

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2022

On behalf of the Congregational United Church of Christ I once more want to welcome those of you who are our guests here this evening, whether you are visiting with family or friends or have found your way here on your own. I hope that you are finding this a place of warmth on a cold night and a place of joy as we celebrate the birth of Jesus and hear again the amazing good news that God has come to us, crying in the night as a newborn child.

And, as I said earlier, it is with great happiness that I have the privilege, on behalf of our Deacons, to invite all of you, first-time guests, long-time members, and everyone in between, to our gala reception downstairs in Rockwood Hall after our worship. This is a beloved Christmas tradition in itself. Please join us as we resume what is always a wonderful occasion.

Our Deacons have been excited about hosting this reception once again and a lot of planning and preparation has gone into it. As always, there's a little bit of trepidation about an event like this. Will there be enough cookies? Enough hot cider? After all, we don't require reservations, so you never know who's going to show up.

And that's the problem we always encounter at the Christmas, isn't it? You never know who's going to wander in:

Soon-to-be parents who have arrived from out of town.

Angels who have left their own heavenly abode unexpectedly appear to people just doing their work.

Shepherds who have left their flocks unexpectedly show up to tell some new parents what they've seen and heard.

At Christmas, you never know who's going to wander in:

Unexpected guests who drop by with no warning.

People from the past who arrive on memories happy or sad—or both.

The hungry, the homeless, anyone seeking to make it through another cold night.

At Christmas, you never know who's going to wander in:

The strong and the weak, the whole and the broken, the rich and the poor—that is to say, anyone who needs to hear good news. And that is to say, all people.

The little read New Testament Letter to Titus is sometimes read at Christmas because it tells us that “the grace of God has dawned upon the world with healing for all.”

Healing for all. Regardless of who shows up, there's enough grace, enough love to go around.

We listened again as the angels came to the shepherds in the fields bringing them “good news of great joy for all people.”

All people. No one is left out. That news is as unexpected as it is good.

And this unexpected good news, this surprisingly great joy comes, not in the distant past, but *now*. “This day,” is how the angel puts it.

Maybe it’s just that angels know nothing of time, nothing of the passing of hours and days and years, nothing of the struggles and successes, the sorrow and joy that we experience in time. Perhaps they know nothing of the flow of the future quickly through the present into the ever growing past. Living in the eternal now of God’s presence, perhaps all they *can* do is speak of the present.

But this is what we who live *in time* hear: “To you is born *this day* a Savior,” the angel announces to terrified shepherds.

God always seems to pick the most unexpected people as the recipients of good news; and those frightened shepherds are the first to hear the message of this birth. Still those words tumble down through the centuries, falling softly on our unexpecting but listening ears, echoing with gentleness in our unexpecting but hope-filled hearts.

Here and now, in *this* place, in *our* time, we begin to sense that if these words come to anyone, these words come to *us* today. This is good news about a birth, a beginning—to *you* is born *this day* a Savior.

Listen. Those words are as unexpected as any Christmas visitor. Doubt or disagree if you will. The words that the angel speaks tonight are spoken not to shepherds long ago but to you *this day*.

The angel says that it is good news—which doesn’t mean that it is easily understood. When G.K. Chesterton was still an agnostic, he wrote a short poem titled, simply, Xmas. In it he gets at both the difficulty of explaining any “good news”—and especially *this* good news—as well as the hope that it creates:

Good news; but if you ask me what it is, I know not;

It is a track of feet in the snow,

It is a lantern showing a path,

It is a door set open.

This track, this light, this opening is for you—because, let’s be honest at least on this night, you are looking for a track, a light, an open door; because, let’s be honest at least on this night, the way ahead is not always clear or well-lit and the door has often seemed closed.

But the good news is that a track, a light, and an open door are set before you.

This track, this light, this opening is not for you alone, however, as much as you might want it and need it—and as much as it *does* come to you.

It is for all people.

The good news that God is with us in our time is for your neighbor as well as for you. It is for those gathering around fireplaces near beautifully decorated trees and for those alone on the cold streets tonight. It is for those who live in peace and those who wake to gunfire in their neighborhoods or explosions in war-torn countries. It is for the brave and the fearful, the

righteous and the unrighteous, the believer and the skeptic—that is to say it is for anyone who needs to hear good news. That is to say it is for all people.

We see the grace of God made real in our time in all kinds of places: in acts of kindness, in the miracle of forgiveness, in works of beauty. We see God's grace in generosity of spirit and giving.

Tonight, we hear once more that God's grace comes to us, not only as an action, not only as an idea, but in Jesus, born in Bethlehem. In Jesus, God becomes *incarnate*—taking on human flesh, human life. That's always kind of embarrassing for Christians because it means we don't worship a grand and noble God, distant in the heavens. We worship a God best known in human flesh. We don't proclaim a God who shows us how our souls can be raised to a heavenly stature. We announce a God who takes on the limitations of earthly, fleshy existence.

This same Jesus is now shown to a waiting world by people like you and me—
the unexpected bearers of good news,
the preposterous vessels of God's grace
in these days.