

Let us pray: In the quiet of a special evening, O God, we gather in prayer. In the bustle of a joyful celebration, O God, we seek your blessing. In the offering of every gift, every grief, every concern and every empty space, O God, we long for your peace. Be with us, beloved God, as we embrace the path of the newborn child. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen

In my first decade of ministry, it was the first Sunday in Advent, I remember that I said the benediction at the end of the service, and then went to the door to shake hands on the way out of church. I was immediately confronted by a very angry Sunday School class – these were the older kids, a mixture between maybe 10 to fifteen year olds.

That year the United Church's Whole People of God curriculum had included a bible quiz about the Christmas story in the lesson plan, a sort of "what does the Bible really say about the birth of Jesus" quiz. It had questions like "how many magi/wise men were there?" "What town was Jesus born in?" and "What animal did Mary ride to Bethlehem?"

The answers were all mined from the scripture narrative, and I don't want to spoil the surprise for you, but the scriptural record might be a little different than what you have acted out in children's pageants or what you see depicted on Christmas cards. So the Sunday school class was in an uproar – Why did you make us act out the story that way, if it wasn't even in the Bible? Why didn't you tell us that Matthew and Luke tell very different stories? Why should we believe anything in the Bible, or anything you say church?

The next Sunday I went to Sunday school and I did my best to explain very basic biblical interpretation to them. And then we re-wrote the Christmas pageant. I wish I still had the script! But I do remember that there was a sign outside the stable with arrows pointing in two directions saying "Bethlehem" and "Nazareth".

Mary complained **a lot** about having to walk on foot all the way to the manger scene. And there were at least 5 magi that year, and they showed up really late.

The Bible is not a history book, nor is it a science book, nor is it a sales pitch. The Bible is an ancient record of a people of faith, who were trying to wrestle some kind of meaning out of the circumstances they found themselves in. They were trying to understand where God was at work in their lives and in the world. Inspired by the Spirit, diverse in its authors, rich in metaphor and mystery – the story of that first Christmas is so beautiful. We don't need an explanation of Luke's virgin birth, or whether it was Nazareth or Behtlehm. On Christmas Eve, we just want to hear the story.

Tonight, Christmas Eve, is a time for the heart, more so than any pursuit of the mind. Everything about this night invites us to **feel the feels** rather than figure out the inconsistencies. It is a time when we are invited to enter into the story and to figure out what that newborn presence of Jesus means for us today. Tonight we want to feel God's presence, and to immerse ourselves in the depths of God's mystery.

And so, we are much like Mary and Joseph in our longing for God to make sense of this new chapter, and to light the path ahead. We are much like the shepherds, who were seeking to be included in the angel's promise of peace and good will, in spite of being less than presentable and very aware of their brokenness. We are much like the magi, who were latecomers to the story, and foreign to the Hebrew culture, and all the time fleeing the cynicism of Herod's empire.

Tonight, we are waiting for the message of peace and joy to be born again in our hearts, like a family awaiting the birth of their newborn child. We are waiting for that message to inspire great things in us and others. We are waiting for a messenger to tell us that God's promise has been fulfilled, again, in this place, in this revelation of God-with-us.

And yet the celebration of Christmas **out in the community** has moved so far from the original stories of Jesus' birth, so far that sometimes it is hard to claim even a little space for the spiritual beginnings of the Christmas celebration.

What I regret most is that once all the baubles and ugly Christmas sweaters are put away, and the holiday foods are eaten up, the world also seems to pack away the message of Christmas – for at least another 10 months.

Isn't the Christmas story actually all about sharing the good news? Mary tells Joseph, the angels tell the shepherds, the shepherds go into town and tell anyone who will listen. God is with us! they proclaimed. I like to think that what they did not say in words, they proclaimed by their actions, that the good news was life-changing for each one of them.

After all, if God so loves the world, that God would come to us in such a humble, unexpected way – then God must be with us in other ways too. God must be working for our healing even now, in places we do not expect to see the holy power or presence hard at work. For surely, God in Christ Jesus does not come to us only in one place, or only in one era, or only in one religion. God comes to us, God is incarnate in the world of today and tomorrow as well.

If our hearts are warmed by the story of God coming to a teenaged girl, or an anxious carpenter, or a fearful shepherd, or a group of travellers – if our hearts are warmed by the thought that all of these had purpose and presence, then why not us as well? Haven't we too been invited into this story of God-with us?

And doesn't that make it true? True enough that we can celebrate Christmas – not just as a holiday, but as a holy day. The kind of holy day that fuels us and inspires us to live out God-with-us the rest of the year.

Sharing the good news is so much a part of the Christmas story. that we too should be participants in sharing it. As the much-loved carol says: repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

Repeating the joy of Christmas is not just about making someone happy with what they find wrapped up under the Christmas tree. JOY is much deeper and more complex than being happy.

When you are in the midst of a time of loss or sorrow or anxiety, and you find even one moment of peace or understanding or hope – that is repeating the joy.

When you are worried about the big day, the important occasion, all the little details you had planned, and you are suddenly struck by the realization that, successful or unsuccessful, you will be okay – that is repeating the joy.

When someone is telling you their deepest worries and fears, and you simply sit with them and listen to them, and don't try to fix them, but simply to share the journey with them – that too is repeating the joy.

When there is a need in the community, or in your own life, which feels too big to handle, but then you realize that others are volunteering and advocating and working hard because they too want to change the same situation – that is repeating the joy.

When we come to worship, and we feel the feels and are inspired to seek God with us here and now – that is repeating the joy.

Joy to the World, God is come. Not only come this night, but always, to be our hope and our path. Thanks be to God, for this gift of a story that can be told in so many ways, and for Christ, new life new born in us again. May we know the joy of walking in the peace of Christ, Amen.

