

“Do You See What I Hear?”
A Christmas, Luke 2:1-20
December 25, 2016
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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I. WHAT IS THE MEANING?

The Christmas Story

Somewhere in the north of Holland there is a church where all those who entered used to bow in the direction of a whitewashed part of the church wall before settling in the pews. Nobody knew why. They had been doing this from generation to generation, and no question was ever asked.

Then one day the Parish Council decided to clean the walls. While doing this they discovered some traces of a painting under the whitewash on the wall. Very carefully they started to peel off the chalk and they uncovered a centuries-old painting of Jesus on the cross.

Nobody remembered that picture. There was no description of it to be found: the painting had been lost from human memory. It must have been painted over centuries ago. But the sign of respect had remained. Now they finally knew why they were bowing their heads before sitting down. The sign had been there but its *meaning* was forgotten. Nobody knew the story of the origin of the sign, nobody could tell its tale. (*Joseph G. Donders in 'Praying and Preaching the Sunday Gospel'*)

II. WHAT DO YOU SEE? WHOM DO YOU HEAR?

“The sign had been there but its meaning was forgotten.” How often are we reminded to “remember the reason for the season?” To “focus on the *true* meaning of Christmas,” but secretly wondered—what *is* that, really? Do we remember? Or, maybe if you’re like me, you secretly don’t want to admit that just maybe, you’re not real sure—inside yourself—what that meaning is?

What does it mean to the person reminding you? What does it mean to your mom, your kids, your grandmother? What **IS** the *meaning* of Christmas?

Could it be that there’s not just one answer? That “the reason for the season”; the “true meaning of Christmas” is a little different, mysteriously unique, for each soul?

Do YOU see what I see? Do YOU hear what I hear? “Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy!” Do you know what I know? About this child? Do you see the one shivering in the cold? *He* will bring us goodness and light? How can this be?!

III. AT THE MANGER

One preacher wonders out loud:

“I wonder what I would have heard had I been there that night. It is a question that annually haunts me. Would I have heard the choirs of angels singing or simply the sounds of barnyard animals shifting around?

Would I have seen the star in the sky that night or simply two poor and very frightened kids? Would I have understood the hushed silence of the divine presence, or simply the chill of a cold east wind. Would I have understood the message of Emmanuel, God with us, or would the cosmic implications of that evening have passed me by?

I am convinced that had two people been there that night in Bethlehem it is quite possible that they could have heard and seen two *entirely different scenes*. I believe this because all of life is this way. God never presents himself in revelation in a manner in which we are forced to believe. We are always left with an option, for that is God's way. Thus, one person can say "It's a miracle, while another says "It's coincidence."

Certainly very few people in Palestine saw and heard and understood what took place that night. The choirs of angels singing were drowned out by the haggling and trading going on in the Jerusalem bazaar. There was a bright star in the sky but the only ones apparently to pay any attention to it were pagan astrologers from the East. If anyone did see Mary and Joseph on that most fateful night, they were too preoccupied with their own problems to offer any assistance...”

IV. ACCOUNTS FROM THE STABLE

Let's wonder a little more—with those characters who were there that night. What did their eyes see? What did their ears hear? What did their minds ponder, or their hearts wonder?

JOSEPH

Father Joseph saw a life challenge. A huge responsibility. He'd listened to the angel in the dream telling him not to be afraid, and to take Mary as his wife, and to bring this son into the world.

Now he had to manage a difficult trip in her ninth month to Bethlehem, plan the logistics of lodging (before the days of smart phones) and navigate relatives (who *well* might have been whispering behind his back about this “unexpected sight”).

Women died in childbirth often in those times—how would he make sure all went well, find a trusted midwife and even a clean, comfortable bed for his betrothed and baby son?

MARY

And, Mary, lovely Mother Mary. She saw chaos! Unexpected company. She felt birth pangs at the most inopportune time—on a trip?! Really? Now?! Why does it have to be now? She heard birth cries: a joy! A sign! Cries that cut to her heart—a healthy, wailing boy born into a loving and welcoming family, but oh, what a frightening and hostile world.

Mary: “Full of Grace” she was called by the angel. But what does that *mean*? Traveling in your ninth month is anything BUT graceful!! Have you tried it?

“How can this BE?”

“All I really want is a quiet, clean place with a trusted, highly-qualified midwife to go through this ordeal. Childbirth is not something I've done before and it's hard! Painful, messy, frightening!”

“Oh, and another thing: Who *are* all these gawkers who keep stopping by?! Go visit someone else's birthing stable for the love of God!”

“I'm sorry. I just don't feel very “full of grace” right now. Maybe I'll be up for company in a couple days. Just check the register at the Bethlehem Target and leave the gifts outside the door, would ya? Thanks. I need some peace and quiet to ponder—and the baby needs his swaddling diaper changed—again!”

SHEPHERDS

And, what of the night-shift Shepherds? Those who drew the short straw and had to work graveyard shift? What did *they* see? As much as we think of the angels in the sky, floating above the field; or even have them on a pulley system in our elaborate pageants, angels were simply messengers of God—looking very human and ordinary. On that night, in the dark, a stranger appearing among them would have frightened those shepherds—put them on the alert to theft or mugging.

Even when told they were not to fear, that this stranger was bringing “good news of great joy for all the people” it still would have seemed scary and mysterious. Called for some faith and overriding their better judgment: “Well, let's go and figure this out—let's see for ourselves, guys!”

“Could it be that the Lord truly has made known to us, something world-shattering? Us? Lowly graveyard-shift blue collar workers?”

THE ANGELS

The angels saw an Assignment. A job. “We've got a message to telegraph to the world tonight. To get out on the airwaves. To post, to tweet, to sing! The prophets have been talking about this for a loonnngg time! Now, we get to break the news! A savior, who is Christ the Lord!”

THE MAGI

And, the Magi—magicians from a far country. They saw a Sign. An answer to their calculations and explorations. At least, they hoped this was it! That they were on the right path. They saw a king—for that's to whom you brought Gold. They saw a Sacrifice—for what was Frankincense other than a priestly tool for sacrifices in the Temple. They saw one who would die—for Myrrh was the embalming spice. A preparation for burial.

The magi also saw a dangerous sight, and heard stern warnings to “go home by another way.” They listened to the message in the dream, and went home wondering what kind of child this was that would incite such a response in the powers and principalities.

HEROD

For without a doubt, Herod saw a threat. His response to the news of that birth was one of fear, for sure! And he had no angel to tell him *not* to fear, that this was good news. Because he was not open to the idea of God coming to save the world, walk among us and “bring us goodness and light.”

Herod didn't want to share in the leadership –he wasn't interested in God's kind of kingdom. His paranoia that others were conspiring to overthrow him is well documented. He even had his “favorite wife” executed, along with her mother and his brother-in-law! Took down anyone who defied him or threatened his seat on the throne. Where others found hope on that Christmas night, Herod found himself in a prison of paranoia—a tortured and confused man.

And he sought to release himself from that prison by lashing out at all the baby boys who might be born in that time; who might rise up to bring goodness, light and love into the dark world.

V. NATIVITY ON THE BEACH

Once upon a time, in the year 2016, a man named Juan Manuel saw the manger as well. You might have seen his story and a crèche out of stones on the beach. It's gone viral this week!

Where others saw a bunch of rocks on the beach, Juan Manuel saw a Mission—literally and figuratively. He started to build a mission front with those rocks and someone came along and saw a Nativity Scene. And so, he went with *their* vision and made it his own. What he eventually found was a mission after all—a purpose for his life and art!

Juan began practicing an art of rock stacking a couple years ago. This year he tells the story:

“I'd been contemplating building a mission facade for a few weeks and when I finally did, I found a photo of it and captioned it “everything is a process,” not knowing at the time just how accurate that would be. A friend of mine saw the image and mentioned that it reminded her of a nativity set. As a nativity set, it surely wasn't complete so I went back to the beach to work on it for a few more hours. Eventually, it became not only a nativity scene, but a beacon of the true meaning of the season for onlookers walking by.

My rock stack nativity scene is my Christmas present for Ventura, a community I've come to love. I carefully selected each stone I needed, sometimes walking 30 minutes down the beach to find one that was the exact size and shape. I don't have any tools or a background in engineering or architecture but I do have a keen sense for balance and a gut feeling that tells me when to let go. I'm just a guy who found a hobby and turned it into

something special.

When I first finished my nativity scene, I didn't want to go home. I just wanted to eat and sleep by it to keep it safe. I thought it might last a couple of days and then get knocked down by children or a wandering dog.

Since then, my trust in our community has grown. People have brought their families, left flowers, and captured amazing photos because it touches them and they want to remember it. They have shown nothing but genuine appreciation.

I've spent hours watching people come by. Seeing the way it touches them has become a gift to myself. I feel as though I must have done something really good sometime to deserve something this great.

I've been balancing stones for just over two years and it hasn't always been easy. Some people have told me I'm wasting my time, others wonder if I'm cheating somehow, while others still try to take credit for it. It's been a process, just like everything else in life.

Standing by the nativity set, by far my most popular piece, people notice me. "Are you the guy behind the stones?" they ask, "I admire them on my early morning walks. I loved that one piece..." they often share. So people have

been paying attention, I think to myself. Appreciative eyes have always been there.

I will be here everyday until Christmas to make sure my gift is here for everyone to enjoy. The wind and the rain have damaged it on occasion but I will continue to rebuild it. Then I'll figure out my next project. I plan to keep balancing stones for a while and have faith my art will lead me down the right path.

VI. MEANING OF THIS HOLY NIGHT

Somewhere in the north of Buena Vista, Colorado, there is a church where all those who entered on a Christmas Eve came from different faith journeys and life walks, backgrounds and perspectives. They came in different sizes, shapes and colors. And as they worshiped, sang and prayed and celebrated, they focused in the direction of a beautiful part of the church: A fireplace and a Communion Table and a Nativity Scene.

They each brought a story to this scene. Their own eyes and ears and perspective. They found *great* meaning here—it wasn't "forgotten" by any means! But, the meaning was not one-dimensional by any means. It was not *exactly* the same meaning for each set of eyes and ears. It didn't resonate in the heart the same for each soul.

Now more than ever we are compelled to open our eyes and our ears—to each other, to learn and see and hear various perspectives—on life, on faith, on God's presence among us—Emmanuel!

Compelled this night above *all* nights, to walk a mile in one another's moccasins to Bethlehem. To comprehend that what we *think* we see might not be what another sees or the whole story—the full picture.

To understand that what I see maybe not what you hear and I want you hear may not be what the person next to you understands.

And, that the only way through this complex and complicated place and time we find ourselves in, is to listen to *truly* seek to understand and see through one *another's* eyes hear through one another's ears. To see one another and the babe in the manger through *God's* eyes. See into one another's hearts—looking with the heart of Christ.

How will YOU make the world a more beautiful place, by what you've seen and heard tonight? Like Juan, on the beach in Ventura, who saw simple rocks were not merely stones but a gift of art he could give to others.

When *you* leave, what story will you tell? What good news have you seen and heard that needs to be shared? Good news to ALL the people!

That Love Itself has come down at Christmas? No less than the Divine's own Holy Presence is with us in a most profound, powerful, yet simple and humble way?

“For unto YOU a child is born! Unto YOU a son is given!”
Whoever you are! *Wherever* you are on this journey. And this shall be a sign. That this good news is truly great joy for ALL the people! Amen.