

GOD SURPRISES - GO IN PEACE
Christmastide

Luke 2:27-35

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 Carolyn Stark (Moderator in 1994) and Margaret Stine (current Moderator)

As we seek 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 two verses 27 to 35.

Luke 2:27-40¹

²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law,

²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."

³³ And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna.... She was of a great age... ³⁷ ... She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

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. .

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Pastor Catherine Foote

Let us pray:

God

May the words of our mouths,
The meditations of our hearts
Be transformed in your sight
For you are our rock and our Redeemer.
— Amen.

You know, yesterday many of us gathered here downstairs in Ostrander Hall and looked back over 25 years of our life together. And I *love* such a looking back! Of course, we always capture those moments of great grace. It's those turning points, those breakthroughs that we talk about, that we celebrate, that we rejoice in. It's like this story of Simeon and Anna or most of our biblical stories, actually. They capture a moment in time and then, as the saying goes, that moment is worn smooth by the telling and retelling. Moments of grace. And yet don't we know, as well, that most of life is made up not in those breakthrough moments but in the day-to-day.

Marcus Borg and John Crossan suggest that Luke in this story – that began in chapter 1 and ends here – this story of the first Christmas, Luke is using early Christian chants to tell the story. And we recognize those chants by the names they've been given: the Benedictus of Zacharias the father of John the Baptist; the Magnificat of Mary the mother of Jesus; and now the Nunc Dimittus of Simeon. Borg and Crossan suggest that the earliest Christians, just like us, sang their way through Christmas. And that singing fills our hearts with those moments that we notice. But just like yesterday, underneath those breakthrough moments, we're just showing up for the day- to-day. Like Mary and Joseph, just doing what we know we are encouraged to do. A child is born. Now we bring that child to the community to mark a moment.

But that growing up will be full of moments. And if we immerse ourselves in this story, we might imagine Mary and Joseph didn't start this journey from Bethlehem to Jerusalem expecting anything particularly special. They were just doing what they had been encouraged to do. The trip takes about 6 miles — half a day, maybe longer if you traveling with a newborn.

And Simeon and Anna: they, when the sun rose that morning I don't know that they knew anything particular would happen. But then there they were — faithful, present — when that moment they had been waiting for occurred.

And really yesterday, even though we framed it in moments, what we really celebrated as a community was you, Peter, showing up faithfully every day doing what you knew in your heart to do, until moment by moment you built a legacy of almost a quarter of a century — not expecting one day we would look back and highlight moments of faithfulness, but knowing that in the day-to-day building those moments, those *moments* of breakthrough grace would occur. In the end it's what we all do.

Here you are the Sunday *after* Christmas. Granted, it is a particularly special Sunday; but Sundays after Christmas are known for *low* attendance. It's *after* the pageantry. It's *after* the miraculous birth.

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And we show up again, faithful in the moment, building a life of faith, knowing that joy or grace or tears or laughter might break through *any* time for *any* one of us.

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

There are so many people I would love you to meet. And there are so many people that have sat in these very pews over these last decades. And there are the people, of course, who were sitting here, right now, today. There's just so many people I would like you to meet and have them stand right here beside me and I would say, "This person is the most amazing person."

And so, it was like that day for Simeon and Anna in the temple, as well.

But you know, of all those hundreds — perhaps thousands of people — that I've had the privilege of getting to know over these past decades, there is one person at the very beginning of the story I'd like to tell you little bit about. Because unlike other of our stories that are private and precious and can't be shared, Horace's story was lived out loud.

Horace was here. And, ah, he would sit right about here, where Peter and Candy are seated. And when you stood up at the pulpit, Horace would comment on what he thought. Out loud. And if you mistakenly said something like "needless to say", he would say, "Well, then *why*, Peter, are you saying it?" And if, perhaps, my voice dropped, Horace would say, "**Speak louder!**" Well, Horace was none too thrilled, let us say — and he made that known — about Dave and me being called here as these new young pastors.

So Horace gets out one day and he is walking out at the very end of the service with his walker. And he comes to the very back of the church. And it's that moment — and we'll have that moment today — it's dead quiet. The chimes ring: One. Two. Horace whirled around in his walker and he noticed me there and he pointed at me, and he said, "I don't think you two have done a *darn* bit of good since you've been here." Except he didn't say "darn". The whole church, you know, "Oh, Horace."

And don't know what it's like for you, but I certainly remember me and my 32-year-old self when life was all about proving how good I was and how good I could be to everybody — particularly, when you've come into a congregation where you have 73% of the vote. All right! So there's a bunch of people you gotta go, gosh, how can I show that I'm good enough, pastoral enough, loving enough.

I don't know, but on that day I stopped trying to justify myself to Horace but perhaps just get him out of the door and into the Narthex. And all I could think to say to Horace was, "Well! Tell me more."

So, we set up a time for me to meet with Horace. And, Horace was dying. I didn't know that about him. And, over those months that we met, he would tell me stories. And he had stories, like each and every one could tell to our stories, about places where we've been rejected and places where we've been excluded. And as Horace told me his personal stories, I realized he was talking to me. And in his own indirect way of saying it, he was telling me, "I understand you, Peter, and I understand something of the pain in your life because I felt that, as well." And we developed just a wonderful, wonderful relationship. And a heartbreaking one, too, because it *was* months later that I officiated at Horace's memorial service.

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You know, you've been to them — memorial services — and you know how they go. But there are just two things I really want to remind *you* of today. One of them is, is after, you know, people share the quote "truth" about somebody's life, you know *all* the great things, and some of the *real* things about our lives. And we have trouble going to the real things about our lives. Like always, you can only talk about the good thing, because if we talked about the not-so-good things, then who are we? But none of our lives are like that. And despite however we do and the people do who were talking and the pastor does about the highs and lows of somebody's life, we come to these two places in the service that are not the minister's words but they are the Church's words. And the minister stands here before you and just repeats the Church's words reminding us again. One of them is that we always say the Scripture. It's my favorite Scripture from Paul's letter to the church of Rome, "What can separate us from the love of God?" Paul asks himself. And then he answers in the very old-fashioned language of his time, this answer that is basically "nothing". He says, "I am convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come, nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."²

And some of us here today can nod and say,

"Yes, yes, that's where I have experienced that love in Jesus Christ."

And others of us nod today and say.

"Yes, I experience that love in the beauty of the sanctuary, in the beauty of this day."

"Yes, I experience that love in these friends sitting next to me this day."

"Yes, I experienced that love in this music of this day."

This love is all around us and can never be contained.

And it's the *love*, as we reminded Mary and we were reminded of,

It's not because we're good or we have proven anything

But just because of the amazing gift of who we are,

Who we are.

And the final part of a service — and this is what I want to leave with you today more than anything — is one, it's the gift of being one of your many pastors over these years is this part of the memorial service. And *again* the pastor stands up and shares the Church's words, and they are this. And we say, Given all those highs and lows of someone's life, the truth we have been able to name of the truth we could *never* name, "Thanks be to God for the gift of the life of _____." And then you say that person's name." But today and right here and right now I need your help, because I am going to say those words and I want you whisper to yourself your own name. No one else to hear, you just hear it. You whisper to yourself *out loud*, though, your name. This is the church's gift to you. This is the gift of eternity to you. And so,

Thanks be to God for the gift of the life of _____.

It's such an amazing thing to play, because you can also put in there somebody that you really like and love.

Thanks be to God for the gift of the life of _____.

² Romans 8:38, Holy Bible (NRSV), op cit.

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And, really, if you want to push the envelope, put in there the name of somebody you *don't like* — and always be recalled to the fact that, yeah, there's things we don't like about each other, for sure. But let us never, ever forget our call to *love* each other, because all of us are here in our brokenness and beauty together.

And, so that's it. I just want to say, faithful church, what a gift it has been to be a pastor. What a gift it has been that you have enabled me to see you in your highs and your lows and your truth. But for this pastor, I just want to say thank you for seeing *me*. You've seen me, some of you, grow up and still growing, right? You've seen my highs, my lows, my stumbles, my falling, my successes, my failures. You've seen me. And because you have seen this pastor, you have changed his life, you have changed my life. And *you* fill me now with enough faith, hope, and love to step forward, called by the spirit of the Living God into this unfolding work of time.

Pastor Amy Roon

I am reminded, Peter, that my first Sunday that you all had me preach was the Sunday after Dominic Crossan preached. So clearly this is part of what I do. You thought the sermon was done. But, no, Peter, there are two more chapters.

So, I feel called to remember and remind you that for all, for all we focus and notice her, we don't have a lineage from Mary. We don't have a last name for Mary. ... Mary's experience is to just be a girl thrust into womanhood in unexpected ways to experience this whole advent of waiting — which I can attest whether you grow the baby inside you or whether you are just waiting for a phone call in the middle of the night, the moment will come. And I asked my dad when I was waiting, I said "Dad, I just, I keep having all these lists of things maybe to be prepared for and the things to do, and as I'm waiting but, but ... I just ... you know there's, there's no middle. I'm just going to be here just me and then ... and then I won't be. And there's *no* transition.

And I, I struggle with change as much as any of you. So I like to plan the transition. I like to think through and kind of ease my way into it. And there is just none of that. And so for Mary the waiting is over. Oh. She's not pregnant anymore. Now the real work begins!

Now, right? She shows up. She shows up and she realizes okay their traditions to hold so, you know, it's been eight days and we've got a walk 6 miles out of the temple and bring my newborn. And this is what you do to be recognized by your elders in that moment of feeling fragile, to have someone you never knew say to you, "Oh! I was waiting for you. This thing you are doing. This new, crazy thing you're scared of doing? I've been watching and waiting for you to be ready to take off for my whole life." Because that's our human story, isn't it? Someone desperately waited for *you*. Someone is waiting for what is being born in you to take off in the world.

For Mary, she probably didn't know this quite yet, but I have learned this and notice when people ask, "Well, why did you decide to become a single mom?" And I have to remind them that no one decides to be a single mom. You end up that way in one way or another. But they say, "How are you doing this?" I said, "I don't know. But what I find more puzzling is why do people who are coupled think TWO is really enough?" — like that's so much better than one." When you're ONE, you really know you can't do it by yourself.

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And that's the truth of how you bear your light and how you grow it up. Mary had the job of raising a revolutionary and knowing that that was her job. I trust. I trust in the hidden parts of the story with every bit of surety that Mary didn't do that alone.

David Anderson, Church Administrator

Mary did that with community. We do that as this community. Much continues. Love, hope, and prayers here go on. As Peter moves ahead, so do we. Today is not the end of the story; today is the closing of a chapter. And when we begin a new chapter in our life here, we prepare to turn the page.

For some of us, our whole time in this congregation has been with Peter's leadership. For some of us Peter's time here is less than half of our time here. For some of us today, this may be the first time with Peter or with this congregation. And in all those realities, thanks be to God who has been on the journey the whole time of this ministry, the whole time of this congregation, the whole time of this faith we claim, the whole time of Creation.

We sit surrounded by those who've been part of this journey of faith, surrounded by names and stories long before us and, I believe, we're also surrounded by the possibilities of those yet to become part of this community, those not yet here, those not yet born.

In Jerusalem when Jesus was a baby, Simeon and Anna were some of the faithful. They were part of us. They helped the congregation, the community through their own actions and hopes. Simeon and Anna celebrated the present, the connection with Jesus. And also looked toward a future. They joined those present on that day in looking ahead together with joy and trepidation, with hope and assurance. And so we join with Simeon and Anna, and with Horace and Clinton, and Dale and Hortense, and Edna and Irene and John, and with Roy leading our call to worship this very morning, with children now with us in our congregation, our present and the future.

In the midst of this amazing cloud of witnesses, I remember the quote from UCC theologian Roger Shinn who said, "Every time I look backwards, I stare into the eyes of those looking steadfastly forward, beyond me to our common future." And that's what awaits us — that future we move in together with God's love and grace abounding. It's a future that will have big decisions for us about ministry and direction and focus in faithfulness. It will have celebrations of new life and renewed love and hope. It will have times of faithful work and prayer and music in action together. It'll have times of joy. And it'll have times of sorrow. And we will be joined by those yet to come, by those here now, and in spirit by those who came before us and imagined such a congregation of love and justice of faith and hope and possibility.

Together looking forward we join in gratitude and Thanksgiving. God is with us as we close a chapter, as we turn a page, and as we continue on in this journey of faith and life. And for all of that, thanks be to God.

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

And so it seems appropriate to just conclude with a sailing story.

It was one of those days I hate! The wind was coming up strong from the south at the Center for Wooden Boats, a horrible day for sailing — at least for me. So I go out with John. And we go out

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sailing on that day. And we get out in front of the Center for Wooden Boats. Wind's coming strong this way. And I'm just tacking back and forth this way. The wind coming strong across the beam of the boat. It's a horrible, horrible way to sail. Boat's tipping up. And coming around here. Noisy fluttering of sails. You go back this way. But you see, on that day I didn't want to trust in the wind. I didn't want to let the wind take me to the Gas Works Park. In fact, I've only been there six times ever! And how in the world would we get back in time! So back and forth we went in front of the Center for Wooden Boats. The other one boat out there that day had spread its sails wide and creamed across to the Gasworks Park and was tacking gently back. And so we turned eventually back into the dock; me, relieved to be back home again.

Elaina, the livery manager, said to me, "Did you have a good time?" "Yes," I lied.

John said, "Peter, I was kind of surprised. I thought you'd just let the sail out and let this wind take us to Gasworks Park."

It's been a couple years. And my faith, my love, my hope, my belief has changed and grown as well, wide enough to set wide my sail. And today to let that wind take me to Gasworks Park for the seventh time and to turn to the left – which would be port –under the Aurora Bridge, down through the Ship Canal, out through the Locks, my goodness, out into Puget Sound and beyond, trust in that wind of God and that same wind, friends, blowing back here and you in this life and in this church calling us all forward to a life we never ever could imagine: God's love with us.

Sung Response³

v. 1—Peter, to congregation; v. 2—clergy, worship leaders

v. 3—window (east) side; v. 4—inner (west) side

v. 5—all; v. 6—congregation, to Peter.

Won't you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you?
Pray that I may have the grace to let me be our servant, too.

We are pilgrims on a journey, we are travelers on the road
We are here to help each other go the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christlight for you in the shadow of your fear.
I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping; when you laugh, I'll laugh with you.
I will share your joy and sorrow till we've seen this journey through.

And we sing to God in heaven we shall find such harmony.
Born of all we've known together of Christ's love and agony.

Won't you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you.
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.

³ *Hymn 539 Won't You Let Me Be Your Servant?* by Richard Gillard, 1977. In *The New Century Hymnal*, 1995, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, Ohio.

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Liturgist (Margaret Stine)

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: CF-PI-AR-DA-PI

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew 02/06/2019 from <https://universityucc.org/sermons> then to "More Podcasts" and SoundCloud as needed



Preparing to carry the light out into the world 12/30/2018. (L-R) Rev. Mike Denton, Rev. Amy Roon, Roy De Maagd, Rev. Peter Ilgenfritz, David Anderson, Rev. Dr. Catherine Foote, Margaret Stine.
Picture by Beth Bartholomew.