

Christmas Homily

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

24 December 2023

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Texts: Isaiah 11:1-9

Luke 1:26-35, 38

Luke 1:39-53

Luke 2:1-7

Luke 2:8-16

Matthew 2:1-12

“On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother... they left for their own country by another road.”

– Matthew 2:11a, 12b

Prayer

Holy God,

We have come together

To hear once again the lessons

And sing the carols

That draw us into the mystery and beauty of Christmas.

Help us tonight

To remember why this simple story still matters to us

And to the world. Amen.

Welcome all on this holy night!

I am delighted that you and I are joining millions of people around the world who are inspired by the words of the shepherds who upon hearing the Good News of Jesus' birth from the mouths of angels said to one another, ***“Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”***

Every year, the world stops to listen to the Christmas story. Every year, even the most skeptical amongst us darken a church door and let this story take us back to Bethlehem. Every year, we go to the occupied town of Bethlehem – the little, impoverished, inconsequential town that sits perilously between people who have allowed history, religion, and ethnicity to blind them to the humanity of the other. It is to this troubled little town patrolled by occupying military forces and home to a suffering people that hungers for freedom and thirsts for justice that we go on this holy night in search of a miracle. And in the most unexpected way the words of the familiar Christmas carol become our earnest prayer:

“O holy Child of Bethlehem

***Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel."***

The story of Joseph and Mary's journey to Bethlehem and the birth of their first child in the same room where the livestock was kept overnight never seems to wear out. The Gospel narrative is so simple, beautiful and fanciful that it captures the imagination of both children and adults alike. As we listen to the lessons read out loud in the sacredness of this space, we imagine the familiar scenes unfolding: a young Jewish couple whose lives have been turned upside down by a pregnancy of divine conception, traveling on foot to Bethlehem to become a statistic, a number among the tax-paying people of Roman-occupied Palestine. While they are in Bethlehem, the still virgin Mary gives birth to her son and places him in a feeding trough. Angels appear to shepherds who are watching their flocks in the fields by night and announce the birth of the Christ, the Messiah. Suddenly, a choir of angels fills the night sky with songs about peace on Earth. The shepherds rush to Bethlehem where they find the Child of Mary wrapped in a baby blanket, surrounded by the soft breathing of barnyard animals. In the final scene, exotic visitors from the east show up at Joseph's doorstep, bringing with them expensive gifts fit for a king while a star shines over the small dwelling place in Bethlehem.

The Christmas we know and love is grounded in this compelling, heart-warming, soul-stirring, multigenerational, epic, fantastic and deeply human story filled with gripping moments, surprising twists, Pixar-worthy visuals and unforgettable lines. We have heard the story so many times that it can be difficult to believe that this skillfully crafted religious drama which the Church lifted off the pages of the different Gospels and spliced together with strands of carols and candle-lighting can make much of a difference in the real world. And yet, this absurd story about this holy Jewish Child who is "*Emmanuel*" or the enfleshment of the Divine in human history has shaped Western civilization's high-minded, lofty and noble ideals about human dignity, equality and fundamental rights.

In the Gospels, Christmas is not a pious religious celebration but a worldview. The coziness of the holiday festivities can and often do obscure the revolutionary message that is at the core of this holy night. Emmanuel. The Incarnation. The impossible to grasp idea of the transcendent found amid the ordinary, the divine infiltrating the quotidian, the eternal co-habiting with human finitude, God with Mary's milk on his lips and the soft spot of a newborn baby on his head.

Many of the great philosophers, thinkers, and historians of antiquity ridiculed and scoffed at this central Christmas claim about the Creator stooping to enter time and

space as a poor Jewish child. Neither Greeks nor Romans could believe that God would be born not into power, wealth, and privilege, but among Palestinian Jews who were in the throes of poverty, struggling to get by in a world that was indifferent to their dreams and impervious to their suffering. Still, for two millennia Christians have insisted on keeping alive this worldview birthed through Christmas in which God leaves the dimension we call heaven to join humanity here on earth. The story the nativity scene tells us is that God took on human flesh and lived among common people, experiencing love, hope, joy, compassion, solidarity and friendship as well as anger, tears, sadness, moments of hopelessness, aloneness, anxiety, betrayal, and deep pain. In and through Jesus Christ, the Church proclaims that God becomes intimately acquainted with what it means to be human. The mystery of the Incarnation that you and I are remembering tonight makes the bold assertion that from the manger in Bethlehem to the cross on the Golgotha, the Child of Mary reminds us that God is with us and there is no place we can go – no place that is too far away, too poor, too dark, too broken, so violent, so remote, so impossible – that God’s love cannot find us, touch us, and give us hope for salvation – for full life. This birth gives humanity the world-transforming gift of seeing every human life as sacred, every human being as having the fundamental right to life, every human child, man and woman as deserving of a second chance, redemption, a new and more whole life. Christmas laid the foundation for the life-affirming ideas of human dignity and inalienable human rights along with the longing for peace, because the lack of peace is a threat to the very essence of what means to be human.

Pope Benedict XV understood well that this Christmas worldview calls on us not only to celebrate the birth of Christ on Christmas Eve, but to be active participants in the story God entered willingly not to dominate humanity, but to love us; not condemn the world, but to save us.

In December of 1914, Pope Benedict XV pleaded with the warring nations across Europe to hold a Christmas ceasefire. He hoped the guns would fall silent at least upon the night the angels sang of peace on Earth.ⁱ Benedict XV was convinced that a truce would create the space for peace negotiations that might end a 5-month-old war that had at the time already claimed a million lives. World War I marked the debut of tanks, machine guns, aerial combat and poison gas and the Pope decried the use of those weapons by the greatest and wealthiest nations, which he accused of being well-equipped with “**the most awful weapons modern military science [had] devised**” for the sole purpose of destroying human lives “**with refinements of horror.**”ⁱⁱ

The political and military leaders of Europe rejected the Pope’s plea for peace and demanded that the young men on both sides carried on the orders to gun and gas each other into oblivion. But the soldiers in the trenches were grasped by a different vision of the world. As the sun moved across the sky of southern Belgium on December 24th one hundred and nine years ago, German soldiers placed Christmas trees with lighted candles on the parapets of every trench. The trees had been sent to the warfront by the German government to boost the troops’ morale. Then, it is said, a young and

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.

unknown German soldier began to sing “*Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht.*” All up and down the front the music spread as other German soldiers, for miles and miles, joined in singing, “*Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm, all is bright...*”

The English and French soldiers who were only 50 to 100 yards away responded with “*The First Noël.*” “*The first Noel the angel did say was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay.. tending their sheep on a cold winter’s night that was so deep.*”

As the sun rose on Christmas Day, brave soldiers, some estimate more than 100,000, from both sides emerged from their trenches, unarmed, and walked ever so cautiously into the land where no man would have dared to go the day before. Risking their lives and insubordination, muddy and war-weary young men clambered over barbed wires to shake hands with their enemies and wish them “Merry Christmas.” One by one, those soldiers transformed a godforsaken battlefield into a place of fragile peace. The men exchanged gifts, mostly cigarettes and chocolate, with each other. Someone produced a soccer ball, and a soccer game broke out, turning that parcel of no man’s land between the trenches into a space where enemies became playmates. The machine guns went silent. The technology of death was replaced with human laughter and a soccer match. For a fleeting moment the worldview of Christmas prevailed over the brokenness of the world designed by the powers that be. No gun was shot. No one was killed. Life and peace were all that really mattered during that tenuous, brief, spontaneous and momentous Christmas ceasefire.

This story of the Christmas truce is in a book by historian Stanley Weintraub called “*Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce.*” At the end of the book, the author reflects, “***The Christmas Truce has lingered strikingly in memory... a potent symbol of the stubborn humanity within us.***”ⁱⁱⁱ

We come to Bethlehem tonight to reclaim that worldview that will not give up on our humanity, on peace and on the possibility that soldiers and enemies may become playmates. We gather on this holy night to remind each other that Christmas gives us a glimpse of a world where there is a very real possibility for human life and human history to be calmer and brighter. We are the ones who choose whether the world will tilt toward light or darkness, peace rather than war, full life instead of untimely death. We go to Bethlehem to see once again the miracle of God-in-human-flesh and to find the spiritual strength to oppose the technology of death that kills with precision and refinements of horror. We head to Bethlehem to allow Christmas to open our hearts and minds to God’s love – a love that makes us profoundly aware of the inestimable worth of every human life. And if God became fully human to be with us; we who gather tonight should certainly reach out to each other with a deep appreciation for the dignity of human life.

Of course, tonight we cannot overlook the irony in the language of our Christmas Eve service. While we go with haste to the Bethlehem of the Christmas story, the

churches in the today's town of Bethlehem and across the Holy Land – which is only holy to us because of Christmas – have canceled all the traditional Christmas celebrations and festivities. There are no Christmas trees, lights, or public nativity sets anywhere. The inns are all closed. Christians in the Holy Land have been invited to remember the war in Gaza and pray for peace. The Lutheran Church in Bethlehem rearranged the crèche in their sanctuary. Instead of a stable, the Christ Child is lying in the rubble created by the fury of a worldview shaped by revenge, violence, and the life-crushing machine of war. In 2023, there is no official or unofficial ceasefire in the Middle East. It's Christmas and the war is raging on.

Still, you and I rush with the shepherds to Bethlehem, praying that our Lord Emmanuel may abide with us and give us courage to believe that God-is-with-us and that the lives of Palestinian civilians and Israeli soldiers, Ukrainians and Russians are worth saving from the reach of those who want to make war, fund war, wage wars and who will abrogate international law and disregard humanity's commitment to human rights in order to kill with refinements of horror.

On this holy night, the words of poet Maya Angelou helps us remember why it is important to the world that we remember Bethlehem and the Christmas story:

***“Into this climate of fear and apprehension,
Christmas enters,
Streaming lights of joy, ringing bells of hope
And singing carols of forgiveness high up
In the bright air.
The world is encouraged to come away from rancor,
Come the way of friendship.
It is the Glad Season...
Hope is born again in the faces of children.
It rides on the shoulders of our aged...
Hope spreads around the earth,
Brightening all things...
In our joy, we think we hear a whisper...
We hear a sweetness.
The word is Peace...
We clap hands and welcome the Peace of Christmas.
We beckon this good season to wait awhile with us...
We shout with glorious tongues the coming of hope.
All the earth's tribes loosen their voices
To celebrate the promise of Peace.
We, Angels and Mortals, Believers and Nonbelievers,
Look heavenward and speak the word aloud. Peace.”^{iv}***

Friends, it's Christmas. Dare to go to Bethlehem to see this birth that has taken place. Be the brave person who will offer a Christmas carol as an olive branch, a sign of peace. Dare to be different. Walk into places of darkness and division with words and gestures of peace. Like the wisemen in Matthew's Gospel, go home tonight by another way. Choose the way of peace, of human solidarity and friendship. The world is too dangerous now for anything but brave people of goodwill who want to see the worldview of Christmas, the peace of Christmas prevail on Earth!

And to all of you who will be leaving this sacred space and time very soon to return to the real world, I offer you the wise words of another poet, Dylan Thomas:

***“Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light”^v***

Friends, hold on to the light of Christmas as you celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ tonight. Have faith that in Christ there is light and life for all people and darkness cannot overcome it. Keep this peace-making Christmas light burning in your life.

Merry Christmas!

ⁱ By Terry Philpot in World War I's Pope Benedict XV and the pursuit of peace, National Catholic REPORTER, 19 July 2014. [<https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/world-war-pope-benedict-xv-and-pursuit-peace>]

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stanley Weintraub in Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce, p. 173.

^{iv} Maya Angelou in Celebrations: Rituals of Peace and Prayer - Amazing Peace, locations 311-343 [Kindle Edition].

^v Editor Paul Muldoon in The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas, “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night”, p. 18-19.