

“The Wait, Wonder, Why and Work of Christmas”

B, Christmas Eve; 7:00 pm

Luke 2:1-20; December 24, 2017

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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I. WHAT BRINGS YOU HERE?

Why are you here?

Alrighty then! Now I’ve got your attention. You’re either thinking, “Uh-oh, we didn’t know this was going to be an interactive sermon tonight!”

“Will this be on the test?”

“Is this an *existential* question?”

Why am I *here*? Like, why am I on this *planet*?

What’s my purpose in living and breathing;

what am I supposed to be doing with my life?!

Ugh. That constant questioning! I don’t go to church very often, and this is a good reason why!

Or, you’re thinking, “Well Duh!!” This gal isn’t very sharp if she’s asking *that*! It’s Christmas Eve for gosh sakes! Why we’re *here* is pretty clear, don’t you think?!

How about if we rephrase the question:

“What *brings* you here?”

Hmmm.....well, that’s a *little* better, but again, isn’t it obvious? My car brought me here. My mom! My family, my spouse. I’m on the worship committee and have a job!

What brings us here might be habit. This is where we *always* go on Christmas Eve. Or, at least, *church* is where we always find ourselves on this night. Isn’t this where we’re *supposed* to be?

II. THE WAIT

We’ve been waiting. All these long weeks, since Advent began. Way back to the third of December. Wow. Doesn’t that seem like a *long* time back?!

The season of Advent is said to be a time of watching and waiting; of preparing and probing. Of embarking on a spiritual journey to find deeper meaning, right in the middle of the craziness and busyness and consumerism swimming about us—also a part of the season.

But, what *are* we waiting for during Advent?

We all might answer that differently, actually.

For some of us, it’s the waiting for loved ones—especially college kids!— to come **home**.

Or, we might eagerly wait for those grown kids, well beyond college, who are coming home to bring us grandkids’ faces to kiss. (Nieces and nephews too!)

We *long* for a sense of home and homecoming throughout the year, don’t we? “I’ll Be Home For Christmas” wasn’t just a Top Greatest Hit for the year it came out—but for years and years!

We are drawn to *stories* of homecomings that are wonderful and full of surprises. Something deep down inside us just can’t get enough of that “home for the holidays” kind of waiting.

My own parents’ story actually begins there. They knew each other in college casually. One day, as my mom was going through the cafeteria line, she overheard my dad, who worked as a food server, say he had no plans for Christmas because the train trip back home to Montana was just too much money.

My mom, knowing my Grandma was *always* one to add another plate to the table and welcome in the homeless of any kind, quickly extended an invitation to George to join their family table in Portland for the holiday.

And.....the rest is history.....and here we are today!

What *is* it we are waiting for, in this poignant season? (Hoping you're not thinking: "For this sermon to be over so we can get on with the lighting candles, singing Silent Night and home to the presents under the tree!")

We might be waiting for the To Do list to *finally* get down to a manageable 3 pages instead of 6! (almost got that accomplished this morning)

Or, we're waiting for all the preparing and shopping and wrapping and baking and making endless plans to finally be D.O.N.E. done! We're *tired* of all the hubbub and feel a little "bah humbug!"

Below the surface level, we may be waiting for this very night. But *why*? Do we know *what* we are truly waiting for when we embark on the Advent Journey?

And, if we find what we've been waiting for—the birth of a baby yet again; the breaking-in of God into our world and our lives in a new, yet very ancient way—*Emmanuel*—God With Us—then what?

Is our waiting *fulfilled*? Have we *found* what we are seeking for, these many long weeks? And so *what*? Is life any different tomorrow? Next week, next year?

III. THE WHY

We've been waiting, and now we are here—drawn in by a sense that we will find it here—in this sacred place on this holy night. Here, around a roaring fire, a-swim in beautiful poinsettias and candles, around the Table, snuggled into rows of friends and family.

Here, around a scene—A Nativity Scene that calls to us on a level we might not fully understand, to live a story once again—in word and song and primal memory.

Why does this draw us in and touch us so profoundly, year after year? We don't know if it "really happened"—this birth narrative. It's pretty far-fetched from a modern, scientific, logical perspective. But for one holy night, we somehow understand that truth and the stirring of our spirits has very little to do with the literal and the plausible. With historical fact.

We are drawn *into* the Christmas stories and they are *our* stories. We don't have to believe that everything portrayed in these core stories of our faith literally *happened* that way. What matters is the greater truth and compelling mystery behind that scene.

Why does it draw us in, on this night, in this season as no *other*? Because we are creatures of ritual. Whether we want to believe it or not! We pooh-poo things as routine or ritualistic but at the same time live out of a place of ritual, and find meaning there like no other.

If you doubt this, go to Starbucks!

James Burklo, in *Progressive Christianity*, has written a wonderful article about ritual, and urges us to reclaim this deeply embedded part of our lives and psyche as a *good* thing. And, to admit that we are creatures of ritual and that's o-kay!

He tells a story:

"Take comfort in rituals," said a sign pasted on a Starbucks coffee shop. This made sense to me as I enter in the morning for a hot chocolate. Indeed, I value the process of getting the hot chocolate *as much as* the actual substance in the cup.

Standing in line with other people who are seeking comfort is itself comforting, and it builds up the satisfaction in the awaited hot beverage. It is a ritual that starts my day with warmth and

conviviality. Rituals *abound* in our lives, and if we notice and appreciate them, we can begin to take ownership of them – and put them to work in the service of souls.

Rituals envelope our lives far more than going to Starbucks, of course! Think of weddings and memorial services; of graduations, of trekking out into the woods to fetch a Christmas tree then decorate it, or even put up lights all over the house and yard!

Burklo shines a new light on this: “There is a healing power in ritual. Too often the word “just” is associated with “a ritual,” as if these ceremonies are nothing more than rote habits, no more than going through expected motions. **But at their best, rituals are mirrors that we hold up to reflect upon life’s passages. They clarify the meanings we find in the turning points of our lives.** Births, graduations, weddings, deaths: the events themselves can be so overwhelming that we cannot see them for what they really are to us. We need to set aside ritual space in order to be able to know them much more fully.

Rituals. Gatherings. Traditions. We find meaning in such things, and that meaning is *not* dictated to us—it is up to *us* to find that meaning for ourselves. Our spiritual journey is our own—faith is our own to ponder and explore.

If you are here tonight because someone insisted you come and you don’t really want to be here—ponder that. What is *meaningful* for the person bringing you? Perhaps a childhood family tradition.

I know I wanted my son and husband here with me tonight. Why? Because when I was a child we would all dress up and go fill up a pew at Christmas Eve service TOGETHER. It’s deep in the core of my being and defines Christmas for me—go to church with your birth, chosen or church family, sing the carols, celebrate the birth with candles and communion on this holiest of nights.

If you’re not sure why you’re here tonight, or if your presence matters to anyone, rest assured that it *absolutely* does. If you’re not sure what it all *means*, rest assured that you’re not alone! I’m sure Mary felt much the same way. And Joseph. And the animals...

But perhaps the not knowing why will lead you to find a sense of wonder in it all.....to find what is meaningful for yourself.

IV. THE WONDER

We create ritual because we don’t understand everything that happens in life and perhaps we don’t need to. The soul *needs* ritual, because it needs to feel wonder.

Far from “locking things down” by making celebrations too rote and repetitive, ritual in its purest form actually *frees* us up; makes room for wonder. In creating the security of tradition and a sense of “home” and familiarity, these holy observances can take us to a deeper, broader place where the soul can dance and explore with abandon. With exceeding joy and delight!

If you wonder if you’ve lost your capacity for wonder, consider how much we want surprises at Christmastime, especially. We *love* surprises! We want to wonder!

How many of us as children couldn't *resist* the urge to sneak a look into the gifts that were stashed supposedly out of sight for us, or to try to shake and feel the already-wrapped gifts under the tree? But then, when you might have guessed it, suddenly there was a sense of letdown, because the chance for surprise was now gone and all the magic suddenly deflated?

"I wonder as I wander" isn't just a line in a song we hear at Christmas. Our souls are built to wonder. There is an unending hope that emerges at Christmas time. That taps into something deep down and primal. When we wonder, we keep that hope alive, even in the darkest times. We need a little wonder!

V. THE WORK OF CHRISTMAS

And finally, the "Work of Christmas." What is that, you ask? Aren't we finally done working? Is it the cooking, the wrapping, the dishwashing? We observe ritual and tradition to fill our tanks. SO THAT we can work and serve and do the work of Christmas.

"The Work of Christmas" (by Howard Thurman)

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

What is the work of Christmas for us on this Holy Night?

It might be as simple (and as difficult!) as "bring peace among the people." Around the table. In your own family and in your

own heart. And then, outward into the world. "We need a little Christmas" and we need a LOT of Peace on Earth!

Rev. Tracey Dawson, our friend over in Parker, says we do the work of Christmas—that finding the lost and healing the broken by "letting love win"—*even* if the broken relationships are within ourselves, or between us and God.

"This Christmas, I invite you to let love win over your life. If you are angry to the core with someone, let love win the argument. Pick up the phone, make the call, sing the first note in the overture of reconciliation. This is especially important if the one you are angry with is yourself. It's time to let it go. It's time to forgive yourself. It's time to let love win. [With yourself!]

It's especially important to let love win the argument with yourself, but it's *crucial* to let love win if the one with whom you are angry is God. God is waiting for your heart to begin singing the love song. God wants you, invites you, *nay implores you*, to let love win this one. This Christmas.

VI. WHY ARE YOU HERE?

So, why are you here? What brings you here on this night? AND, "Why are you here on this planet, right here and right now?"

Is it possible that we all come here on this "silent night, holy night" to wait, still, for the wonder to break forth? To keep that childlike wonder and hope of surprise alive? To ponder, with Mary, the why—why us? Why God has deemed *our* lowly selves to be light bearers, the love-carriers of God in the flesh?

Is it possible that we are here because of an indescribable yearning in our souls to enter-in to the story, the mystery, the wonder *as* ourselves, and to know that it didn't just happen once long ago, but that Christmas happens—again and again—and that we are *always* and forever a part of that?

As we wait through the Advent Season, celebrate the moment as Christmas rings in, and then delve-into the “work”—the work of love for ourselves, each other and creation itself—may we never cease to wonder. To ponder. To ask what brings us here and what keeps bringing us back, year after year.

Let us take it all—the wait, the wonder, the why, *and* the work of Christmas from this holy place on this silent and holy night *into* the night. Into the world that God loves so much that he came to be with us. In the flesh. In the manger. In the baby. In the love. Emmanuel.

Merry Christmas to us, one and all! Amen.

“I Am the Light of the World”

CHORUS:

I am the Light of the World

You people come and follow me.

If you follow and love, You'll learn the mystery

Of what you were meant to do and be.

1. When the song of the angels is stilled.
When the star in the sky is gone.
When the kings and the shepherds have found their way home.
The work of Christmas is begun!
2. To find the lost and lonely one,
To heal that broken soul with love,
To feed the hungry children with warmth and good food,
To feel the earth below the sky above!
4. To bring hope to every task you do,
To dance at a baby's new birth,
To make music in an old person's heart,
And sing to the colors of the earth!