

December 3, 2006
Luke 1:1-13, 18-19
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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In these days...

Introduction to the Scripture:

Today's gospel reading is from the opening of the gospel of Luke. After a brief introduction, the gospel writer begins the story with these words...

In the days of King Herod of Judea..

That may not mean much to us, but in the first century, it said a lot... You know how Snoopy, in the Peanuts cartoons, always begins his stories with *It was a dark and stormy night*. Well that's what the words- *In the days of King Herod* implies. Or in Dickensonian language, *it was the worst of times...*

This introductory line is then followed with words of hope about one who is to be born - a prophet, John the Baptist. One who we know will prepare the way of the Lord.

* * * * *

(Sermon)

In these days...we're preparing for Christmas. 'Tis the season. There are decorations going up in town and we have begun to transform the sanctuary.

Yesterday for our youth group activity, I divided them into four groups and asked each group to come up with something that represents the holiday. I gave them each some money. They went downtown in their groups, bought what they needed

and then came back and put together their representation.

One group got at small tree, named it "The Giving Tree" (in honor of the book by that name), covered it with candy canes and put up a sign which invites people to take one. Another group decided a star was the symbol they wanted to represent the holiday. They found a large star, which we then put on top of the tree. Another group focused on the spirit of giving in various traditions. They made a gift box, with representations of Christmas, Hanukah, and Kwanzaa on the sides. The fourth group made a crèche out of edible materials - animal crackers for the animals, candy canes to represent the shepherds, Mary and Joseph's bodies were made out of small peanut butter cups stacked on top of each other. And the heads for Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were dum dum lollypops. All these representations are in Fellowship Hall for the people to enjoy tonight at Advent-ure.

At your house, I wonder what signs of the season have appeared. I've seen some of you picking up wreaths at the office this week. Some people have put up lights. Others already have their tree up. Some are writing out Christmas greetings to friends and family, far and near. Some are already looking frazzled by the gift giving decisions. Some are coaching themselves on how not to eat inappropriately through this long season of feasting. It used to

only last a few days, didn't it? Now it seems to last all month.

In these days... at our house, one of the signs of the season is the appearance of crèches. As is often true of clergy families, we have several crèches. There is one that Ron gave me, which has become special for me over the years. It is Southwestern in style.

Our first year here in Brunswick, I put this crèche on our bookcase in the living room. There was nothing remarkable about that. What is interesting is that I didn't take it down. When we were taking down the other decorations, I decided to leave it up until Epiphany. Then, I decided to leave it up through the season of Epiphany. Then, occasionally, through that spring and summer, I would notice its presence. It seemed a big incongruous in the midst of July, but I didn't take it down. The next thing I knew, Advent had arrived again. I fluctuated between chastising myself for leaving it up all year and chuckling that I was already prepared for Christmas. That was last year. Guess what. We've gone another whole year. Another Advent has arrived and it's still there. I have decided to leave it there. Permanently, I think.

I've decided to leave it there, because in these days... a symbol of hope is a precious gift.

In some ways we live in the best of times...

- More people have opportunities for education.
- Women have more freedom for self-determination.
- Health care provides us with longer productive lives.

Yet, we still experience grief and despair,

various types of abuse and addiction, illness and death. And we recognize that the opportunities we do have are mostly privileges for those of us living in the first world and then only some of us in the first world.

If you consider all of humanity (which God does), we continue to live in difficult times

- Nations and tribes are at war.
- The poor are hungry.
- The rhythms of the planet are shifting significantly under the influence of human activity.

So how do we sing a song of Christmas and celebrate in the midst of pain and suffering? Madeleine L'Engle (who wrote *A Wrinkle in Time*) responds to this type of question with these words:

*God did not wait till the world was ready,
till...nations were at peace.*

*God came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release...*

...

*We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!*
(Imaging the Word, V. 1, p. 85)

In these days... I've decided to keep the Christ child in plain view all year round - for a sign of hope is a precious gift.

This season of Advent and Christmas is both a wonderful season and a stressful season. As much of the Christmas holiday has been adopted and adapted by the culture, and the economic activity of the season has become so important to our economy, it is sometimes hard to keep the Christ Child in plain view even during this season.

Susan Fitzgerald told me a story from last Sunday in church school that illuminates this tension. The teacher in the first grade class read Tommy DePaola's book, *The First Christmas*, telling the story of the birth of Jesus. At the end of the story, a child who's new to church, spoke up, saying, "That's not very Christmassy." When the teacher asked what would make it more Christmassy, the child said, "You have to have reindeer, Santa, and a Christmas tree at least." After a pause, another child in the class spoke up, "I got it! I got it! You have Santa come down the chimney and bring the baby Jesus."

I love the spiritual instincts of this child. I suspect he doesn't know the history of the character Santa Claus, but instinctively he knows that St. Nicholas is about special gifts. The original St. Nicholas, a bishop in what is now part of Turkey over 1,700 years ago, was known for his generosity, for his giving heart. He was known for the ways he brought the Christ Child to those around him, especially those who were poor and in need.

In these days... we need all those who are willing to bring the baby Jesus to the world.

Most all the youth told me yesterday that a crèche is part of their family's custom during this season. I asked them if they have special traditions related to the crèche. One said they don't add the magi right away because it takes them a long time to get there. I knew a family who always started the magi in the part of the house farthest from the crèche. Then each day they would move the magi a little bit closer to represent their long journey to Bethlehem. I think this is a more meaningful way to mark the days of Advent than those calendars in the store

that give you a piece of chocolate each day.

Another youth said they don't add the baby Jesus to the scene until Christmas. This is a powerful reminder that at this point we're pregnant and there's a lot of watching and waiting during pregnancy. I've known families who put a new piece of straw into the manger each day of Advent to prepare a bed for the baby. Then when Christmas arrives Jesus joins everyone else in the scene.

Without originally intending to, I've started a new tradition at our house. There is one crèche I don't take down. In these days...I need the sign of hope all year.

The hope and promise of Christmas is that our life here and now matters. The Christian faith is not just about what happens after you die. The Christmas story claims and proclaims that God chooses to be fully present with us right now in the joys and in the sorrows of human existence – to share our common lot.

In these days...

God does not wait...

God comes ...