

First Congregational UCC, Appleton, WI December 24, 9:30am

Scripture reading Luke 2:1-20 NRSV

The Birth of Jesus

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph 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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

The Shepherds and the Angels

Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

Sermon: *"Evermore and Evermore!"*

Pastor Mary Jo Laabs

Put both feet on the floor, if you can...hold your hands, palms "up" on your lap. Close your eyes if you are comfortable closing them. Take a deep breath, let it out slowly and...ask yourself: "How will I share joy today?" and as the ideas float through your mind, open your eyes open your eyes and focus on the candle of joy as we pray...

Loving God, what more can we say than, "Thanks!" for giving us these precious moments together; for the excitement of the children; for the love that surrounds us in this room; for the hope which helps us to carry one another's burdens, for each moment of joy that comes our way in the name of Jesus. Amen.

As I remember Christmasses "past," some of my most beloved memories include children's Sunday School programs. One that stands out, that took place in Schofield at Highland Methodist Church, 9 years ago. Picture this: The scripture story of the birth of Jesus was read by the older children; the younger ones, dressed in costumes, acted out the story, much like our 40'clock, "Do-It Yourself Nativity" today. Mary and Joseph came down the aisle, looking this way and that. When they arrived just below the chancel steps, Joseph knocked on the pulpit. When the innkeeper stepped out from behind it, he announced, "There is no room."

Acting as disappointed as they could, Joseph and Mary walked up the steps and took their places near an empty wooden manger. Someone forgot to bring the "baby Jesus" out from behind the Christmas tree... so,

Mary scurried back there, grabbed the Cabbage Patch Doll and plopped it in the manger. The shepherds came forward as the story unfolded. Three timid kings journeyed from the back of the aisle to the front.

All the while, the smallest child, dressed as an angel, who had been sitting with his mother in the front row, somehow, unannounced, crept up the steps, got up and stood quietly by the manger...a precious moment.

By the time the reading of the story was finished, the little angel, who now was getting a little bored with the whole arrangement, stepped away and inched his way closer to the top step. All eyes were on him now!

Just as the congregation was about to applaud, the little angel, still at the edge of the steps, looking out at all the people; and in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, he asks, “**What next?**” and took a leap off the steps.

The congregation was breathless...it was one of those God moments, *spoken by a child*... Then came the clapping! **No one will ever forget that moment.** What is next?

Well, for one thing, this is the first time in my life that I have celebrated Christmas Eve in the morning!! Praise God for this memorable tradition.

What’s next and evermore will be is the story that we have heard today ... is the scripture story that we know best...is the same story that we have been hearing, each year since we were the little ones in the Christmas plays. Just out of curiosity...have any of you ever played the part of the angels in a Christmas program? the shepherds? sheep? the wise men? Joseph? Mary? Baby Jesus?

You... have taken part in the telling of the greatest story ever told! What’s next? It’s that this story has been ours to tell whether we were in a Christmas pageant or not. We never tire of hearing it: Jesus was born. The prophets had foretold it. People like you and I waited their entire lifetimes for the day that occurred much differently than they had expected... A teenaged girl gave birth to the long-awaited Messiah. A choir of angels announced it to shepherds in a field near-by. The evening sky was bright with stars, and there, in the humblest of places, the little Lord Jesus was asleep in the hay. When we hear the story in scripture and in song, we are blessed by its retelling...and can almost feel the life pulsing through those ancient characters in the nativity scenes we have set up in the church and on the mantels.

Because of the birth of Jesus, the story has been retold in Christmases past, has been told here again today, and will be repeated in future years. The only part that is *changed* is how we each, as followers of Jesus, carry this story with us and live out the “what’s next?...” in the **evermore and evermore** of our lives.

Because he entered into human life as a newborn baby, grew up learning a carpenter’s trade; modeled radical hospitality and unswerving hope; turned the world’s attention to living in the light of his word, being a moderator of justice and peace; because Jesus died on the cross and rose triumphant from the grave, we are enabled to offer a message of salvation and a baptism of new life to those who may never have heard it, or to those who have put aside their faith since last year at this time.

Now... try this: try to forget about this heart-warming story of Mary and Joseph and the birth of Jesus. Forget past celebrations of Christmas. Forget the Christmas Eve services, the music, the flickering candles, the familiar scriptures. Try to forget the Christmas programs. Forget about the impact that Christ has had upon the world and upon our own lives...and consider this question: “What if Jesus Christ had *not been born?*” (... taken from a 1984 sermon by Rev. Dale Kuck, Merrill WI: “What if Jesus had not Been Born?”)

What if...Mary would not have broken into that song of praise? What if she would have said, “No, but, thanks anyway.”?

I can think of numerous people who have shaped human history whom we wish had *not been born*. If Hitler had not been born, millions of people would not have suffered or died, and the world would have been a far better place to live. There are countless people who have inflicted pain on innocent people. Our world would be a better place without them.

What if Bach, Beethoven and Handel... Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo had not been born? There would be a void in the world of art and music. If William Shakespeare and Christina Rossetti would not have been born, our world would indeed be poorer for not having their literary genius at our fingertips.

If inventors, scientists and researchers had not been born, our lives would certainly be different. Things would not be the same without Jonas Salk, Louis Pasteur and Thomas Edison.

What if you had not been born...or I? How would it make any difference? The lives you have touched, the people you have influenced, the good you have accomplished, may never have been attempted by anyone else. Each one of us brings unique talents to life, to our families, to our workplaces and to this family of faith that no one else can do quite as well. Our lives are a gift from God...we are all precious in God's sight.

Since I have visited some of the great Cathedrals in Europe, and I am thinking some of you have, too...St Peter's Basilica, Westminster Abby, the Cathedral of Notre Dame...none of these would have been built, had Christ not been born. There would be no Church in every corner of the earth without Christ. Many of the early colleges, universities and hospitals were initiated by the Church. I would hate to think what life would be like without **the church**.

The New Testament would not have been written...the influence of that powerful book would never have been felt. Its far-reaching influence is greater than we think: many who claim not to be church-going people *still speak* of the "Good Samaritan" or "The Golden Rule."

Our culture has inherited a philosophy of kindness, good-will and service from the influence of Jesus Christ. There is something enormously attractive about Jesus. He overcomes all barriers of race and language and culture. He is genuine and tender. Through him, we know God. In him, we experience hope and peace, joy and love...courage and salvation. Jesus is the Christ...the promised one.

Today, we give thanks and celebrate the birth of Jesus. Let's do our best to make these next *12 days of Christmas* a time of realizing the difference that Jesus Christ has made in our lives. Keep one Christmas ornament hanging up all year-round as a reminder.

In the words of Franz Rigert, WI Conference UCC Minister: *If Mary, in her consternation, could see herself as divinely blessed, surely, we can. Just as she discovered the gift of love in the incarnation of her son, so too can we magnify the love and goodness of the one we call Messiah. In a world fraught with words of hate, gestures of intolerance and cruel acts of war, may this extraordinary love be revealed in ordinary people like you and me.*

So, what is next? It's what has been and always will be: God so loved that world that God sent his only Son...Love was born at Christmas and now, it is up to us to "Let this mind...of love...be in us, as it was in Jesus Christ..." *Glory be to God in the highest, and on Earth, peace and good will to all* stating with us and for evermore and evermore! **Take a deep breath. And let it out.**

Benediction: Merry Christmas and a healthy new year...God bless us everyone, whether distant or near. A very merry Christmas and a healthy new year...may God and his son watch over all of us here.

The blessing of God: Creator, Redeemer and Comforter...is with us always. Amen.