

Christmas Eve  
“No Rehearsal,” or, “Masks in the Manger”  
December 24, 2021

This is, of course, our first in person Christmas Eve service in two years,

So, on behalf of the Congregational United Church of Christ I once more want to welcome everyone with gladness, especially those of you who are our guests here this evening, whether you are visiting with family or friends or made your way here on your own. I hope that you are finding this a place of welcome and a place of joy.

Some of you might have been here earlier this month when the children of the church school presented their annual Christmas pageant. It was a wonderful event that helped many of us see the light and darkness of this season in new ways.

The children presented a shadow play. Because of the pandemic, they didn't process through the congregation as they often do. They were behind a screen on which they projected images that told the story of the birth of Jesus. At the end of the pageant, the screen was pulled aside to show a manger scene—with everyone masked: angels and shepherds, Mary and Joseph.

I was talking with some of the teachers afterwards. One of them said with astonishment: “And we did it without any rehearsals!”

That, too, was a pandemic related precaution—no rehearsal.

I began to think: that's how it is for all of us right now. We're doing all of this without any rehearsal.

When we started live-streaming our worship services a few weeks ago, there were some glitches. Mark Kenaston told me that streaming these services is like doing a live TV show—adding that while in most cases TV shows have rehearsals beforehand. Not us—our worship service *is* the rehearsal.

We've never done before what we are doing in these days: assessing risk wherever we go, getting fully vaccinated—then getting yet another shot, masking up, singing with masks, preaching with a mask.

Yes, it's now our second Christmas with Covid, but we see the differences from last year: we gather here instead of exclusively online. We sing even though we're hidden behind masks. Last year we had great hope as the vaccines were rolling out and we were rolling up our sleeves. This year we're still dealing with delta as omicron ominously looms.

We've had no time for rehearsal. We're playing it by ear. We're improvising. We're adapting as we go along. Each of us, all of us, are saying to one another in various ways: “Please be patient and understanding and kind with me. I've never been through a global pandemic before. I'm doing the best I can.”

We are.

We didn't get to rehearse any of this.

Here's the good news: the Christmas story is for people like us: the unrehearsed. It's a story about the unexpected, the unprepared for.

An angel comes to Mary with news that is as incomprehensible as it is good: she will bear a son whom she will name Jesus and of his realm there will be no end.

This hadn't happened before, but like any good improviser, Mary takes what comes her way with a "Yes."

The census fills Bethlehem. Who could have imagined the crowds? No one was ready for this, apparently least of all the innkeepers. Without a rehearsal, they improvised and laid a baby in a manger.

The shepherds were doing what shepherds do—keeping watch, expecting nothing different. Then, lo! an angel appears. And suddenly! there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host.

No time for rehearsal—in the middle of the night, we're going live.

And you know, it worked out, didn't it? The shepherds found the baby in the manger, a sign of good news of great joy, a savior who is Christ the Lord. Mary pondered all these things in her heart.

The rest of us?

For 2000 years we've been trying to figure out what it means for us to follow the One born this night. Some of us have been incredibly brave or loving or thoughtful or compassionate. Most have simply been everyday people. Some have been well-known, most now known only to their God. All of us have needed the forgiveness and mercy of God shown in this Jesus, born in Bethlehem.

And each generation, down to our own, down to us here tonight, each generation has done all of this without rehearsal. Nations rose and fell. Great beauty was created. Disease and famine touched so many. And we worked to bend the moral arc of the universe increasingly toward justice.

Those who follow in the way of Jesus Christ have never had time for rehearsal. We take what comes our way. With all of our great love and all of our great failings we keep moving forward.

During the rest of the year here at Congregational UCC we work at addressing the cold facts of violence and hatred, the warm hopes of peace and good will. Through study and worship and action, with argument and agreement, we seek concrete ways of showing the peace and goodwill that this birth announces. New occasions in 2022 will call for new actions as we seek to be faithful to the God who is made known in human flesh.

Tonight we come masked to the manger.

There's no time for rehearsal.

Let us go forward together.