

# Christmas Eve 2017

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**Third Presbyterian Church**

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**Merry Christmas.**

We enter a story tonight that began long before us and that will continue, by the grace and providence of God, long after us. In fact, the holy event we remember this night itself entered an already-begun story of creation and redemption.

The theologians talk about “chronos” time and “kairos” time – the event of Jesus’ birth and ministry and death and resurrection and ascension – “kairos” – the right moment, the critical moment – entering, breaking through, breaking into, “chronos” time, the orderly, sometimes disorderly, procession of days and years and centuries and lifetimes and generations. Tonight is when “Kairos” time beraks into “chronos” time.

And you, whether here for the first time, or annually, or regularly, bring your own stories – your time – to connect with this story. In fact, we welcome you all, but in particular those who may be visitors or guests or seekers, and as you are discerning the path of your own life story, we invite you to join yours with ours – visit us again and get connected with us in some way.

This congregation adopts an annual theme – we find ourselves this year in a Year of Stewardship – the nurturing and cultivation and sharing of the many gifts God gives us. Tonight is stewardship on steroids, the stewardship *piece de resistance*, as we receive the most extraordinary gift, God incarnate. Our response first is to worship this holy gift. Then the response. How we will be stewards of this gift? “What can I give him,” is not a rhetorical question. What can I give him? But also “how” can I give him, and “why,” and “where.”

As we engage in our Year of Stewardship, this congregation also celebrates its 190<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This is not about nostalgia. Marcus Garvey said that “A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree

without roots.” As we look forward in faith, with hope, we are called to be stewards of our roots, our future transformed by tradition.

In the Third Church archives I discovered Christmas bulletins from generations past.

- 1917 – a century ago. The bulletin has announcements about buying Liberty Bonds and a Red Cross auxiliary meeting weekly at the church. The pastor of this congregation then, Paul Moore Strayer, was as close to a pacifist as one could be. Still, on Christmas a century ago he was in Spartanburg, South Carolina, serving as a volunteer chaplain at the Army training base at Camp Wadsworth. He wrote this message back to the congregation here in Rochester: “Though vast armies face one another with all manner of implements that kill and destroy, the Messiah is born; though our own boys are training for war, the Prince of Peace is here...” Imagine seeking to embody the Christmas story in the midst of that horrific war. They sang “O Little Town of Bethlehem” and “Joy to the World” that night.
- In 1944, Christmas Eve, like this year, fell on a Sunday. The church’s motto was “to build a church big enough for God.” I admire the ambition and shake my head a little bit at the presumption (though I’ve served on committees that have made worse decisions). I searched for World War II references in the bulletin and found a brief, understated notice of a memorial service, to be held in early January, for Private David B. Russell, a child of this church, killed in action in France, at the age of 21. His parents, probably about my age, encouraged the whole congregation to be present. We sang on that Christmas Eve “O Come, All Ye Faithful” and “Silent Night.”
- 50 years ago, 1967, we sang “O Come, All Ye Faithful” and “Joy to the World.” I am not sure how much joy there actually was, with the Vietnam War at its zenith and the Civil Rights movement having taken firm root, nationally and locally, causing tension even within this congregation.

- In 1976, our bicentennial year as a nation and the 150<sup>th</sup> year of Third Church, we sang “O Come, All Ye Faithful” again.”

In fact, that may be the point, not nostalgia and never history for its own sake, but the bigger story – “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” inextricably linked, intertwined in the real lives, the stories, of people like you and me, the faithful, coming to Bethlehem to adore him, for 2000 years, for 190 years, for 25 or 55 or 95 years, in peacetime and wartime, in times of global and national calm and in times of global and national chaos and crisis, feast and famine, joy and sorrow, sickness and health.

And what of that story. We know it so well, almost too well. It claims us again tonight. Love come down. Grace and truth. A tiny baby, a set of all-too-human parents, the cast of supporting characters.

Our real vocation is to be stewards of the story, stewards of its vision of love and peace and justice in the face of war, in the face of racism and sexism and poverty, or our own suffering and sadness, a stewardship that reminds us every day and in every generation why this story is so badly needed, how it is such good news.

So, what do we do?

We rehearse the story – its contours and cadences. That’s what we do tonight, but not only tonight. We rehearse the story. To know it, and know it by heart, to know it so well that it’s in our muscle memory, ready always to be accessed.

We are stewards of it – caretakers, holding it loosely in order to give it away. We pay attention to the moment and the setting, war, national crisis, local challenge, personal struggle, cancer, dementia, depression. And in the moment, we *give* the story away. Our stewardship allows us to live with a Christmas generosity and a Christmas hope, even when, especially when, hope seems to be a rare and elusive commodity.

We remember that we are not just observers, but we are characters in the story. We have a role – like Mary, Joseph, the kings and angels and shepherds. Our role matters, our embodiment of the story matters, for it to continue, as we enact the

story in our everyday lives, our words and actions, joined with so many other fellow travelers.

May we remember with hope. May we rehearse with joy. May we share with love. May we, each of us and all of us, find our role with all the faithful in God's great story of justice and grace, God's love incarnate breaking into the world. Amen.