

GOD SURPRISES IV - EXPECTING A CHILD

Advent

Luke 2:1-7

A Sermon Preached by
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University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture – Read by Liturgists Mary Ellen Smith and Nancy Hannah

As we seek to respond to Your word and will, and encourage one another in the growth of our minds and spirits, let us hear this morning's scripture from Luke 2:1-7.

Luke 2:1-7¹

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid in him a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

Will you join me in prayer.

God,
As we pause and make room for Your coming again,
help us make room even right here and even right now
that You might be born in us anew.
– Amen

So it was "In those days that a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. And this was the first registration [that] was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to their own towns to be registered." And Mary and Joseph went to the city of Bethlehem, because Joseph was of the house and lineage of David. And the time came for Mary to be delivered for her child.

And the time came.

You know, if there's anything that the Scripture just invites us to do it is just to make time to BE.

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

GOD SURPRISES IV - EXPECTING A CHILD

And if you're like me, you don't come easily to such being. And maybe it means just sitting wherever we are, being wherever we are, and just being here. Nothing to do. Nowhere to go. But just to take a few breaths together.

Silent meditation.

You know, my life like yours is full of so many verbs: planning and procrastinating and praying and fixing and figuring stuff out and also much doing and getting stuff done – or not getting stuff done.

But these past 3 1/2 months now – I cannot believe it – have been such a gift and have been such a treasure, a treasure beyond words to me. And while I have said, yes, 18 times a day sometimes in those weeks, "Life has been a kerfuffle," I've also said so many times, "This has been a transformative time in my life." And this time with you all in this community changed me in way that all of our other years together has never changed me in exactly this way, for in these last 3 1/2 months there's been nothing to solve or to fix or to plan or to figure out or to worry about, but just a time for us to sit across the table from each other or hear at this moment just right here and now and just take in the gift, that amazing gift that we forget all the time, of just *being* together. And isn't it a miracle? And don't we miss it all the time? And *why* is it, *why* is it that such a gift comes at a time of saying goodbye? And, yes, what a grace! What a grace that such a gift comes at a time of saying goodbye. And what a grace, what a grace it has been.

You all have gifted me so much in these last 3 1/2 months more than you'll ever know. You've gifted me right up to this present moment here as I sit here on my 25th Christmas with this congregation. My goodness! One of the ways you gifted me was with the word shared with me this week and this quote.

It's hard not to believe that somehow or other there's not going to be another time with our closest friends, another day; so the chances are we won't know it's the last time. And therefore it won't have that terrible sadness about it that the Last Supper of Jesus must've had.

But, *not knowing* is sad in another way, because it means that we won't know how precious – how utterly precious – this time is, how precious these friends are. I mean you and me, I mean all of us together and those that we love. How precious these friends are who we will be sitting down with for the last time whether we know it or not.

So who are these friends for you? And who were these friends for me? What a gift and what a treasure it is to just have such friends, to have this time to be in and be with together.

And, you know, I cannot help but sit here this Sunday morning and think of all of those other members of this community, as well. And you and I – some of us – we could go right around and tell you where they used to sit. And, oh my gosh, that heart, that love, that presence, oh, it's here to as well. Those generations past. And, yes, perhaps as well, the generations to come who will sit here one day who we could never imagine, singing songs that we don't even know yet.

The person who shared those words about not knowing often enough how precious this time is, because someday for all of us it will be the last time with those we love. The person who wrote those

GOD SURPRISES IV - EXPECTING A CHILD

words was Frederick Buechner, a pastor and a novelist.² And I had the real gift in my life many, many years ago when I was still in divinity school to hear Frederick Buechner preach. He started this sermon by saying, "I am sorry that I always have to talk about myself. But, you know, it is in the intimacy of my own life that I find God. And perhaps," he said, "that's true for you as it is for me. Are you listening?" Are you listening? Are we listening to God echoing there in the intimacy of our lives? And I know that sitting there that day, I know in all the countless ways that God comes – and can come and will come – in music, in community, in nature, in light, in seasons, in friends, in family – it's *that* place for all of us that God particularly wants to come. And be known there in the intimacy, in the being, in the story of our lives.

And Luke knew that and that's why for Luke, you know, it's not that Jesus was born, well, at any time in any place or that it doesn't really matter ... it matters! It matters that it was at a *particular* time, a particular time when Augustus was Emperor and Quirinius was the ... (whatever he did ... what *did* Quirinius do?)... Ah, he was the governor of Syria. So it is important to know! And Jesus was just not born anytime and anyplace. Does it matter? It matters! Jesus was born in the city of David. He is of the house and lineage of David. He, this one, this baby that we will call the Prince of Peace, was born in a time when there was no peace, in a time of occupation and tyranny, a time of terror, a time of poverty, a time of great need, in a time, as Madeleine L'Engle wrote long ago – a time – that time –

This is *no* time for a child to be born [with us],
With the earth betrayed by war and hate
And a nova lighting the sky to warn
That time runs out and the sun burns late.
That was *no* time for a child to be born,
In the land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honour and truth were trampled by scorn,
Yet here [*here in that time*], did the Savior make his home. ³

It was Christmas 200 years ago. 1818. Present-day Austria-Bavaria, and the world was in turmoil.

Napoleon had ravaged Europe, looted, burned vast stretches of land in Europe, leaving the peoples in that land hungry, impoverished. Epidemics. No easy time.

Across the world in Indonesia a volcano⁴ had gone off and it covered Europe and the rest of the world for months and months in thick smoke. No sun. No crops. Starvation and hunger and tyranny and political upheaval. ... No time to celebrate Christmas.

And yet it was at that time on a Christmas 200 years ago that Joseph Mohr, a priest in the little village of Oberndorf and a struggling poet, walked for two miles to the neighboring village and passed on his poem "Silent Night" to his friend Franz Gruber who added the melody that we have come to know and love and sing each Christmas – and sang it that first time for the Christmas mass.

² Frederick Buechner. "At The Last Supper: Bidding Farewell," Christian Century, April 4, 2006, p. 26-27.

³ Madeleine L'Engle, "The Risk of Birth, Christmas, 1973." Adapted. Accessed 1/10/2019 at <https://rippleeffects.wordpress.com/2013/12/11/reading-the-season-poetry-by-madeleine-lengle/>

⁴ Tambora

GOD SURPRISES IV - EXPECTING A CHILD

[Madeline L'Engle's poem concludes –

When is the time? ...
When *is* the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth.
And by greed and pride the sky is torn
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

The mystic and the monk Meister Eckhart⁵ wrote long ago [paraphrased],

What good does it do? I mean really!
If Jesus was born so long ago,
if Jesus is not born right here and right now in you and in me and in all of this world?
– Merry Christmas

Soloist Royce Morrison (Reading current news headlines. Translations provided by Royce.)

Addressing human driven atmospheric warming, the just released 4th National Climate Assessment states "Future risks from climate change depend ... on decisions made today."

[*Congregation begins singing "Silent Night" as Royce continues.*]

El Presidente de Estados Unidos enviará miles de militares a frontera con México contra miles de centroamericanos que huyé de la violencia, la pobré y la corrupción ... para solicitar asilo.

<<translation>> "The President of the United States has sent thousands of troops to the border with Mexico, against thousands of Central Americans who are fleeing violence, poverty and corruption ... to seek asylum.

The former personal lawyer of the president was sentenced to three years in prison, saying, "I felt it was my duty to cover up"

In related news, American Media, Incorporated, parent company of the National Enquirer ...

À Paris, on demande: en Amérique du Sud, le Brésil, est-il devenu fasciste?

<<translation>> "In Paris, one asks: in South America, has Brazil become fascist?"

In Yemen over 85,000 children under the age of 5 have died of starvation since the United States intervened in that civil war.⁶

⁵ "Eckhart von Hochheim OP (c. 1260 – c. 1328),^[1] commonly known as Meister Eckhart^[a] or Ekehart, was a German theologian, philosopher and mystic ..." From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meister_Eckhart. Accessed 1/10/2019

⁶ Reported by the charity Save the Children.

GOD SURPRISES IV - EXPECTING A CHILD

Успеть за четверть часа на переговорах в Финляндии
Владимир Путин и Дональд Трамп сделали шаг
к возрождению Российско – Американских отношений.

<< translation of photo caption >>

“To succeed in a quarter hour of negotiations in Finland
Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump took a step
in reviving Russian – American relations.”

In the archdiocese of Los Angeles, two Sisters ... retired principal and teacher-administrator of St. James Catholic School, are accused of embezzling over \$500,000 of charitable donations.

Australian students ... on strike from school ... have converged on urban and regional centres demanding the government take action on climate change ...

The Fort Worth Star-Telegram has uncovered over 400 allegations of sexual abuse, cover-ups and victim scapegoating by 168 leaders in nearly 200 Independent Baptist churches and institutions across the nation.

Four months since the Dow's all-time high, investors worry

From Oregon State Capitol Salem comes report of a slight dip in the number of homeless students last school year ... but numbers are worse in many rural school districts.

Liturgists

For the word of God in Scripture,
For the word of God among us,
For the word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

UCUCC: PI

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew 1/09/2019 from <https://universityucc.org/sermons> then to “More Podcasts” and SoundCloud as needed