



Rollstone Congregational Church

United Church of Christ

199 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA

Pastor: Rev. David B. Hanks 978-821-9571

Moderator: Paul Stansel 978-337-1608

Church Organist and Musician: Gavin Klein

First Sunday after Christmas

December 27, 2020

Prelude:

Away in a Manger

Anderson

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

As we gather for worship in amazement there are many reasons we are amazed. Some of the things which amaze us are during this Christmas season;

I am amazed at:

all the presents I got!

my new iPod!

the amount of time I spent making all those cookies and they were gone so fast.

And how many cookies I ate — along with all the other delicious holiday food.

I am also amazed at the the many presents I wrapped and how quickly the packages were opened.

At how fast this vacation is going. It's almost time to go back to school.

At how many hours I spent shopping and so quickly — the holiday is over.

And I/We are amazed it has taken us so long to recall the most amazing thing of all: God came to us and love was born in a manger.

Come, let us open our hearts and celebrate the greatest gift of all, Jesus Christ our Lord. To him we lift our voices in praise.

Opening Hymn: “Angels We Have Heard on High”

Angels we have heard on high, sweetly swinging o’er the plains
And the mountains in reply, echoing their joyous strains.

[Chorus]

Gloria In Excelsis Deo

Gloria In Excelsis Deo

Shepherds why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong?
Say what may the tidings be, which inspire your heavenly song?

[Chorus]

Gloria In Excelsis Deo

Gloria In Excelsis Deo

Come to Bethlehem and see, him whose birth the angels sing;
Come, adore on bended knee, Christ the Lord, the newborn King

[Chorus]

Gloria In Excelsis Deo

Gloria In Excelsis Deo

See within in a manger laid, Jesus Lord of heav'n and earth
Mary, Joseph lend your aid, with us sing our Savior's birth.

[Chorus]

Gloria In Excelsis Deo

Gloria In Excelsis Deo

A Time of Prayer:

This wonderful day, O Lord, is our opportunity to acknowledge your loving gift to us in Christ our Savior. Therefore, we come humbly and joyfully into your presence to express our unrestrained thankfulness and our words of love for the greatest blessing we have ever received. With eternal gratitude, we pray in your Son's blessed name. Amen.

A Reading from the Scriptures:

Luke 2:22-40 (NIV)

22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

29 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;

30 for my eyes have seen your salvation,

31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles

and for glory to your people Israel.'

33 And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

36 There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left

the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Musical Interlude: O Little Town of Bethlehem Wilbur Held

The Message: “The Gaps in the Story”

“Jesus is having a moment in literary fiction.”

That’s what Paula Coccozza, a feature writer for the British newspaper *The Guardian* said a few years ago. She was commenting on the number of recent novels written about Jesus. And, don’t assume the authors are Christians. Philip Pullman, Colm Tóibín and Richard Beard are all nonbelievers. Naomi Alderman is Jewish. And J.M. Coetzee is described by some as a post-secularist, which seems to mean he’s hard to define in terms of faith.

The books by these writers come on the heels of a couple novels by Anne Rice, the author of popular vampire stories who was a late-life convert into, and then back out of, Catholicism, and one by new ager Deepak Chopra.

The word “novel” is important here, for it communicates that these books are fiction, or more precisely, historical fiction, but that means that, while the subject was a real person, the authors exercised artistic license. In fact, you can’t avoid using license if your goal is to write about any of the times in Jesus’ life that the gospels don’t cover (which are most of them).

In terms of storytelling, our Scripture reading for today, for example, is little more than a vignette from Jesus’ infancy -- an important vignette, to be sure -- but a vignette nonetheless. In the next scene, Jesus is 12, and in the one after that, he’s a grown man. The very vignette nature of today’s reading tends to make us notice how many unreported periods there are in Jesus’ history, especially when it concludes with a statement intended to move us quickly over those gaps: “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him” (v. 40).

What’s more, even the records we do have about Jesus from the gospels leave quite a few holes, as well as numerous questions, about the chronology of reported events. Beginning in the 19th century, there have been at least three scholarly “quests” for the historical Jesus -- with the most recent starting in 1992 -- but none of them brought scholars and historians to a consensus historical portrait of the man from Nazareth.

So these gaps become prime real estate or opportunities for fiction writers.

The trouble is, we may not like or agree with what the novelists envision Mary's son doing in these periods not covered by the gospels. For example, Cocozza says that in Tóibín's book, Jesus "comes across as an annoying figure with a loud voice and weird clothes who takes up too much pavement space -- a sort of first-century hipster." In Chopra's novel, Jesus spends his teenage and young adult years searching for enlightenment and discovering principles of Eastern philosophy. Some other novels about Jesus portray scenes that seem more in keeping with the gospel pictures of him, but even then, the action comes from the writer's imagination, not history.

Many preachers try their hand at gap-filling, too, especially if they've done any "first person" preaching, speaking as one of the biblical characters. In those sermons, we usually have to add some material from our imagination simply to make them long enough.

Some of us who follow Jesus would like to know more about what Jesus did during the so-called silent years of his life. That's not going to happen, but perhaps there's a message for us. Mark Twain once said, "It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me; it is the parts that I do understand". We might adapt that line of thought to say, "It ain't the missing parts of Jesus' story that bother me; it is the parts that aren't missing."

At least one Christian writer -- Wayne Jackson -- considers the gaps intentional on God's part. Jackson writes, "This silence of the New Testament records, however, represents no accidental breach in the biblical account. The gap is there by design. The New Testament narratives were purposefully constructed to present only such information regarding Jesus as was relevant to the unfolding plan of redemption. What the holy lad did in the carpenter's shop was wholly beyond the scope of divine intention."

Well, maybe. But Jackson does point us away from the gaps and toward what is reported. And in the case of the text before us, what's reported is that two pious Israelites recognize in the infant Jesus the presence of "the Lord's Messiah" (v. 26). These two, Simeon and Anna, were noteworthy for their righteousness and devotion to God. When Simeon takes Jesus into his arms, he realizes that he is literally -- literally -- holding God's salvation (v. 30). When Anna sees Jess, she knows she is looking at the "redemption of Jerusalem" (v. 38).

So the takeaway for us today is that, before spending a lot of energy on the parts of Jesus' bio that we don't have, we should read ourselves into the parts of Jesus' story that we do have.

We aren't Israelites, but like them, we need to be saved from the things that separate us from God and others. If we can't literally hold salvation in our arms, we can hold it in our hearts. If we aren't looking for the redemption of Jerusalem per se, we're looking for the redemption of the parts of our lives that

aren't working. And Jesus, the Bible tells us, is salvation and redemption for us.

But the lesson for ourselves is that the gaps in Jesus' story do leave room for our imagination to work, and the imagination can be a channel through which we interact with the living Christ. St. Ignatius Loyola, of the late medieval period, taught people to use imagination as a means to "enter into the vision of God" -- that is, to see things from God's perspective. He asked people to picture God looking down on our turbulent world and to imagine God's concern for us. Then picture God, he said, intervening by sending Jesus to us.

Another way Loyola advised using imagination is to place ourselves within a story from the gospels. The Jesuit, David L. Fleming, gives this example: "Jesus is speaking to a blind man at the side of the road. We feel the hot Mediterranean sun beating down. We smell the dust kicked up by the passersby. We feel the itchy clothing we're wearing, the sweat rolling down our brow, a rumble of hunger. We see the desperation in the blind man's face and hear the wail of hope in his words. We note the irritation of the disciples. Above all, we watch Jesus -- the way he walks, his gestures, the look in his eyes, the expression on his face. We hear him speak the words that are recorded in the gospel. We go on to imagine other words he might have spoken and other deeds he might have done."

Fleming goes on to explain that for these exercises of imagination, Loyola "chooses scenes of Jesus acting rather than Jesus teaching or telling parables. He wants us to see Jesus interacting with others, Jesus making decisions, Jesus moving about, Jesus ministering. He doesn't want us to think about Jesus. He wants us to experience him. He wants Jesus to fill our senses. He wants us to meet him."

Fleming adds that imaginative prayer "teaches us things about Jesus that we would not learn through Scripture study or theological reflection. It allows the person of Christ to penetrate into places that the intellect does not touch. It brings Jesus into our hearts. It engages our feelings."

Now all of that may sound very Roman Catholic -- although such exercises can be useful for Christians of any denomination -- but consider that we Protestants use our imaginations for spiritual purposes whenever we ask that WWJD question -- What would Jesus do? In those cases, we may be applying our imagination to Jesus for purposes of deciding a course of action rather than for experiencing him per se, but to reach a decision, we usually have to picture Jesus, not in some gospel-story setting, but in our setting, and that -- people -- is looking for Jesus in the gaps.

Likewise, whenever we say we should be more "Christ-like," or whenever we sing James Rowe's hymn "Be Like Jesus," we are, in effect, advising the use of our imagination for spiritual purposes -- to decide how Jesus would behave wearing our shoes, and then emulate that. And we can ask God to guide our imagination in that endeavor.

We stand here at the end of a year, ready to start the next calendar. What will

the year ahead be like? We can't know in advance, but we can imagine already how Jesus will be with us in our ongoing story.

Even in its gaps.

Musical Interlude:

Variations on In Dulci Jubilo

Anderson

A Time of Prayer – *let us remember all of our brothers and sisters on the prayer list, especially those who are having a difficult time during this period of social distancing. Please share your prayer concerns so that they may be added to the prayer list by emailing your concern to Pastor Dave at dbhanks92@comcast.net or by calling him direct at 978-821-9571. He is available every evening and on weekends. During this time we suggest that you create a prayer partner with whom you can pair up until we are able to worship together at the church.*

We gather in prayer ever grateful for the gift of your son, loving God. We celebrate with joy the holiday: the time of family gatherings and phone calls, of food prepared and gifts created in love. And now we want to linger at the manger. We want this feeling of joy and completion and satisfaction, and, most of all, gratitude to remain with us before the hectic pace of our lives begins again. So grant us the grace to stay by the stable a bit longer in awe and delight at all that we have received in the gift of the child. Let us breathe in the serenity of Mary and the steadfastness of Joseph. Let us become attuned to the obedience of the shepherds who heard the angel voices and journeyed to Bethlehem. Let us, like the wise men, bring gifts worthy of a king as we kneel in the radiance of love come down to give us new life through Christ our Lord, the newborn king.

These, O God, are our prayers as we pray for all who are lonely, in need, or are need of love and compassion. May these our prayers be heard as we recall those words in which Christ taught us to say when we pray “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”

Closing Hymn: “Go Tell It On the Mountain”

Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere
Go, tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born!

While shepherds kept their watching, o'er silent flocks by night
Behold throughout the heavens there shone a holy light

Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere
Go, tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born!

The shepherds feared and trembled, when lo! above the Earth
Rang out the angel chorus, that hailed our Savior's birth

Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere
Go, tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born!

Down in a lowly manger, our humble Christ was born
And God sent us salvation that blessed Christmas morn

Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere
Go, tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born!

Benediction:

Let us go into the new year confident and full of faithfulness. Let us go forth celebrating the great good news that Jesus Christ is born. Let us go forth now with the mighty blessings of the eternal God. Amen.

Postlude:

Excerpts from Noël X

Louis Claude Daquin

PRAYER LIST

Amy Belli
Carolyn Barney
Jack Brigham
Becky Colwell
Maureen Daoust
David Dufour
Diana Escarbie
Cathy Fontaine
Chuck Funk
Bob and Pat Goguen
Jerilyn Hoffman
Linda Hurd
Mary Jackson
Tom Kazanjian
Sarah Kee
Bob and Doris Lane
Diane Lane Cormier
Linda Long
Family of Carol Maki
Lorraine Michaud
Audrey Painchaud
Maria Piazza
Emma Pollice
Melanie Pouliot
Jackie Reiss
Martha Quinn
Del Sampson
Elwin Shepard
Ron Smith
Arlene Sirois
Diane Staples
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry
Donna Thorne
Daniel Tousignant
Marilyn Wales
Mary Wayman

All who are experiencing difficult times and situations

All who are lonely or depressed

All who are personally dealing with the affects of the COVID-19 Virus

All medical personnel – doctors, nurses, testing staff, first responders

Our Church and all of its members and friends

**All members of our armed forces who have committed themselves
to the protection of liberty**