

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2018

A Place for Them

Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-5, 9-16

Many of you know Mark and Julia Sibley-Jones, members here at Fourth Pres,
and some of you have read Julia's blog, called "This Uncharted Now."

In her December post, she tells of driving home one Advent night a few years ago,
with her kids Jack and Emma.

Emma was maybe three,
and they passed a huge nativity scene all garishly lit up.
Emma said,
"There's baby Jesus!"
Jack, all worldly at age seven, corrected his sister,
"that's not *really* Jesus."

Trying to save the situation, Julia said,
"True, but we celebrate Jesus's birth because it's God's way of telling us
that we are God's children too.
Jesus is in everybody."

To which three year old Emma replied,
"Yeah! Even in Jack!"

What Julia says she's come to understand about Christmas is that...

**Incarnation is not just important because it revealed God in Jesus.
Incarnation is important because it revealed Jesus in us.
Each of us.**

I think she's right about that.

If God is in Jesus, and Jesus is in us, then God is in us.
Each of us.

Incarnation means that God is not just a distant power,
some untouchable, unknowable Source of the universe, beyond all things;
rather, God is here, imminently here,
a touchable, knowable presence, in every human being, every atom, in all things.

**This is the mystery of Incarnation. It is the mystery of Christmas.
And it's why Christmas is good news.**

By extension,

being a Christian
(that is; one who lives with the Christmas Spirit all year around)
is not about making some propositional claim
about Jesus being God;
rather, it is about living in relationship with the world
and with other human beings
in a way that embraces God in all people and in all things.

This embrace of others and of the word is what we call “love.”

And — as Julia goes on to explore in her blog —
the challenge for people who celebrate this good news of Christmas
**is to learn how to love even the most difficult people in our lives
and in this world...**

...like 3 year old sisters loving their 7 year old brothers who know everything,
...and perhaps...even greater challenges than that.

But there is something about this biblical claim that may be even harder for us.

The Bible makes an even edgier claim,
and standing at the center of this claim
is the story of the birth of Jesus to Mary and Joseph:
While Jesus may be in each of us,
Jesus is especially in those who suffer.
And in this world, as the scriptures repeatedly stress,
and as the Christmas story is the central example,
**Jesus is especially in those who suffer because they are
poor and oppressed.**

Now, relative to the rest of the planet,
you and I who are gathered here tonight
are among the least poor and oppressed of people.
As (mostly) wealthy (mostly) white Americans
we can get rankled when we hear this —
but it is pretty plainly true as we read the scriptures.

**Jesus is found especially in those who suffer because they are poor and oppressed,
like Mary and Joseph.**

There is a Christmas tradition practiced by our Latin American brothers and sisters
known as “Las Posadas,” which is Spanish for “The Lodgings.”

“Las Posadas” began in Mexico over 400 years ago,
and is still celebrated today in much of Latin America.
It’s sort of like a nine-day progressive dinner,
gathering at a different house in the community each night,
celebrating the nine months of Mary’s pregnancy,
and recalling the search by Mary and Joseph for suitable lodging
for the birth of their child.

There is an abbreviated version of “Las Posadas” included
in the newest edition of the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship.

We used this version of the liturgy
as the opening for Fourth's Session meeting last Tuesday night.
As the elders arrived at church for the meeting,
they were asked to come here to the sanctuary.
At random, every other elder was admitted to the sanctuary,
while those not admitted were asked to wait outside in the hallway.

The feeling of discomfort was immediate,
certainly for those outside, since the hallway by the glass doors can be a little chilly;
but at least one elder who was allowed into the sanctuary
expressed discomfort at her insider status!
I assured them all that their selection was entirely random,
that there was no profiling going on — at least, none was intended!

After lighting the candles of the Advent wreath,
with the insiders seated comfortably in the pews
the outside elders standing, huddled, just outside the door,
and me standing — well, right between the Advent Wreath and the American Flag —
we began the liturgy.

I read Christ's words from Revelation:
*Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking;
if you hear my voice and open the door,
I will come in and eat with you, and you with me.*

The Outsiders read from the liturgy:
**Our names are Mary and Joseph.
We are weary from our travels.
Will you give us lodging?**

The Insiders responded, per the liturgy, saying,
**We don't care what your name is.
We will not let you enter.
You are strangers.
Let us sleep!**

Then I read from the Gospel of John:
*He was in the world,
and the world came into being through him;
yet the world did not know him.
He came to his own people,
but they did not accept him.
But to all who received him
and believed his name
he gave power to become children of God.*

The Insiders asked:
Who are the children of God?

The Outsiders answered:
All who are led by the Spirit are children of God.

The Insiders asked:

What does the Spirit guide us to do?

I read from the Gospel of Matthew:

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your mind.
You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

And from Galatians:

*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy,
peace, patience, kindness,
generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

The Insiders asked:

How do we know that we love the Lord and have faith?

I read from the Letter of James:

*If someone is naked and lacks daily food,
and you do not supply their needs, what good is that?
Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

At last, the Insiders respond:

Enter, Mary and Joseph!

Enter, holy pilgrims!

We will gladly give you lodging:

**There is room in our home
and room in our hearts.**

Now I would not want to suggest that story of Mary and Joseph,
or the liturgy of “Las Posadas”
gives any kind of clear answers as to how a nation of the world
is supposed to provide for orderly immigration, or asylum for refugees;
that is a complicated problem.

But the Christmas story certainly teaches us
that we are to hold poor, desperate migrants and refugees in our hearts
as dearly as we hold Mary and Joseph and their Child in our hearts.

We are to love the poor and oppressed because was one of them
and now lives in them.

Even if there are bad apples in the barrel
who might do us harm,
does Jesus not live in them, too?

If we say no,
we must ultimately say no to ourselves, as well.
(That’s basic Reformed Theology, folks.)

But we do not have to go to the Mexican border to find Mary and Joseph and Jesus.

Right here in Greenville, there are many in need of lodging.
Many in crisis, desperate for some measure of help.

The pressure on those without lodging is growing in our city.
As our more impoverished neighborhoods are being gentrified,
as with the new million dollar homes being built within sight of the Sterling community,
people are finding themselves with no place left they can afford to live.

I am told that poverty rates are rising in places just outside the Greenville boon,
like Berea and Fountain Inn.

But what about the Greenville Inn?

Is there room in the Greenville Inn for Mary and Joseph and their child?

How about in our backyards? Is there room in our backyards?

You know, it may happen one day
that there is a plan to build affordable lodging in your backyard
or in mine?
Will there be some story at work in our minds and hearts
other than the story of our property values?
Might the Christmas story come into play?

Tonight's offering gives us all a chance to contribute to the help of those in need.

Sometimes we help them directly, as we do through the Deacons' Fund.
Sometimes we help through our Annual Benevolences,
by working with organizations take a more holistic approach —
that seek to address the causes of crisis
rather than simply providing bandaids and relief of symptoms.

And anytime we give to sustain the work of this and other Christian churches
we keep the story of Mary and Joseph and Jesus being told.

Without the church, the Christmas story goes away...

...or it gets co-opted, as we too often see,
by those who would use Christmas simply to turn a profit.

But whether you give tonight, or you give in other ways, the point is this:

The story of Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus
is not meant to be softened or sentimentalized.

It is a story about a ruler — the Emperor Augustus —
sitting in Rome at the center of his Empire,
issuing a royal decree that is to be carried out
all the way across his empire, to the very edges,
even unto Bethlehem.

And in one of the great ironies of the biblical story
by trying to solidify his grip on this vast Empire,
the Emperor ends up facilitating the birth of the Davidic king
according to the prophetic word that says he come from Bethlehem.

Even in the messiness of world politics;
even in the tired feet and aching backs of a poor family,
pushed and pulled by empire,
forced on a cross-country journey;
even in the struggle of the owner of the stable and the manger
who tries to do the right thing;
even in the startled confusion of the shepherds
as they struggle to process the rapidly unfolding events
that are upending their world;

even in smelly animals,
and in the messiness of childbirth
and the weakness and vulnerability of a newborn infant;
even in people and places such as these,
God is coming into the world.

God is in Jesus,
and Jesus is in each of us—
even you, even me, even Jack.

And on this night we are called to stand in wonder,
to be amazed with the shepherds,
and to ponder with Mary,
what it all means;
and how we are now to live
in this light that is coming into the world.

Will we say:
Enter, Mary and Joseph?
Enter, holy pilgrims!
We will gladly give you lodging:
There is room in our home
and room in our hearts?