

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC  
December 24, 2016

**“Silently, the Wondrous Gift is Given”**

“... (Mary) gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped  
him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger,  
because there was no room for them in the inn.”  
Luke 2:7

**PRELUDE**

We gather this evening to carol and sing,  
and to pray;  
we gather to recall the sacred story  
that has been passed from down  
through so many generations,  
the Wonder-full story of a birth  
that brings new life to a world  
bound to decay.

Not all welcome the pause  
worship affords this evening.

Some recline elsewhere,  
with eyes fixed upon screen,  
eager for the diversion  
entertaining games  
provide.

Some are “**humbug**” bound,  
resisting the fuss, wanting little more  
than to be left alone.

Remember Ebenezer Scrooge  
scolding his nephew Fred?  
“**Nephew ... keep Christmas in your own way,  
and let me keep it in mine.**”

“**Keep it!**” repeated Scrooge's nephew.  
“**But you don't keep it.**”

“**Let me leave it alone, then,**”  
said Scrooge.  
“**Much good may it do you!**”

**Much good it has ever done you!"**

Dickens' Scrooge gives voice to  
one of the great challenges posed  
by Christmas celebration - what good comes of it?  
If we see and sense some good in it,  
    how do we keep it - not as a possession -  
but how do we keep Christmas so as to honor it,  
to be a participant in all that it signifies for us,  
    and for world?

Every age is under obligation,  
not to be a Christmas observer,  
but to be a Christmas participant,  
not to keep Christmas tied to a past feeling,  
but to keep Christmas current,  
    tethered to the present,  
in a way that rightly honors the  
    Gift and Giver.

In my study I have a cartoon tacked on a cork board;  
it shows a well-decorated Christmas tree,  
beside which Jesus is holding in his hands  
    a traditional-looking church building;  
Jesus bears the look of being frustrated,  
disappointed, with what he holds.  
A voice from above is captioned:  
**"What's wrong, Jesus?  
You said you wanted  
a church for your birthday!**

**"Yeah, I did,"** Jesus says.  
**"But I'm having trouble  
getting it out of the box."**

Isn't it true - we want just enough  
Christmas to warm our hearts;  
but not so much to really change,  
    transform, the world.  
We believe - but our believing  
is boxed more often than not,  
not open to radical assertion we  
live in the wake of a Visit,  
that would break all bondage that would  
limit our peace, our hope, and joy.

We hold to a teaching in this church,  
an affirmation that asserts the responsibility  
of each generation to make  
the **“faith of the historic Church”** its own  
in **“reality of worship,  
in honesty of thought and expression,  
and in purity of heart before God.”**

Each generation is charged to keep  
Christmas, to honor Christmas  
in such a way that the Holy Child  
is born again, and again, and again in us,  
that we might be saved and spared  
the dangers and deceits that  
lurk within us.

I was reminded the other day that Christmas  
manger scenes date to the 13th century.  
St. Francis is credited with setting the stage,  
and he did so because the church was a  
box, mumbling its prayers in a language  
common people could not understand.  
So he got feeding trough, gathered in  
some animals, auditioned some townsfolk,  
sent out invitations, and told the story  
such that it could be seen and understood.

Our Puritan ancestors lived in an age when  
Christmas as a holy day had been largely  
usurped by bullies and thugs whose year-end  
irreverence made a mockery of  
nativity observance. They tried to put  
a break on the excess, indeed for a time  
they outlawed Christmas for all.

In the 19th century, Dickens saw the challenge of massive  
poverty, great gaps in wealth and health,  
surplus population, and so he told the story  
in such a way that Scrooge was transformed;  
he become **“better than his word.”** He became  
a keeper of Christmas through the whole year.

In the 20th century, challenged by racial hate and segregated social structures, bigoted minds, Martin Luther King preached a Christmas sermon, his last Christmas sermon, in which he said, in part:

**“the Christmas hope of peace and goodwill toward all (hu)man(ity) cannot longer be dismissed as a kind of pious dream of some utopia. If we don’t have good will toward all in this world, we will destroy ourselves ...”**

In this sermon, King challenged the church to **“never let up in ... determination”** to rid the nation of every vestige of its inequalities; and he did so urging that we never **“relinquish our privilege to love.”**

What an idea! We are people privileged to love - to love the world as God loves the world, daring to enter it, to suffer it, to redeem it, from its boxed incarceration.

Each generation is charged to keep Christmas.

We keep Christmas with hope.  
We keep Christmas with faith.  
We keep Christmas with courage.  
We keep Christmas when we honor and live  
in the reality of the incarnate  
love it proclaims.

We live Christmas when we are generous and  
open-handed, when we are defiant in  
our loving, kind in our deed.

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So many years ago as a seminarian, I was introduced to the work of W.H. Auden. Auden, making Christmas his own, wrote when the world was unraveling with war. He couldn’t see what good had come into the world; he couldn’t see what good was coming. Yet he wrote:

**“All I have is a voice  
To undo the folded lie,  
The romantic lie in the brain  
Of the sensual men in the street  
And the lie of Authority  
Whose buildings grope the sky ...**

And then, this hopeful affirmation:

**“Defenseless under the night  
Our world in stupor lies;  
Yet, dotted everywhere  
Ironic points of light  
Flash out wherever the Just  
Exchange their messages:  
May I, composed like them  
Of Eros and dust,  
Beleaguered by the same  
Negation and despair,  
Show an affirming flame.**

Christmas eve, 2016.

Our world in stupor lies.

Post-truth. Fact free.

A world neither fair nor balanced,

boxed as much by the church,

insecure in all that beleaguers,

consenting to adolescent, authoritarian rule.

We know not what comes as days ahead unfold.

But know this:

into such a frightened world as ours God dares draw near;

in mangers and mansions, in human hearts

yearning and hungry for peace.

God draws nears that our world in our time be

dotted with flashing points of light!

No one discerns God's coming.

There is to be seen only

the keepers of Christmas,

whose goodwill is flashing brightly,

an affirming flame, honoring the Child.

May we all be so graced.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,  
for the demands of the day are many;  
so be charitable as you read; and remember:  
the contents of this sermon have not been edited  
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*