

“The Comfort of the Unexpected”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “THE COMFORTS OF CHRISTMAS”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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Luke 2:1-20 [NRSV]

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

There are lots of things you can expect at Christmas. Long lines at check out counters. Too many parties to go to. Sore throat and runny nose as soon as you put up the tree. Aunt Susie embarrassing you when she gets a little too much of her eggnog on. Overspending that Visa card – AGAIN! There are a lot of things you can expect. You can make your own list.

There are a lot of things that can happen unexpectedly at Christmas, too. Someone becomes ill or a relative shows up that you hadn't planned on. Something breaks down and has to be repaired so you have a \$500 bill you hadn't budgeted for. Someone gives you a gift that you hadn't planned on sending one to and now you have to run out and get something else. The power goes off during the cooking of Christmas dinner.

These are things you can't expect. Sometimes I wonder which things make you more uncomfortable: the things you expect or the unexpected things.

But we all long for Christmas to be comfortable, traditional, predictable, and comforting don't we? Gosh if there is anything we would put at the top of our wish list for Christmas it would be peace on earth, a little quiet around the house, and a nice warm fire to sit beside and rest. Shouldn't Christmas be comfortable and comforting instead of all this madness of busy, busy, busy?

This Christmas doesn't shape up as one of the more comfortable ones. The economy is still bad for too many folks. There are still too many men and women headed for Afghanistan and Iraq and other places where it is dangerous. Anxieties and fears are running rampant about health care reform. You may have health issues of your own. You may have economic issues of your own. You may have relatives or friends who are one of those persons in the armed forces in dangerous places. What happened to peace on earth, goodwill to all? Where is the comfort?

I don't know if this falls under the category of "misery loves company" but let me point out the situation at the first Christmas. The armed forces and government appointees of the lone superpower of the day, Rome, occupied Israel. The dictator of Rome had ordered a census so that he could raise taxes. The census meant tens of thousands would be dislocated because it required every one go to their hometown. You think I-95 is bad at the holidays, try taking your

donkey down the highway from Bethlehem to Jerusalem.

On top of that this story of two common, peasant-class Jews named Mary and Joseph is complicated by the fact that Mary was pregnant and near term. Did I mention that it was a child conceived out of wedlock? There used to be a stigma about that that would be very uncomfortable. There was a name that used to be used for such children in the day when I was growing up, but that uncomfortable label seems to have pretty much fallen away in this day and time. Child-birth at its best was a risky proposition in that day and time. There were no birthing centers, no hospital Emergency Rooms or any other options other than a home and a midwife that would have made the situation more comfortable. Add to that roadside bandits were common, there were no Holiday Inns to stop at, no rest stops or 7-11s to get a Big Gulp. Once they arrived they would normally stay with family, but the Bible reports they found no room anywhere. This is more unexpected than we might realize. Hospitality – caring for the traveler, the stranger especially, let alone a relative, was a very high value of the time. Unexpectedly they have to stay in the stable. It certainly couldn't have been a terribly comfortable or comforting situation. The reality is the first Christmas wasn't very comfortable or comforting. Mary and Joseph faced many things that would be unexpected and uncomfortable about that situation.

Yet I want to suggest to you that the message – the true hope and joy of

Christmas, if you will – is in what could be called unexpected about Christmas. If hope and joy are sources of comfort, then truly the greatest reasons for us to find comfort are these unexpected truths of Christmas. We have lost some of the surprise of these because we have heard and read the story for so many years that it may not seem surprising. But if you think about them anew, I think you will agree that they are both extraordinarily surprising and comforting. I share them with you in hopes that we can all find comfort in the unexpected even today.

First and foremost the message of Christmas is that God says, “I will be with you.” What other God says such a thing? Most of history is marked by faith in gods that are destructive and dangerous and fearful. They required sacrifices to appease them or they meted out punishment far beyond the measure of the sin committed. The Christmas story is at its heart the message that the real God, the one God, actually loves his creation and his creatures enough to be with us in our own state, as a human, as a creature. That is perhaps the most unexpected claim any theologian could make about any God, yet we take it for granted, or we even deny it by our lack of faith in it.

In fact, when we know and trust that God is “with” us, we can find a source of joy that can be great comfort in uncomfortable times. Ron Buford, the creator of the UCC’s “still-speaking” program, comments on this in a recent devotional. He quotes a verse which says, “with joy, draw water from the wells of salvation.” He adds, “Life is

sometimes difficult.... when we lose someone we love or struggle financially, when our health fails, when people disappoint us or we disappoint others and ourselves, or when we must abandon a life-long dream.” Ron adds, “Joy is not inappropriate or senseless happiness, frivolity or complacency in tough times. It is hopeful remembrance of God’s Presence and Power on our behalf.” How? By remembering times we have survived by God’s grace in the past. “Does this mean that things will always turn out the way we’d like? No. It does mean we choose to change dance partners -- from fear and negativity to dancing with the God of hope and perspective on all life’s circumstances, with the One who gently whispers in our ear, guiding as we learn the steps, just in time.” Ron says, “So, get your bucket honey, draw up living water and then dance, dance, dance with God today.”

The second way Christmas helps us find comfort in the unexpected is that God says to us our life has purpose and meaning, no matter how insignificant we might think we are. Mary and Joseph by all accounts were the most insignificant persons ever designated for fame. They were as common as dirt. Yet God had a purpose for their lives that would give their lives great meaning. They were willing to do what God needed them to do to fulfill that purpose, no matter what. We may not have received angelic visions or visitations announcing our purpose but, if we are willing, God can show us the way our lives can have great purpose and meaning, no matter what circumstances may arise in our lives.

Anthony B. Robinson, a UCC pastor and writer says, “I know a young woman who was determined to go and work among the poor in the most violent city in the world, Johannesburg. I read of a man who insisted on seeking survivors in the wreckage of New York’s Twin Towers, though one would collapse upon him. I know quite a number of people who keep on going places that aren’t easy to go to, and are even in some ways dangerous for them. Why go? Because they have been called. Called to serve. Called to give. Called to go.

He adds, “In the end, God does not care most of all about our safety or about our comfort. God cares that we live lives that matter, that we live our lives for Christ’s sake.” He reminds us that Jesus once said, “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mark 8: 35). This Christmas I invite you to take time to reflect on how God does not call us to be comfortable but to live lives of purpose and meaning. Maybe now when things are uncomfortable it is a good time to consider our purpose and how we find meaning in life.

The third way I think the Christmas story helps us find comfort in the most unexpected ways is by showing us that God is revealed in both the most common and most extraordinary moments in life. Childbirth is a perfect example of that. It is at once the most common and yet most extraordinary moments of life. How appropriate that God would come to us in such a way, and yet how extraordinary! Most of us

could imagine God coming in a far more dramatic and miraculous way, yet God comes to us the same way we all come into the world. And at the same time it is the most extraordinary of events. God comes to us in both the most extraordinary and most common moments of life.

Bruce Epperly comments on this in his blog saying, “That grand old word, “providence” does not mean that God determines everything, or chooses everything in our lives—from car accidents and illness to success and good health—but that in all things, God is working for good, providing resources and possibilities, and the energy to achieve them, wherever we are. That’s a vision that can change your life—the vision of God as an intimate companion, loving you completely, inspiring you always, giving you enough direction and inspiration to use your freedom and creativity for a greater good, and enough vision to see hopeful possibilities in otherwise hopeless situations. Even in the darkest time, God’s light shines—giving us a way when there is no way.”¹

Many people today are looking at their lives and see no way at all. But God keeps promising his presence in the most unexpected ways. God keeps making a way when there seems to be no way. God keeps calling us to a larger purpose and meaning. In these ways we can take comfort that the God of the unexpected is also the God of Christmas, who come to us in Jesus Christ. AMEN.

¹ Bruce Epperly, “Joy in All Things,” processandfaith.org, Dec 17, 2006.