

Did Christmas Come?  
Scripture: Luke 2: 22-40

Did Christmas come? How can you tell? Do you feel differently within or always feel this way after each Christmas? Sort of like what Presbyterian Ann Weems writes about on the cover of your bulletin in her poem Boxed? Be sure and read it. Has your faith deepened because of the experience of Christmas? When I was a seminary student I worshiped at the Riverside Church. I was privileged to have been there when Bill Coffin was pastor. Here's what he has to say about faith. "Faith is being grasped by the power of love. Faith is recognizing that what makes God is infinite mercy, not infinite control; not power, but love unending. Faith is recognizing that if at Christmas Jesus became like us, it was so that we might become more like him. We know what that means: watching Jesus heal the sick, empower the poor, and scorn the powerful, we see transparently the power of God at work." Coffin adds, "We know that our lives too can become channels for divine mercy to flow out to save the lost and the suffering."

Has your life been transformed over Christmas? Are you able to take another road on your journey? Can you commit to mission in Christ's Way? I think of John Wesley when he talked about his faith transformation as having a "strangely warmed heart." It changed his whole life and direction. Believe me, it will. It changed mine. I bet you have some stories to share, too.

This first Sunday after Christmas focuses on the holy family after the shepherds, angels, and heavenly hosts are gone. Luke's gospel account of the story tells of the need for Mary and Joseph as devout and pious Jews to fulfill religious obligations in Israel's tradition, to return to Nazareth and raise a son. This story is about the purification of Mary and the presentation of Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem. This is a poor family who cannot afford to offer a lamb for sacrifice, but only a couple of turtledoves, two young pigeons. It is in the temple that the holy family encounters Simeon and Anna, two elderly, pious Jews, the former a lay person, the latter a prophetess who prayed and fasted continually. Simeon recognizes the baby Jesus as the Messiah, the hope of a small remnant, the poor of Yahweh beginning to be fulfilled. The old man took the baby in his arms, and praised God saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." After the Nunc Dimittis from the Latin, Simeon blessed the holy family and said to Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed-- and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." What he said proved true. Then Anna came and praised the child and all who were looking for the redemption of Israel. Simeon, on whom the Holy Spirit rested, could now die in peace. One of my favorite theologians, Gustavo Gutierrez, a Catholic priest from Peru, says this is a sign of contradiction, the object of resistance and even rejection. For the holy family, Gutierrez adds "faith is a process which can be painful." The theme is hope and suffering brought to us so suddenly after the birth of Jesus we celebrated just three days ago on Christmas.

First Presbyterian Church in Batavia is about to celebrate its Bicentennial, 200 years of this congregations journey of faith. And so I have been reflecting on its leadership, the clergy who were called to serve as Teaching Elders in the Reformed tradition. Rev. C.C. MacLean ( who served here from 1922-1941) said, "May the greatness of (this church's) service in the past, be but the earnest of mightier achievements in the future." And then Rev. Fremont Chapman (who served here from 1960-1980) wrote in the 1976 annual report, "Quite frankly, I don't know how one measures the success or failure of a church. I believe, however, if there is a good spirit, joy, an attractiveness, a feeling of optimism, if people are present at worship, and there are smiles and good humor, if people share in leadership, if financial obligations are met

without undue begging and pleading, if the church is a congregation where members love and care about one another, and their brothers and sisters around the world, then it seems to me, that church is in some measure carrying its mission and the Father's will. I believe this is happening here at the corner of Main and Liberty." Not to forget John C. Gardner, the lay preacher, whom Rev. William Weckerlie in 1971 said he would drive a 100 miles to hear. He preached to this congregation, "Go out with love in your hearts. This is the success of the story of missions. You have before you the call -- go ye into all the world and preach and teach/ feed the hungry/ heal the sick/ clothe the poor/ (and say) Lord REMEMBER ME." And there were the fruits of faithfulness: The Children's Home; the Hungarians; the Vietnamese; the missionaries from this congregation sent to the Far East and Near East, and to the American Southwest; the Ware Class who served the poor; the Ancillary Agencies who served the diverse generations of this congregation with a special emphasis on Youth; the Women and Men of the church with all their outreach ministries; the Music ministry; and those who served their country from this congregation in this nation's wars and conflicts.

It all started in 1809 with a handful of widows, a few men and Rev. Royal Phelps near Stafford Hill. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there." And so began this congregation. Jesse Rumsey's barn served as the sanctuary for the first celebration of the first Lord's Supper. In truth, this church has had its ups and downs over the years. In its heyday, it had over three thousand members and was a major influence in this community. In the recent past, changing demographics and the resurgence of Christian fundamentalism has taken its toll on the historic mainline denominations including the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Fear and the need to believe in absolutes drives some to seek a simplistic faith of black and white, with no mysteries, and a literalist interpretation of scripture that is not unlike a philosophical proof text of absolute truth claims and absolute assurances. But Presbyterians in the Reformed tradition are of a thinking faith. We have our experiences of the God of grace alone and unconditional love. We are guided by the Holy Spirit in matters of conscience. We don't have to agree and we can still be a community of God's faithful. Christmas is only the beginning! Listen to these words from Christina Rossetti, soon to be Roula's professor at Colgate Rochester Divinity School. "Love came down at Christmas; Love all lovely, love divine; Love was born at Christmas, Stars and Angels gave the sign." How can we be fearful when we are loved unconditionally and know that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus! In this coming Bicentennial year, we celebrate the first Christian presence in this community. This year we have an opportunity for a new beginning, for renewal, for redevelopment, and a new energy and vision for the future.

Our time and place is different than any other and we have a pastor to lead us whose Christian heritage dates to the beginning of Christian faith, to Jesus and Paul the Apostle, and to the first Christians from the Holy Land, the living stones. She can help us to deepen and broaden our faith and be faithful in the ministries to which we are called. Are you up to it?

So what about Christmas? The story is told about a clergyman who called upon a member of his congregation who had been neglecting Church services, and went straight to the fireplace in the sitting room, and with the tongs removed a live coal from off the fire and placed it on the hearth, then watched it while it turned from the red glow of heat to a black mass, (something like this lump of coal). The parishioner in question carefully observed the proceedings, and then said, "You need not say a single word, I'll be there next Sunday." Did Christmas come? Are you coming back to worship the Christ child, a gift of God, who grows up in faith to teach God's Way? It's no secret that our spirituality is nurtured in the community of faith. Catholic theologian Megan McKenna asks, "How else will you have a life transforming experience from the angels, the stars, dreams, shepherds, the Magi, and Simeon and Anna, who share the good news of salvation so others can hear and respond with their lives."

I close with an alternative to one of my favorite Christmas songs, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" which makes me feel so warm and comfortable at Christmastime. But this is not it according to our scripture lesson. Listen to these words from the Sojourners Community. "Have yourself a peace and justice Christmas. Set your heart a-right. Flee the malls and focus on Christ's guiding light./ Have yourself a peace and justice Christmas. Give your time a way. Share God's love and serve the least of these today./ Hear we are as we pray for peace. We'll live simply and give more. We care for those far and near to us. Which brings cheer to us, once more./ God brings down the haughty from high places, And lifts up the low. God cares for the hungry and the humble so - forget the stress and let the peace and justice flow!" May it be so. AMEN.