filled joy of Christmas in our lives. Without this joy that flows from grace, Christmas is only a season that has a beginning and an end. Without joy, the Good News of Christmas lasts for 12 days and then is stashed away with all the decorations. Without the deep awareness of God's grace, Christmas is nothing more than a holiday we celebrate and then we go back to business as usual, unchanged. Without the joy that comes from knowing that we too are called to embrace the Good News about Jesus and let Christ be birthed into the world through our lives, Christmas is a yearly gathering that is quickly forgotten until it comes around again.

In Luke's house, the evangelist invites us to follow Mary's lead so rather than doubt and be silent because we cannot believe, we may think through Scripture, through the Gospel, and have enough chutzpah to imagine how we can be lovers of God and let God's grace fill our lives and bodies with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

There was one year when my mother finally caved in and set up a small Christmas tree in our living room. I was 8 years-old and had spent most of October and November imploring her to buy a tree. I was ecstatic when mom came home with a 4-foot-tall aluminum tree along with a box of ornaments and Christmas lights. I gladly helped her decorate. I was eager to see the lights on, but my mother surprised me. Before we plugged in the lights, she handed the hand-painted glass tree topper to me and asked me to place it on the very top of our first Christmas tree. In that moment, I thought I had the most beautiful and precious tree topper in the whole world in my hands! I was so glad and so nervous that my hands were shaky, and I had to rely on a little bit of motherly guidance to put the final ornament on the tree. I will never forget that feeling of pure and unreserved joy.

What is your earliest memory of being completely overcome with the Christmas joy?

At the heart of Christmas there is joy. The joy of knowing that by God's grace Christ came into the world to turn you and me into lovers of God and lovers of

humankind. Christmas at Luke's house is just a story, but I hope you can remember this familiar and beloved story as the most beautiful and life-transforming Good News you ever heard. Like Mary, be curious enough to listen to the story with an open heart and mind and also to wonder how Christmas can happen again but in a fresh new way in your life. May we all have enough chutzpah to say with Mary, "***Let it be. Let the impossible happen in us and to us. Let the grace-filled Good News, the Gospel of Christ's birth give us joy like never before.***"

May it be so. Amen.

¹ John 1:14a.

² Luke 1:2.

³ Luke 2:14 [New American Standard Bible].