

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: December 24, 2016
Sermon Title: What IF . . . the Whole Christmas Story Is Real?
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Christmas Eve Litany

'What IF?'- A Christmas Eve Litany

David: What if it all happened?

**People: What if God came down
in a little baby
in a tiny village
in a humble stable
in a poor family
long, long ago
far, far away?**

David: What if
shepherds really were watching their flocks by night
and angels really did sing
of good news
of great joy
for all people
loud and clear?

**People: What if
a star did wander the skies
and caught the wise men's eyes
who followed the star
and found the baby
and gave their gifts?**

David: What if it all happened
really, really happened
and we believed
really, really believed
the prophecy,

the miracle,
the purpose,
the person?

**Together: What if
we spent a full year
— all of 2017 —
living each moment
as if
we believed tonight?**

What IF? The Christmas story really hangs on two verses. After the angels tell the shepherds about the birth of Jesus, "The shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about.'" (Luke 2:15)
In other words, what if this thing is true? We'd better check it out!

Meanwhile, the Wise Men arrived in Israel, intrigued by a star that seemed to be wandering across the heavens. When they got to Jerusalem, they inquired, "Where is the baby who has been born King of the Jews? We have seen his star in the East and we've come to worship him." (Matthew 2:2)
In other words, what if this star is a big deal? We'd better check it out.

Right from the beginning the shepherds and the Wise Men were confronted by this "What if?" question. What if it's true? Could it be so? Does that really mean anything? Is it pointing to something special? Were those really angels . . . talking to us . . . singing . . . pointing us toward town . . . "to see this thing that happened?" "Is this a dream? A mirage? A little mass hysteria? A silly superstition gone out of control?"

Who knows what doubts may have surfaced until that moment when each group, the shepherds and the Wise Men, had to consider the following:

What IF . . . this is all true? I'm not sure the world of 2,000 years ago was all that different from today, a host of distractions, large and small, drowning out the angels, dimming the star, putting the original Christmas on the margins, creating doubt.

There was terrorism, oppression, poverty, international intrigue, personal harassment, the loss of rights; everyone struggled to get by, while the powers that be played off one another to everyone's detriment.

Nobody knew the “reason for the season,” nobody was saying “Merry Christmas.” Christmas was no holiday. What’s different nowadays is that Christmas *is* lovely as a holiday, as a season. Even when it’s crazy, it’s still lovely.

Christmas trees are fun. Christmas cookies are the best. Christmas lights. Even Christmas shopping, looking for the right gift, thinking about it, getting it, wrapping it; or being on the receiving end and unwrapping it, to great surprise. The downtown looks festive, houses sparkle, happy songs are played everywhere; even snowflakes take on an extra glow.

We were in Brooklyn the other day. A Salvation Army brass band was playing on the street corner. Last Christmas Day we went into New York City and were thrilled by the department store light shows and window displays. Tinsel and Santa and “Elf on the Shelf”; old movies, “Miracle on 34th St.,” “It’s a Wonderful Life,” the original “Christmas Carol.” All good stuff. Even the bad Christmas movies and bad Christmas music and bad Christmas fruitcake can’t make Christmas unlovely.

But everything I just said, every single item and tradition and activity, every part of the holiday season has nothing to do with real Christmas. I’m not complaining. I’m not whining. I love the Christmas holidays. What’s missing is the Christmas Holy Day, *Holy Day*.

This sermon isn’t about whether you prefer Christmas butter cookies to snicker doodles or Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas” to Elvis’s “Blue Christmas.” This is about finding a way to sneak the *real* Christmas back into the *holiday* Christmas.

So tonight we are asking you this one simple question: What IF this whole Christmas story is true? What IF God really did have a plan to save us from our worst deeds and worst sorrows? What IF all it required was a trusted husband and a very special, patient wife; it took a wandering star and angel choirs; it counted on believing shepherds and truly Wise Men. What IF all that happened, it all came together: miracle and wonder, incarnation, Good News, and Holy Family? What IF it’s all true?

There’s a house in Fairfield on Roseville Terrace. It’s been getting a lot of publicity this year: 350,000 lights, 200 figures, the whole Christmas panorama: Santa, reindeer, North Pole, lights, candy canes, wreaths, train set, glitz, music, 100 percent over the top. And guess what! There are angels, a Nativity scene, the Star of Bethlehem, God’s message of “Peace on Earth.” And spelled out in bright blue lights, “Jesus is the Reason for the Season.”

They figured out how to have holiday Christmas, a cultural Christmas, even a Santa Christmas, and still have a *Christmas* Christmas. As if what's true is as important as what's fun.

So . . . What IF? What IF Christmas is Santa and tinsel and Rudolph and candy canes *and* a Messiah and angels, miracles and wonders, peace and salvation? What IF?

WHAT IF? Let us pray:

Lord God of this Christmas Eve, we want to believe "Silent night, Holy night, all is calm, all is bright" somewhere, sometimes. In here, we dare to hear angel voices and holy promises of "Peace on Earth" and "good will toward *all*." In here, we are able to imagine miracle birth and stars that choose to bring Good News of Great Joy. In here, there is always room at the Inn; there are always Wise Men and Women, seeking. *In here*. In here, we still bring gifts, precious gifts, gold-like, frankincense-and-myrrh-like, that bless us all, near and far, that touch and heal and inspire, near and far

Out there, noise confronts the silence. Herods threaten our innocence. Fear blots out the star. Faith is mocked, miracles debunked, Christmas lost. The worst do their best. Lord, have mercy.

From here, Holy God, we go out there. And it doesn't look good. Help us to look harder, closer. We see chaos. You see creation. We see darkness. You see stars. We see Herod. You see Wise Men. We see desperation. You see opportunity. We see anger. You see love. We see Earth. You see Heaven. We see a baby. You see a miracle. We see a Silent Night. You see a Holy Night.

Loving God, our Christmas prayer is that in 2017 when we are out there, help us to see what you see.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil;
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and glory forever.

Amen