

**Sunday, December 27, 2020**  
**Sermon: The Christmas Story Continues**  
**Rev. Charlie Hinkle**  
**Clackamas United Church of Christ**

*Today we continue to learn about the Christmas story. Mary and Joseph bring the baby Jesus to the Temple after he is born and they meet a man, Simeon, and a prophetess, Anna. Both proclaim the baby will grow to be someone who will dismantle the status quo. Today we welcome Rev. Charlie Hinkle and thank him for giving the good word today as we continue to learn about the revolutionary Jesus.*

Good morning to everyone watching with us and worshipping with us this morning. A lot of holiday traditions had to give way this year but many churches still put on a Christmas pageant and I'm glad to say that ours was one of them. Clackamas UCC had a terrific pageant last week! The holy family, the shepherds, the very wise woman, the Roman emperor, the Angel Gabrielle, a whole host of other angels - it was a beautiful presentation and I hope you saw it. It's available on YouTube, our Facebook page, and our website in case you missed it, so I hope you will take a moment to watch it. The pageant included several Christmas carols and it ended with Joy to the World and I was happy about that because that's my favorite Christmas carol.

More than 40 years ago, I started a tradition of Christmas caroling in the law office where I worked for many years and we always ended our caroling session with Joy to the World because that melody is about as joyful as you could ask for, and the words express so well what the Christmas celebration is all about. The word 'joy' appears more than a hundred times in the Bible and it's at the heart of the Christmas story. An angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds who were watching their flocks by night - that's a wonderful phrase I've always thought 'watching their flocks by night.' And the angel comes to the shepherds and brings to them good tidings of great joy - that's the translation of that phrase, or whatever it was the angel may have said in Greek or Hebrew, that's the translation given to us by the King James version translated into English 400 years ago. Modern translations of the Bible don't use that phrase anymore, they talk about the angel bringing good news and that's fine because that's what it was, after all. That's what the word 'gospel' means - good news. But I like the old version best. It's a phrase that has stuck with me ever since my Sunday school days many decades ago, so I was glad last Sunday when our Christmas pageant used those words and we heard the Angel Gabrielle bring to the shepherds good tidings of great joy for unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

Savior, that's what the name Jesus means, Savior. Both Matthew and Luke report that the angel told both Mary and Joseph separately that the child was to be given that name. Jesus and Matthew add something else - they say that the child would also be called Emmanuel which means God with us. God with us - that's the message of Christmas and it's a message we want to believe but in a year of pandemic and fire, a year of racial injustice and unemployment, economic stress and insecurity, in such a year it may be easier to say God is with us than it is to believe it. If God is really with us why have we been surrounded by so much death and destruction and discord this past year? That's not a new question. One of the most famous stories in the Bible is the story of a man named Job, a good man the Bible tells us. Blameless and upright but a man who went through a horrendous series of calamities. His children were killed, his

animals were killed, he was afflicted with a terrible disease of some kind that seemed to have no cure. God can't be a God of justice Job complains. And complain is the word for it too. He never pulled his punches. If God were just, this wouldn't have happened to me. God has abandoned me and I'm not afraid to call him out on it. That's Job's attitude and if you turn to the very next book in the Bible, right after the book of Job, you come to the book of Psalms. There you'll find a surprising number of Psalms with that same attitude – you have rejected and crushed us O' God, says the psalmist. How long will you hide your face from me? The waves break over me, my enemies jeer at my misfortunes, and all day long they say to me, "Where is your God?"

To the folks who wrote those psalms, God just doesn't seem to care very much about human suffering and Psalm 22 puts it bluntly, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And if that question sounds familiar, it should because that's the question that Jesus quoted from the psalms when he was hanging from the cross. Jesus knew what it was like to be rejected, to feel abandoned, to have doubts about God and that fate was predicted for him right from the beginning. In the scripture lesson that Sharon read for us this morning, Luke says that when Jesus was an infant, Mary and Joseph took him to the temple to be dedicated to God, to present him to the Lord. This was part of the ancient Hebrew law from the book of Exodus, so Mary and Joseph brought him to the temple that day. And in the temple, they encountered a man named Simeon. Simeon believed that God had told him that he would not die until he had seen the promised Messiah, and when Simeon saw Jesus he was sure that this was the one. And so he gives thanks to God, "Mine eyes have seen thy salvation" he says, but then he turns to Mary and he says to her, "This child is destined to be rejected by many in Israel, Mary, and you, Mary, will be pierced to the heart." Now that's probably not what Mary hoped to hear when she went to the temple that day but as it turned out, of course, Simeon was exactly right. Jesus did face hostility, rejection, and opposition from the religious establishment. He was chased out of his own hometown by the people who knew him best and eventually all that hostility and rejection and jealousy led to his crucifixion. And even then, it didn't stop.

Crucifixions always drew a good crowd in those days. Popular entertainment after all, just like public hangings used to be in the wild west in our American history. People turned out to jeer, to mock, to insult, that was part of the fun for folks on days like that. And when Jesus was on the cross, some of that mockery was aimed at him. "You trusted God!" they shouted at him. "Where is your God now?" As we saw, that was a question raised by the psalmist, too, and it's a question that maybe all of us have at one time or another. Where is our God? God with us, that's the promise of Christmas but it doesn't always seem that way, and it didn't always seem that way for the people of the Bible.

Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Elijah, Mary and Martha, Peter and Paul, they all had their doubts, they all had their feelings of loneliness and even abandonment. And the Bible is very honest about that. It doesn't promise a life without pain. We're not promised a life without hardship but the Bible does talk about a God who can be found in our sorrows and in the storm, in our experiences of isolation and abandonment. When Jesus cried out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" He did indeed have a moment of doubt but remember what else he said that day? He turned to the two criminals who were hanging on their crosses nearby and he said to them, "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

Jesus knew that God was there. Jesus knew that God was with him on that cross. Jesus knew that God had not forsaken him and would never forsake him. He'd known that all of his life and that's why

he could live his life with such confidence. "Don't be anxious about tomorrow," he said. "Don't worry about what you have to eat or where God will take care of you." Well, you and I can hear those words and say, "Well Jesus, easy for you to say but it's not so easy in the 21st century." But it wasn't easy for him either. He had the same kind of doubts that we do but he was persistent and he tells us that we have to be persistent, too. We have to be patient in the way that Pastor Adam spoke about in today's children's moment.

He told a story about a woman who had a legal complaint of some kind and who was having no luck getting a judge to hear her case but she kept coming back and coming back and coming back until finally, the judge agreed to hear her out. To hear what her complaint was. Jesus doesn't tell us how the case turned out, doesn't tell us what the judge decided because that wasn't the point, Jesus's point, says Luke, is that we should keep on praying and never lose heart.

And another time, Jesus told a similar story about a man who had a friend drop in on him in the middle of the night unannounced, unexpected. The friend had traveled some distance and he was tired and hungry but the man had no food in the house to share with him. So he went next door to borrow a loaf of bread from his neighbor and the neighbor tells him, "Go away! It's after midnight, we're in bed trying to get to sleep. Don't bother us!" But the man persists, he keeps banging on that door and Jesus says that because of his persistence his neighbor got up and gave him what he needed.

Jesus doesn't tell stories like that to describe what God is like. He's telling us to think about how serious we are. Telling us to think about how serious we are in our search for God. He's saying that faith in God requires patience and it requires persistence. If God seems remote, if the waves are breaking over us and goodness knows we've had a number of waves in the past year. If the waves are breaking over us, Jesus says to us, "Don't give up." We've got to keep coming back he says. Ask and you will receive, he says. But he doesn't promise that it will happen the first time or the second time or the hundredth time. We've got to keep coming back like the widow with her lawsuit, like the man who wanted that loaf of bread at midnight.

Now for some people, that persistence can pay off like a bolt of lightning. They may have a sudden breakthrough. The presence of God may seem as real to them as the ground they're standing on and if that's your experience, then God bless you. But for most folks I expect, faith in God, the realization that God is with us as the Christmas story promises, that realization won't come like a lightning bolt. It will be a gradual awakening. It will come in fits and starts. It may come when we're stumbling in the dark at a time of sickness, or loss, or disappointment, or injustice. For those people, and that's most of us I think, coming to faith in God and I mean a real living sustaining faith in God, that's a process, not an event. And it takes time. It takes persistence. It takes patience. And it doesn't matter where you are on life's journey, it doesn't matter if you've never in your life given a single thought as to how you're going to make a connection, or even if you want to make a connection with God, and the reason doesn't matter. It is never too late to start.

Jesus told the story of the prodigal son. The son who came back home after wasting all of his inheritance living a life of frivolity and meaninglessness. And he comes home poor, not a cent in his pocket, and he hopes that maybe his father will let him have a job on the farm as a hired hand. The father greets him, he

doesn't criticize the son, doesn't berate him, doesn't say 'told you so.' He welcomes him with open arms and orders up a grand dinner party. "This son of mine has come home!" he says. And then what happens? They all began to be merry. Jesus says they began to be merry. Something good had happened after all that time and all those disappointments and all that estrangement. Something good happened. A relationship was restored or maybe it's more accurate to say that a relationship was created that day where none had ever existed before.

One of my favorite theologians, a dear lady in our church named Judy Boncaro, posted a message on Facebook the other day, a message that she had found in her readings and it went like this – Jesus told the story of the prodigal son to make a simple point: never mind what you've done, just come home, just come home. The prodigal son did come home and it was, therefore, a time to be thankful, to be grateful, and to celebrate.

Two weeks ago, Pastor Adam told us that coming to church ought to be an occasion of joy, of celebration. And he was right but too often, and for too many people, the church has not been a place of joy but a place of judgment and a place of exclusion. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," that was the frightening name of a famous sermon preached almost three centuries ago by one of our forebears in the United Church of Christ, a Congregationalist minister in New England named Jonathan Edwards and boy did he get it wrong. It's good news that we are celebrating, not bad news. And it's good news for every human being. The angel says to the shepherds, "I bring you good tidings of great joy for all people." Did you hear that? For all people. "What part of those three words don't you understand?" the angel might say to that New England pastor 300 years ago. "What part of those three words don't you understand?" the angel might put that same question to a great many parts of the Christian church today. And it's a question that the angel just might put to you and me because we all have plenty to learn about the height and depth and breadth and width of God's love for her children. "Good tidings of great joy for all people," the angel says.

The Apostle Paul got that message and he listed Jew and Greek, slave and free man, male and female, as categories that don't matter in God's sight but the list is a lot longer than that. All people – black and brown and white people, gay and straight and transgender, and gender-fluid people, the houseless person sleeping in a doorway in a store in downtown Portland, the homeless person, or the "houseless" person I should say because everybody has a home. It's the houseless person sleeping in a tent near a freeway exit, it's the person who's living in the grip of addiction to drugs or alcohol or something else, it's the prisoner on death row, it's the person whose political views are different from your own, it's that annoying neighbor down the street with a barking dog, good tidings to all people. And we need to hear that message and we need to help pass it on to the prisoner, the hungry, the houseless, the poor because that's how Jesus comes to us and we know that because he told us so. "The way you treat the least among you," he said, "that's how you are treating me."

A wise man once said each of us is an innkeeper who decides if there is room for Jesus and each of us decides, not just whether to listen to what the angel announced on that first Christmas, "Good tidings of great joy to all people," but more importantly we have to decide whether we are going to join the angel in spreading those good tidings to all people. The promise of Christmas, Emmanuel God with us, that's a promise made to you and me. It's a promise that we should clasp to our hearts and celebrate as we enter

a new year and if it's hard for you to hear that promise, if it's been hard in this past year to hear it, if it's been hard to believe it or act on it, don't give up. Jesus says come as you are, come with all of your doubts, all of your worries, all of your complaints, and all of your anger, and shout it out to God, the God who loves you. And then in the midst of your struggles, in the midst of your doubts, your pain, maybe that miracle will happen. "I will give you rest," Jesus says. That's our hope but more than that it is our conviction, our certainty because we have God's word for it.

The gospel of Matthew begins with that promise, "God with us," and that's how it ends with the word that Christ spoke to his disciples after the resurrection. Words that he speaks to you and to me on this last Sunday morning in the year 2020. What he says to us is this, "I will be with you always until the end of time." Good tidings of great joy, indeed, Amen, and Amen.