

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Luke 1:5-80

Rev. Tyler Amundson

December 3, 2017

Unwrapping Christmas – Unpacking Christmas

Opening:

Welcome to worship and the beginning of our new advent series entitled “Unpacking Christmas”. We’re peeling back the paper to look at some of the things that we sometimes miss in all the hustle and bustle of the holiday season.

For those of you who are new to advent... well, advent is a season of anticipation. A season of awaiting the arrival of the Christ child into the world.

Can we be honest though? As nice as that sounds, the reality is, for many of us this can be a season of high stress. A season where we do too much, spend too much, eat too much, and where we miss the true reason of the season.

On this first week, we find ourselves gathering boxes and unpacking Christmas. How many of you have put up your decorations already? [give them a moment to interact] That’s most of you - very good.

Decorating for Christmas is one of those things that many of us thoroughly enjoy. One of the most fun aspects of the season is pulling out boxes filled with old ornaments, tchotchkes, and other meaningful decorations.

It’s a time of reconnecting with things you may have forgotten; like favorite keepsake ornaments, or those end-of-season items you purchased for a great deal when Christmas was over last year. Those unexpected surprises can be so much fun can’t they?

Our scripture this morning is filled with surprise and unexpected wonder. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth find the ultimate surprise packed away when the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that Elizabeth is pregnant with child.

Zechariah was not sure he could believe the season was coming and was silenced until it arrived, as a way of inviting him to reflect on where God’s Spirit might be moving.

Elizabeth on the other hand simply prepared step by step for this amazing gift. When her cousin Mary, who was also with child arrives, she and Elizabeth, celebrate these incredible surprises together.

This morning, we’d invite you to discover what surprises God may have packed away for you.

Let us worship together as we Unpack Christmas

Sermon:

This past week I was unpacking the decorations for our house and I found that feeling of sentimentality as I unpacked the Christmas village, the angel for our tree, and placed the wreath on our front door. Then I realized I was out of time and left a box of decorations in our living room and it stayed there all week long, and I kept tripping over it. I found myself annoyed by the very notion of how we keep so many boxes around just with things we need to decorate each year. If you think about all we do to unpack for this season each year it does sound rather absurd. Cutting down trees and bringing them inside our homes, climbing ladders in what is traditionally a cold and icy time of year to hang lights that we only leave up for a month around our homes, and hanging stockings over an open fire...always a good idea.

Welcome to December, in the past week I think I have had at least 5 different people comment that either November flew by or that December was going to fly by. This time of year, is filled with all sorts of traditions, activities, opportunities to connect with people, and times we are called to gather with family and friends. For many of us the Christmas season means we will hear songs too many times on the radios at the mall, we will go home singing *White Christmas* and have no idea where we heard it that day, and we will never have a down minute until the season is over.

For others this season is challenging, for many this season is a reminder of lost loved ones, and the times spent away from people they want to be near this season. For others, it can be a reminder of how little they have, and that the weather and darkness can close in so quickly. For those struggling with world events or just the pace of everyday life this season can seem (high and low.) This season can be rough on many in our community who cannot seem to find the glimmer of hope and peace amidst the chaos.

I want to invite us to watch this clip from National Lampoons Christmas Vacation, pay attention to how hard Clark is trying to make the season work and what simple things actually make things happen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ar-ub0rc>

Bishop Karen, our bishop posted this story yesterday online -

One day, I cut too many corners trying to pack everything in I needed to get done. I flew out the door to do an early bit of grocery shopping before heading to church. When I returned, I opened the garage door and thought I smelled smoke. I immediately thought of my 92 year old neighbor whose house was connected to mine, and worried that she had left something burning on her stove. As I went up the steps, I saw smoke—her place must be on fire! I grabbed a phone and dialed 911. I was put on hold (!) and as I waited I heard crackling. I turned into my dining room and saw that the table was in flames. The fire was in MY house! And there, at the very center of the table, was the culprit: my Advent wreath, now with all the candles melted down into the table...

Moses encountered a burning bush. I had a burning dining room table. All my planning, rushing, DOING, came to a screeching halt that Advent. As the house was slowly put back together, I relearned how to be in the moment, to wait expectantly, to realize that the gift of God's grace comes whether or not we are ready for it, and God will use just about anything—even a burning dining room table—to get our attention.¹

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/YACUMC/posts/1530130470402379>

Nothing like a burning Advent wreath to remind you to slow down your season, and remind you this is the Advent season in our practice as Christian people, not quite Christmas yet.

Advent season is about preparing for Jesus to arrive, about making the way for God to enter the world. Our secular world has taken Christmas for a ride to the fast-forward past the unpacking and developing of Christmas and they want to get us to Christmas day. The feeling of something arriving we did not expect is what the advertisers and our world push us toward, and yet the very practice of Advent is about find a way to prepare our hearts for the arrival, prayerful anticipation not rushed expectation is the reason for the season.

Jim Harnish is a United Methodist Pastor who authored the study, *When God Comes Down*, he shares this story:

“Star-watching began as a hobby for Robert Owen Evans. He grew up in a Methodist family in Sydney, Australia. In 1967, he was an ordained minister in the New South Wales Conference where he served as a pastor and studied the history of evangelical movements in the Pacific Islands, Papua New Guinea, and Australia and New York. He retired in 1998 and might have drifted into pastoral obscurity except for his talent is spotting supernovae.

A supernova occurs when a giant star at an incomprehensible distance from Earth explodes in a spectacular burst of light estimated to be equal in energy to 100 billion suns.

...

Pastor Evans began supernova hunting in the 1950s, but didn't make his first official discovery until 1981. It takes a lot of patience to see something most people don't see. By the end of 2005, he had made forty discoveries. In *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, Bill Bryson records the star-watching pastor saying, “There's something satisfying, I

think, about the idea of light traveling for millions of years through space and just at the right moment it reaches Earth someone looks at the right bit of sky and sees it. It just seems right that an event of that magnitude should be witnessed.”²

Unpacking the stories surrounding Jesus' birth we come across the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Elizabeth is described in the gospels as Mary's cousin, and Elizabeth is married to Zechariah. Zechariah is a priest and while performing his priestly duties he is approached by an angel of the Lord. The angel informs Zechariah that he and his wife will bear a son, John (aka John the Baptist). John will begin to help people find God again, and prepare the way for one greater than him. Zechariah doubts this to be true because he and Elizabeth are older, and due to his doubts Zechariah is unable to speak until the events he has learned about come to pass.

This scripture story today comes from Luke, chapter 1 and is a long story that is important to understand Jesus' origins. Zechariah and Elizabeth both have been practicing and regulars in worship. They are like countless people I have met in churches in my work, constantly present each Sunday and seeking to live God's way the best they can. In fact, when Zechariah encounters the angel that silences him, he is engaging in the regular practice of worship. Worship for Elizabeth and Zechariah is like it is for us, is a time to seek God's presence around us. Regular worship is about preparing yourself for when you encounter God.

Yet even despite this preparation Zechariah in particular is caught off guard. For he does not believe he or Elizabeth will ever have children. This theme of never having children is one that reveals the hard truth I have seen on parents' faces who lose small children, or are struggling to

² Harnish, J. A. (2012). *When God comes down: an advent study for adults*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

conceive a child. It is a feeling as if God has abandoned us, or has let us down. In the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament this theme is often shared when people begin to doubt whether God will keep the Covenant to sustain and grow the people of God.

In the time of Jesus' coming birth there was a strong sense that God had abandoned the people to death and violence at the hand of tyrannical powers beyond their control. There were many who hoped the Messiah would come and conquer through power and might.

The arrival of news for Elizabeth and Zechariah is the foretaste of what God might do. It is a reminder that if we work to prepare for God's arrival, if we know what to look for, we will see the small signs that God is still active in our world.

Like Zechariah, it might help if we were struck with silence in a noisy season to give us time to breath and know we are preparing for peace to course through the world. That same peace you see when walking under a moonlit sky in the middle of winter, the silence that reminds you God can still calm the chaos and bring a solid place for us to stand.

Like the star-gazing pastor might we be in wonder of something we prepare over our lives, that we might we grow in satisfaction of the idea of seeing the moments when God's peace enters the world, knowing how long and far that peace sometimes has traveled.

At the moment Zechariah's mouth is cleared, and he can speak again he speaks a beautiful message about the joy in his heart, for his son and what God is doing.

He says:

⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,

⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,

⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

This song is an unexpected song to the people of Jesus’ time, because again the message is that even John the Baptist will bring peace. For ruled by ancient Rome the only peace they know is the peace that is brought through war and violence. Yet, each of the messages from God about Jesus indicate that this peace will be something great and yet none of these messages indicate it will be done through great force.

As we unpack this Christmas may we know that like Zechariah and Elizabeth we are called to practice in worship opening our eyes to where God might be appearing for us. Like Zechariah may we be struck with silence this season, so we might find a glimmer of the coming peace that is trying to break into this world. Like the star-gazing pastor may we be ready to see the multitude of minute lights breaking forth across the cosmos representing the magnitude of God and God’s love. May we seek the coming of the Christ child as a calling to God’s love.

No matter where you are coming from this Advent, whether it is hard to move ahead or you can’t seem to slow down. I invite you this week to unpack Christmas by taking time to note a moment of light, where something good is done in our community, and then say the following prayer, “Thank you God for showing up today!”

Amen