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Date: December 24, 2017
Sermon Title: Simply Christmas
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Luke 2:1-12

Luke 2:1-12

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph 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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And 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.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'

On Wednesday, Alida and I hosted a lunch at the parsonage for our college students home for Christmas; it was a great time. At the end, an earnest young man asked how many Church services we'd be having from Christmas Eve morning through Christmas Eve and then Christmas Day. And more importantly, how many services are people *obligated* to attend? I said "All of them," but Alida told him I was kidding, we don't have "Holy Days of Obligation." People come to Church when they want to. Then she added, "Everyone comes to Christmas Eve. There'll probably be nobody at the 10:30 service on Sunday!" Well, here we are: the few, the strong, the brave. It may be Christmas Eve on the calendar, but it's still also Sunday morning, and by

golly, we are here for our regular Sunday morning Church service! And with five more services today and another one tomorrow, we are keeping it simple: hence my title, "Simply Christmas."

You know the story: Angels tell Mary and Joseph they are going to have a baby by extraordinary means. O.K., they say, each in their own way. Wise Men, far away, see something unusual up in the heavens, figure out it's an omen, a sign, and decide to follow this moving star. Time passes. Mary and Joseph are forced to go to Bethlehem. Jesus is born in humble surroundings—in a stable, in a manger, animals all around. Angels tell shepherds what's going on, what it's all about, the shepherds rush to see for themselves; they believed it hook, line, and sinker, start telling the whole town.

Meanwhile, the Wise Men follow the star all the way to Bethlehem, present their gifts, and sneak away . . . because an evil king wants to eliminate Jesus. So the Holy Family escapes to Egypt. That's "Simply Christmas." Basic facts. A few miracles. Bits of wonder.

Whenever Alida and I have a particularly inspiring cultural event, we argue over who gets to use it as a story in a sermon. It might be a movie or a play, a concert or a book. Well, we went to a terrific musical Tuesday night on Broadway, and I'm preaching first, so I get to use it.

It's a sweet musical, and I hope using the word "sweet" isn't damning it by faint praise. I mean it as high praise. It really was sweet. It's called "The Band's Visit." It was a mildly successful foreign film 10 years ago, and someone had the idea to make it into a musical. Wonderfully acted; lovely, haunting Middle Eastern music; and a sweet story, a Christmas story, really (although I'm the only one saying that).

There are no Christians in the musical, to speak of, no mention of Christ or Christmas or Church. But I saw it as a Christmas story. "The Band's Visit" is about an Egyptian ceremonial police band from Alexandria, Egypt, that performs at formal occasions all over Egypt. On this occasion, the bus ticket agent sends them by mistake into a village of the same name in Israel, and they end up stuck overnight in a little out-of-the-way desert town in Israel. Nine Egyptian, Arab, Muslim musicians in a small village of Israeli Jewish townsfolk, each wary and suspicious of the other, none of them happy to share time or space together until the next bus comes the next day. But hour by hour, something happens in that little town: love happens. Love gets recovered, discovered, remembered, found.

The Egyptians are stuck in this desert town overnight with no hotel. So, begrudgingly, some Israelis take in an Egyptian or two for the night. And the

resulting human interaction triggers other human interactions. People start talking, connecting, listening, all over town. Friendships are restored. And I'm not just talking about some Egyptian Muslim man making googly eyes at some Israeli Jewish woman. I'm talking about Israeli townsfolk connecting with Israeli townsfolk and Egyptian musicians connecting with Egyptian musicians. Just people. Just humans. Learning to love again, trying love out, being loving. It just sort of dawns on everybody that the Beatles were right:

*Love is all you need.
Love is all you need.
All you need is love, love
Love is all you need.*

In this musical, one lonely soul sings this:

*Here I am
Here I am
And the light is dying*

*Where are you?
Where are you?
Will you answer me?*

*All alone
In the quiet
And my ears are thirsty*

*For your voice
For your voice
Can you answer me?*

*Very soon
Very soon
That's the sound of longing*

*Are you there?
Are you there?
Will you answer me?*

Is that a universal song, or what?

*Here I am
Where are you
Are you there*

*Will you answer me
Very soon
Very soon
That is the sound of longing.*

Christmas is the answer to that longing, historically, Biblically, theologically. The Israelites, the Jewish people, had been longing for 600 years. Theirs is a tortured history. Generations of wandering in the wilderness, 400 years of slavery in Egypt, 40 years to get to the Promised Land. After a couple of centuries of independence, stability, success, then six straight centuries of defeat, exile, vassals under Babylon, Persia, Assyria, Greece. By the time of Jesus, it was the heel of the Roman boot on their throats, crushing their hopes.

All that time they waited on God, longing, waiting, exactly like the sad boy sings:

*Here I am!
Where are you?
Are you there?
Will you answer me?
"Very soon," he kept hearing,
"Very soon," he kept hoping,
That is the sound of longing.*

At our Christmas Eve services tonight, the whole theme is about "Wonder." Christmas is full of wonder, the obvious wonders: the Virgin Birth, the Star of Bethlehem, the angels singing, that sort of wonder. That's not only "wonderful," I actually believe all that wonder—but that's not the reason for Christmas.

Jesus didn't come to test your faith, to see if you'd believe in the Virgin Birth, the Wandering Star, and singing angels. Jesus came to test your love . . . to see if you'd believe in love enough to make it your top priority; to live it, count on it, do it; to give it and receive it. *THAT* is "Simply Christmas."

The rest is nice, fun. Christmas Carols are fun. Presents are fun. The miracles of Christmas are inspiring. But the heart of Christmas is love. The heart of Christmas is *not* the stuff that's hard to believe. The heart of Christmas is the stuff that's hard to live.

We ended our 2017 Church Bible Study with the toughest verses in the whole Bible, from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. You know the verses, many by heart.

"Love your enemies.
Do good to those who hate you.

Bless those who curse you.
Pray for those who hurt you.
Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

I don't know if those verses are more daunting or infuriating; whether I can't do them or won't do them; but they are at the heart of Christmas. We don't worship the Virgin Birth. We don't worship the singing angels or the Star of Bethlehem. We worship the grown-up Jesus who pushes love to the absolute limit.

That's our "Merry Christmas." That's "Simply Christmas."

Please join me in turning in our Hymnbooks to our final hymn this morning, No. 159, "There's a Song in the Air."

*There's a song in the air!
a star in the sky!
There's a mother's deep prayer
and a baby's low cry!
And the star rains its fire while the angel choirs sing,
for the manger of Bethlehem cradles a king!*

*There's a tumult of joy
o'er the wonderful birth,
for the virgin's sweet boy
is the Lord of the earth.
See, the star rains its fire while the angel choirs sing,
for the manger of Bethlehem cradles a king!*

*We rejoice in the light,
and we echo the song
that comes down through the night
from the heavenly throng,
and we welcome the glorious gospel they bring,
and we greet in the cradle our savior and king.*