

“Get Up”
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – January 1, 2023

Please read:
Isaiah 63:7-9
Matthew 2:13-23

Kenn Nesbitt wrote a poem called *December 26*: “A BB gun. A model plane. A basketball. A ‘lectric train. A bicycle. A cowboy hat. A comic book. A baseball bat. A deck of cards. A science kit. A racing car. A catcher's mitt. So that's my list of everything that Santa Claus forgot to bring.”¹

While most of us are wishing one another a Happy New Year, today is what the church calls, “The eighth day of Christmastide,” or “the second Sunday of Christmas. But no matter what anyone says - it's still the Sunday *after* Christmas, the Sunday when, if we’re honest, our goodwill and cheer subsides and we have to think about putting away the decorations and get over with Christmas and get on with life in the *real* world of 2023. As poet W.H. Auden wrote in *The Time Being*, this is for many “the most trying time of all.”

Why? After all the Advent waiting and finally celebrating the incarnation by candlelight last Saturday, having basked in the glow of holiday reruns and colorized renditions of “It's a Wonderful Life” and “A Christmas Story,” we’re now back to facing the unknown in the New Year. I love Wendell Berry’s comment in *Standing By Words: Essays*, “When we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work, and when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded spring is the one that sings.”

Indeed, today is when we begin another year. I love that you showed up at all. I suspect you are here because this Sunday, the Sunday *after* Christmas, feels a bit more real than the magical glow show of Christmas Eve. Read the *New York Times*. Look at our world, not the one in *It's a Wonderful Life*, but the one we live in. Look at the outrageous lying of George Santos, the senseless war in Ukraine, climate change, the intractable poor and hungry even here in Fairfield County. Or the way many of us are truly *Home Alone*, fearful of alienation, violence, separation and failure of our own doing. Those of us who show up today long for a better life and a fairer world. And even with a bit of a hangover from celebrating, we know we need someone, something outside ourselves to intervene, to make right what we can't seem to get right on our own. We know we need renewal...

Have you ever noticed how violent the Christmas story is according to Matthew? And how it normally gets airbrushed out of the Christmas Eve lessons and carols? Today’s lectionary is a rerun of Luke 2, so I went for the end of Matthew’s birth narrative, the unsavory ethnic cleansing in Bethlehem. It’s a reminder that we

¹ Kenn Nesbitt, “December 26.” *The Aliens Have Landed at Our School!* (Running Press Adult, 2006).

live in a violent world where innocent children are murdered at the whim of a jealous tyrant. There is deception, political intrigue, refugees, outright lying and running for your life. Sounds more like *CNN* than the Gospel, right? This part of the story is definitely not for music by candlelight, but a reality check for our times - our world and our lives which need redemption...

And so comes to us the hopeful, redemptive word from the prophet Isaiah, one little verse from today's lesson as we go forth into the post-Christmas reality of 2023: "*It was no messenger or angel but God's presence that saved them...*"

Angels may have announced the birth of the babe to the shepherds, but what we celebrate in this Christmastide is how God showed up; strangely, mysteriously, against all hope, in the babe lying in a manger... The angels declared, "For unto *you* is born this day in the city of Bethlehem a savior which is Christ the Lord." Unto *you*. You smelly shepherds. You poor outsiders with your sheep. Those of you who have been enduring oppression and occupation. Those of you who have been humiliated by racism and bigotry. Unto *you*.

The good news is really good news, because it's not just a story, not just a message or another breaking news flash, but *real presence*. Embodiment. Incarnation. Here, now... *Emmanuel*. God with us. And despite the fact that time and time we miss it, or forget it, there are plenty of signs God continues to show up in our midst, even here and now.

As Isaiah says, "I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, all that the Lord has done for us..." Gratitude is a spiritual discipline that begins with remembering. Especially on this first Sunday of the new calendar year, despite all that may seem wrong with our world and lives, I invite you to remember God's mercy, and the abundance of God's steadfast love...

Can you think of some things for which we can be grateful? For example: We helped feed the hungry serving food at the Covenant House. We held services in person the whole year! Special Church celebrated 35 years, and continues to go strong. We were there for over 20 families who lost loved ones this year. We staffed our children's worship each Sunday with loving parents and volunteers who are committed to raising up the next faithful generation. We exceeded our goals in stewardship giving and to special offerings like the Dove program which feeds the underserved of our region. A church that parties together stays together, and we enjoyed Scottish Heritage Sunday, the Advent Workshop, the Manse Christmas Party and last night's New Year's party. Our Pastoral Care Committee made visits and calls and sent cards out regularly. Our deacons made visits and calls and took out holly swags to bring cheer to our homebound. Wendy has served so faithfully behind the scenes, and Mary has been an example of how deep calls to deep. Our cherubs, thanks to Sherry Tate, sang again, and thanks to Terry, our handbells rang,

and Sunday after Sunday, he made that organ sing a new song... Looking back, God has shown faithfulness to us. We are the little congregation that could...

On average, we welcomed over 100 people to worship this year both in person and via locallive. But more importantly, it's the way we welcome the stranger, the outsider, the least, the lost and the lonely. Nobody is last here. You are the body of Christ for *all*: young old, people of all ethnic and racial backgrounds and diverse sexual orientations and genders.

One of my favorite movies is *The Biggest Little Farm*. Well, if we were to do a movie about the FPCNC, we could call it *The Biggest Little Church*! There is much we can remember and for which we can give thanks to God! ... and we will need to remember God's faithfulness as we move into this new year.

Which brings us to our gospel text. Joseph experienced four dreams. Three of them are in today's lesson. Twice Joseph has a dream where the angel tells him to "get up" because he needs to act, once to avoid destruction by the murderous attempts on Jesus' life in Bethlehem by Herod, and a second time to return out of Egypt to Israel...

What's interesting to me is the verb, "Get up!" It's the same word used at the end of the gospel according to Matthew when the angel speaks to Mary Magdalene as she grieved the death of Jesus at the empty tomb. The angel said Jesus "got up." It's a word used to describe the *resurrection*! The Apostle Paul uses this word in Romans to declare, "We know that Christ, having been raised ("having gotten up") from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him." I think Matthew at the very beginning of the birth of Jesus is already giving us a linguistic clue that this divine presence, this fragile, vulnerable incarnation has come to overcome our worst fears and death-dealing reality of this world. The wood of the manger is a foreshadowing the wood of the cross.

In the babe at Bethlehem, God was only doing what God has done so often in our long history with God: God shows up and brings new life, even from death. Whenever we wake up to God's Word and get up to do God's will, we share in the resurrection new life of Jesus Christ.

The magi, were truly wise. They knew that to discover something new, they had to cross boundaries, cultural and religious lines. They brought their best to the party, the gold, frankincense and myrrh. They were changed. Of course they had to go home by a different route. How could they go back the same way?

Joseph's dream and his response becomes a Divine invitation to us as well. The question is, will we get up to admit there are dangerous forces at work and we need help? Will we get up to share our burdens with our siblings in Christ, to pray through our loneliness, fears, exhaustion, depression, anger, jealousy, frustration with violence and injustice, our struggles with marriage, with parenting, with divorce, with work, with addictions, with racism and bigotry and all the rest.

Will we get up and peer again into the manger, and remember that the Lord mercifully came to us where we really live, with a human face to help us? Will we get up to remember Jesus reveals the God who stands up with us, for us, as one of us, so we might become the people God created and calls us to be and show God's love for others? These are the questions for us as we move toward a new season...

Some of you may be stuck on that list of what Santa didn't bring. But there's one thing you can count on this Sunday after Christmas, this New Year's first day, this 8th day of Christmastide... As we get up to receive from this table, we remember and give thanks that Christ meets us where we really are. Get up, remember, and give thanks, for "It was no messenger or angel but *God's presence* that saved them..." and will save us and all people...

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.