

**“THE STAR STILL SHINES!” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, January 16, 2022**

Over the past couple of weeks all across America Christmas decorations have been coming down. As you can see from our chancel, our church is no exception. Our splendid Christmas array is almost all gone—except for a grouping of poinsettias adorning our altar and its vicinity and a lighted star on high.

Amid this massive take-down, what a big potential let-down! Indeed, for some the end of the Christmas season and a return to more mundane everyday life without all the colors and lights that brightened our December can be nothing short of depressing.

Compounded by our COVID pandemic and the mutual distancing it’s brought on, we can end up beset with post-Christmas “blues” that make everything ahead look rather dismal and dreary to us.

When I get down, as I sometimes do, I try to keep in mind that no matter how dim and distressing the New Year’s immediate prospects seem, any post-Christmas “blues” is usually just a passing phase which a steadfast faith on our part will help dispel. Moreover, others in times past have faced far rougher and tougher post-Christmas let-downs and adjustments than anything I might confront.

Consider, for example, the plight of the Holy Family after that first Christmas at Bethlehem. On the night of Jesus’ birth, angels are flying all over the place. Shepherds are streaming in from the countryside to get a look at the baby in the manger. A dozen days or more later three Wise Men or kings arrive, lending their pomp and circumstance to the stable scene and bringing precious gifts. It’s all pretty exciting. Yet then it’s all over. Everyone goes home, leaving Mary and Joseph to pay the stable bill and to pick up the threads of their own lives as a newly enlarged family.

I think we all know that having a baby isn’t easy under any circumstances. The aftermath can be particularly trying. Mothers, who undergo so much in giving birth, often experience some amount of post-partum depression. The relationship between a wife and husband is also altered by a new child’s presence. For Mary and Joseph, it’s even more complicated. Jesus’ birth happens relatively far from home. Ninety miles of rugged walking terrain separate Bethlehem from Nazareth, where Mary and Joseph had long been living. Another thirty-three walking miles lie between Bethlehem and Jerusalem where Joseph, forty days later, takes Mary to undergo ritual post-partum purification and to present Jesus for consecration by Temple priests as religious law found in Old Testament Books of Exodus and Leviticus requires. (*Luke 2:22-23; Exodus 13:2-12; Leviticus 12:1-4, 15:19*) While such distances seem like nothing today, they were more formidable in ancient times when roads and transportation were cruder.

On top of all this, Joseph begins having nightmares about the diabolical intentions of the locally reigning king and dictator, Herod the Great, who was not-so-Great. Herod had already raised the suspicions the three Wise Men whom he had been both detained and entertained while they were still enroute to Bethlehem. (*Matthew 2:1-13*) According to the Gospel of Matthew, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a nighttime dream, warning him to flee with Mary and Jesus to distant Egypt in order to escape a murderous dragnet intended by Herod to eliminate any future rivals to his royal throne. (*Matthew 2:16-18*) Consequently, reversing the ancient exodus of their Hebrew ancestors, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus have to travel in haste another five hundred miles to secure a safe haven for themselves on the far side of the Reed Sea in the land of the Nile River. In all likelihood, this family of three are political and religious refugees in Egypt for at least a year, where they don't even speak the language. It's that long or more before the venomous King Herod dies and an angel of the Lord provides an "all-clear," assuring Joseph and Mary that it really is safe to return with the baby Jesus to the land of Israel. (*Matthew 2:19-21*)

Jesus' family does find its way back to Nazareth which has the advantage of being a relatively obscure, out-of-the-way town. In its streets, three days away from Jerusalem, they are less likely to be noticed by any henchmen of Herod's son and successor, King Archelaus. Yet safe as they now are, Joseph and Mary have the challenge that we all face to one degree or another at a time like this— namely, keeping alive in heart, year-to-year, all the original hope and joy that attended Jesus' Bethlehem birth.

Fortunately, even if the end of a Christmas season is an emotional let-down, God does not abandon us any more than he abandoned Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. In the absence of any special trappings or wrappings, God continues to let us know of his loving presence, reassuring us that there is continued cause for joy. The Holy Family discovers this in the years after that first Christmas.

Oh, to be sure their life back in Nazareth had its share of persistent hardship. Scripture tells us that Joseph is engaged in the carpenter's trade which was honorable but not always lucrative. (*Matthew 13:55*) Nazareth was not exactly a bustling town either. The town and surrounding region were laid low by the scarcity of good land and high taxes which partly went to Rome to support its military occupation. Poverty was rife. In addition, within a few years after Jesus' own birth Mary and Joseph soon had many more mouths to feed in a growing family. Indeed, the gospels report that Jesus had four younger brothers—James, Joseph, Simon, and Jude. (*Mark 3:31-35, 6:3; Matthew 13:55*) The family also included at least two sisters. (*Matthew 13:56*) The upbringing of this family also took place at a time when there were limited educational opportunities across Galilee in small towns like Nazareth. Indeed, Nazareth had a reputation, whether fully deserved or not, for being culturally backward and a place of questionable morals and

piety. This is what prompted Jews from other places to later skeptically, if not contemptuously, ask as one of Jesus' own future apostles did: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (*John 1:46*)

Nevertheless, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are blessed with moments of grace along the way that make every hardship after that first Christmas meaningful and sustainable, reminding them that all the hope, joy and excitement that they had known in Bethlehem was not an illusion. We see a couple of these happy moments of grace illustrated in our morning scripture passages from the Gospel of Luke. For instance, when Mary and Joseph visit the Great Temple of Jerusalem for the sake of Mary's post-delivery purification, as well as to present the circumcised baby Jesus for priestly consecration, they are unexpectedly greeted by a man named Simeon. Some believe Simeon to be the son of the famous Rabbi Hillel and the father of another eminent rabbi, Gamaliel, who later counted the future Apostle Paul among his students. (*Acts 22:3*) Led by the Holy Spirit, Simeon is prompted to affirm what both angels and a star announced at the first Christmas. Namely, Jesus is to be Israel's messiah and the source of light and hope for the rest of humankind. Indeed, the wizened Simeon declares to all that he can now go to his maker in peace having seen with his own eyes the one who is to be "a light for the revelation to the Gentiles" and a "glory to the people Israel." (*Luke 2:29-32*)

Likewise, during that very same Temple visit, Mary and Joseph have the pleasure of further testimony about the destiny of their son. An eighty-four-year-old prophetess named Anna, whose advanced age, along with all of her fasting and constant prayer, suggests her exemplary sanctity, comes right up to Jesus' family. Thanking God for the child, she declares to all who have ears to hear that he is the hope for the "redemption of Jerusalem" and, presumably, the entire Israelite nation. (*Luke 2:36-38*) How could Mary and Joseph not be encouraged to hear Jesus praised in this way? The very memory of it must have made their family struggles in Nazareth feel worthwhile.

Of course, the best and most gratifying moment of grace for the Holy Family comes later when Jesus is twelve years old. However poor or of limited means they are, Mary and Joseph apparently make it a habit to celebrate the Jewish Passover every year in Jerusalem amid the company of relatives, perhaps with children of their own in tow. Passover was a wonderful time to be in Jerusalem. Commemorating the Exodus of the Jewish people from the enslavement of Pharaoh's Egypt, it was the occasion of joyous festival.

This time, however, a mishap occurs that only later looks fortuitous. Somehow as Passover finishes, Mary and Joseph depart from Jerusalem without counting their kids, leaving Jesus behind. They mistakenly presume that Jesus is in the care and supervision of other extended family members who, evidently visiting Jerusalem along with them, are

now returning to Nazareth at the same time. They are almost halfway home when Mary and Joseph realize that Jesus is missing. It is another two days before they, frantically retracing their tracks, make it back to Jerusalem to locate him. Where is Jesus to be found? In the precincts of the Great Temple, discoursing with leading Jewish teachers and scholars. The moment is captured by the late nineteenth-century artist Hans Hofman. His painting illustrates this morning's order of service this morning and decorates the foot of our altar in gilded frame.

Israel's teachers and scholars are astonished that the young Jesus knows so well and can interpret it so authoritatively. In turn, Jesus' humble parents are surprised to encounter their son in such august and distinguished company.

In their own modesty, were Mary and Joseph afraid that Jesus was making a nuisance of himself? Did they fret that others might regard them as neglectful parents? It's all possible. Yet however bewildering it must have been for them to discover their precious child in this most holy of places, it must have been more amazing still to hear Jesus' piquant greeting to them as parents. "Why were you looking for me?" Jesus precociously asks them. "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (*Luke 2:49*) Basically, Jesus is saying to Mary and Joseph: *You should know by now that I have a very special relationship with God and that his house is my truest home.*

Although the Apostle Luke does not note Joseph's reaction, he does record Mary's internal response. She absorbs *everything* she sees and hears. Just like on that first Christmas when angels, shepherds, and Wise Men shared all that they had seen and heard about her baby, Mary keeps "all of these things in her heart." (*Luke 2:19, 51*) How profoundly wise and important to do so. Every memory preserved is a life buoy in the face of whatever comes ahead. One of the great things about Christmas and other exalted moments in our lives is that are often a source of good memories that can console and uplift us when we later confront sadness and tragedy and come to feel like we're walking in the shadows of life.

I suspect that memories of that first Christmas and those wonderful episodes with her son in the Great Jerusalem Temple sustain Mary when she later has to say good-bye to Jesus twice over. First, when he leaves Nazareth for his proverbial forty days and nights in the wilderness, followed by a ministry that takes him all over Galilee and Judea. Mary's second goodbye comes when her son is on the cross at Calvary and he ultimately relinquishes his mortal body to ascend in resurrection to the right hand of God our Father. As Mary could probably attest to us, whenever we are able to remember good times, we are more inclined to believe and trust that in God's grace good things can happen again. This lends itself to greater hope and patience on our part as we await redemption and resurrection from our own present woes.

Obviously, we are not Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. Yet the loving and provident care that God extends to them individually and together after that first Christmas is a love and care that we can also count on as we move beyond our own season of Christmas, picking up the tasks and responsibilities of full year ahead—no matter how daunting they may at first seem. As the Apostle Paul affirms: “...in everything God works for the good of those who love him.” (*Romans 8:28*) Good things always await us who keep faith with God.

Yes, today, the Christmas decorations are mostly down and gone. Another Christmas season is done. It can be a little tough to let go. Nevertheless, a goodbye to Christmas this time around doesn't mean saying goodbye to the good news that every Christmas always announces. In the first coming of Christ which we celebrate with every Christmas, God revealed a love for humankind and a commitment to our redemption and salvation unbounded by any season. And offering testimony to that simple and beautiful fact, high in our sanctuary a star, reminding us of the one the Wise Men followed, still shines.

**Amen.**