

Our Savior Appeared
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – Christmas Day 2022

Please Read:
Gospel Birth Narratives
Titus 2:11-14

I don't know about you, but I like to watch reruns of my favorite Christmas movies around this time of year. *Miracle on 34th Street, It's a Wonderful Life, Home Alone, Elf, The Santa Clause, A Christmas Story, National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation,* and of course *A Charlie Brown Christmas*....

Every year at Christmas the Church does something similar. We play re-runs of the Christmas story. We need to because over the centuries Christmas has become domesticated, detached and deconstructed from the first noel. Some of you may have heard that I lived in Japan for a year in another lifetime. It was my first Christmas alone, as Christmas is not a holiday in Japan. This year, Tokyo boasts the most luxurious Christmas trees. There's the Harry Potter tree, the Party Popper Tree, the Time machine Tree, the Snoopy Tree, the Cartier Tree, my favorite, the Horse Tree, and of course the solid gold tree made of 12 kilos of pure gold worth 2 million dollars. The problem of course, as fascinating as all of these trees may be, is they have nothing to do with the first Christmas story. So, we need to remember what it's all about...

Let's remember the prophets, the visionaries who never saw their dreams come into reality... Like Micah (whose name means, "Who is like Yahweh?"). 28 centuries ago Micah told how *from* the little town of Bethlehem *shall come one* who will rule like a shepherd. He will feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God... and his sheep will live secure to the ends of the earth. He shall be "*the One* of peace."

Let's remember Isaiah who spoke of a baby born to a young maiden, a child "born for us, a son given to us..." And he is named "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.... a king who shall give endless peace." Mysteriously, there is no other reference to this King in the Hebrew Scriptures. It's a puzzle to whom Isaiah was referring... But today, we remember Isaiah because his vision seems to connect with the plot developing in Bethlehem.

Let's remember the gospel writer Luke, who begins the story with references to key political figures of his day. "Make no mistake about the historicity of these events," is what Luke is hinting. *The dream is becoming real!* There is tension in

the texts set between the reality of the sheer force of the Roman emperor and governors, and the power of God paradoxically revealed in the powerless peasants of Palestine... Joseph and Mary are on the road, travelers from Nazareth in the north of Israel to the southern town of Bethlehem of Judea. There is nowhere for them to stay, except for the stable.

We remember the gospel writer Matthew, who picks up on the details of King Herod, the local tyrant who is threatened and like so many rulers resorts to deception and violence to defend himself. The scene less easily captured in all of our lovely Christmas cards and carols is the slaughter of the innocents, Herod's genocide in Bethlehem to be rid of this newborn king...

No drama would be complete without the intellectuals, the seeking scientists of the time interpreting the cosmology of their day. And so Matthew invites us to remember the *wise men*. They are our patron saints, the first gentiles to bow down and worship the newborn King. It's Matthew's way of saying, "This King is for all people!"

We also remember the shepherds, who hear the angel chorus. Luke writes, "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified!" (2:8,9). These shepherds are the last people that should be the first to receive angelic announcements of Christ's birth... They were considered ritually unclean by the religious folk of the day. Shepherds were social outcasts, not even respectable enough to give testimony in a court of law. Nonetheless, the angels first appeared to them with the tidings of great joy!

Like the shepherds, we are disoriented and surprised by the message in the midst of our day-to-day lives. The cacophony of wars, terrorism, financial challenges, of illness and death, the hardship of all the burdens in this life makes it hard to hear again the angel's voices. *And yet...* like those shepherds we dare still to proclaim this good news of a great joy for all the people, because of the lead character, the **star** of *the Christmas story*, Jesus.

This babe, born of Mary, still captures our hearts and minds. The mystery... The miracle still fascinates us. As G.K. Chesterton noted, "A mass of legend and literature, which increases and will never end, has repeated... that single paradox; that the hands that made the sun and stars were too small to reach the huge heads of the cattle. Upon this paradox, we might almost say upon this jest, all the

literature of our faith is founded...When that contrast between the cosmic creation and the little local infancy has been repeated, reiterated, underlined, emphasized, exulted in, sung, shouted, roared, not to say howled, in a hundred thousand hymns, carols, rhymes, rituals, pictures, poems, and popular sermons, it may be suggested that we hardly need a higher critic to draw our attention to something a little odd about it..."¹

The story we tell is indeed odd. But somehow over the centuries continues to ring true amidst the ambiguities and perplexities of this world. The incongruity of the gospel seems to fit all of the paradox and pain of our lives, no matter what our culture, class or creed. There is goodness here in the baby's cry that broke the night two thousand years ago. There is beauty and truth.

As we read in the letter to Titus, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all..." That's a great summary of Christmas...

But unlike a movie and all the decorations that we'll sadly be putting away soon, the star of the story, this savior in a manger, will not allow us to remain wrapped in our own personal fantasies. This baby calls us out of ourselves! I saw a button recently that made me laugh: *You can stop narcissism...* It's funny because of course we need the characters of the long ago story, and the living Christ today to draw us out of ourselves. We need community, family and friends who will remind us that our lives have meaning, that we are a gift, that we are loved. We always need someone to come down and meet us where we are.

When Kim and I were living in Switzerland, we traveled with friends to northern Italy after Christmas one year and visited a little harbor called Fruttuoso. It's famous because the first Italian to use scuba gear, Dario Gonzatti, died just outside of the harbor of Fruttuoso, in 1947. A friend of his commissioned a 2.5 meter tall bronze Christ statue to be placed in the water near the spot where his friend died. So at a depth of 17 meters in the clear waters off the Italian Riviera, divers and fisherman can see this statue of Christ down in the depths. The Christ is looking up and has his arms outstretched as though waiting to hold someone.

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "The God in the Cave", *The Everlasting Man* CW2:301-303, excerpts.

And it struck me: strangely, here is the Christmas story! God has gone all the way down – even as the creed says, into the depths of hell – to rescue us. The message of Emmanuel is simple: You are not alone. I am always with you. I will never leave you. And I will give you peace.

This year, Christmas falls near the end of the Jewish festival of Hannukah. Happy Christmakah! *Hanukah* means to “rededicate.” It’s the festival of lights, recalling the miracle when the lamps of the temple burned for eight days when there was only fuel for one day. Some say the miracle was the 7 days of light *after the first day*. The people lit the light without enough. *God* provided what was needed. But as my Rabbi friend Tom Cohen taught me, the real miracle was the faith to light another lamp, knowing there’s not enough oil...

Before the closing credits of the Christmas story scroll up in our mind’s eye, I imagine that there is a “*to be continued*” boldly declaring that this saga of God’s incarnation is not over! The first incarnation didn’t look like much at the beginning, and sometimes we wonder where God is, and where God’s people are. God’s advent didn’t look like enough then, and for some, to be sure, it doesn’t look like enough now.

But *this child* Jesus changed the world with his self-giving love, and *He* can still change your life and our world today. The prophets, you’ll remember, claim his Kingdom will have no end... You can’t hold him in your arms, but you can hold him in your heart. So, like those visionaries centuries ago who held out for a better life and fairer world for all, and like those angels who shared the good news of a great joy for all, we can dedicate our lives to sharing the good news of God’s love with all those around us. Like those shepherds who went back to their shepherd lives, *changed*, glorifying and praising God, perhaps the sequel to the Christmas story involves a cameo appearance by each of us... receiving and sharing the hope, peace, joy and love that comes in the newborn king. That’s a rerun, friends, that will change the world!

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