

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road
Fairfield, Connecticut 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



Date: December 18, 2022
Scripture: Matthew 1:23
Sermon: "The Essence of Christmas"
Pastor: David Johnson Rowe

Scripture: **Matthew 1:23**

*"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him 'Emmanuel,'
which means, 'God is with us.'"*

Sermon: "The Essence of Christmas" **David Johnson Rowe**

A prominent Christian magazine noted in this month's issue that more nonbelievers, non-churchgoers, non-Christians get into Christmas than get into Easter. Which sort of makes sense. There's enough great Christmas music to last us a month. The collateral addition of Santa and reindeer; the aesthetics of Christmas trees, wreaths, and candy; even the foods of Christmas, from baking to bought, are all very special, indeed.

Even the theology of Christmas is engaging: a miracle birth, a wandering star, and the whole idea of Incarnation, God becoming one of us. Even if nonbelievers don't believe it, those beliefs are still sort of fun, at least whimsical.

Easter is another matter. There are only enough Easter hymns for one church service. The cultural addition is the Easter Bunny, and that's about it. The aesthetics of Easter are confined to lilies and the occasional tulip. The foods of Easter, well, O.K., lots of chocolate; bunnies, crosses, and eggs made of chocolate. Forgive me, but even after all these years of being numbed by secular culture, I still can't bite into a chocolate cross.

Which leads us to the other thing about Easter. You have to have Good Friday, first. There's no resurrection of Jesus without the death of Jesus, and his death on the Cross was gruesome in every way. So the world at large doesn't jump into Easter.

We don't have *The Grinch Who Stole Easter*, or *Bad, Bad Bunny*, part II. But with Christmas, everyone wants a piece of it. It may be sitting on Santa's lap or eating a candy cane or making a gingerbread house. It may be exchanging gifts, singing Christmas carols around the fireplace, or coming to Christmas Eve services. Something about Christmas grabs everybody.

"Oh Little Town of Bethlehem" draws us in. "Silent Night" really does feel like a "Holy Night." And when we sang a few weeks ago. "Mary had a baby, oh Lord. Mary had a baby, oh Lord," well, yes she did, however it happened, we have no problem with that. If we'd been there, we'd be backslapping Joseph and high-fiving Mary and giving out "It's a boy!" cigars to the neighbors.

Christmas is attractive in the best sense of the word. It is fun. It's the only religious holiday where we would actually welcome a snowstorm. A few weeks ago, I even gave a rather full-throated endorsement of the "Virgin Birth," and nobody walked out. The world loves Christmas. Which got me thinking about the essentials of Christmas.

Alida and I learned something about "essentials" on Thanksgiving. We had one son sick up in Boston, so Alida went up there to look after him, which means she and I spent Thanksgiving apart, without turkey. That taught us there are two essentials of Thanksgiving: being together and turkey.

So what's essential to Christmas? I'm going to start with joy. It's not for nothing that we end our Christmas Eve nighttime services with "Joy to the world, the Lord is come!" If Advent is about waiting for what's coming, Christmas is about the arrival of what's coming—no more waiting.

Think back to your childhood and your children's childhood from about ages, say, 3 to 12, or so. We all knew Christmas was coming at those ages. We all saw Mom and Dad trying to secretly carry packages into the house. We all realized we never saw those packages get unpacked; they just disappeared. We all knew they were somewhere in the house: attic, basement, parents' bedroom.

We all wanted to search . . . but didn't dare to search . . . we all knew to wait . . . and the waiting was killing us. And when you were a certain age, or your kids were a certain age—about 5, 7, 9—who doesn't just about explode that first moment you walk down the stairs, you look at the tree surrounded by presents! Pure joy! The actual, literal arrival of what you had been waiting for.

That's the basic theology of Christmas, isn't it? God had promised a Messiah for 700 years. That's a lot of waiting, a lot of expectation, a lot of Advent. And when Jesus arrives as the Messiah, that's cause for joy—and we see that in the shepherds' delight, in the angels' singing, in the lovely welcome given to Jesus in the Temple by two old people. Why? Because they had been waiting so long.

The last two weeks in our Church have been amazing and quite instructive. Two weeks ago, I wasn't preaching, so I walked into Church just before we started. Something was up. One, the place was packed with people. Two, the noise level was high, in a good way; everybody was chatting, upbeat. Heck, joyful!

Then Michael played his Prelude that was exuberant. And the rest of the Church service just took off . . . from the children's choir, new members, the sermon, "good vibes" all around.

This wasn't something planned or orchestrated. It just was: joyful. And it carried on to the Silver Tea.

When you hear "Silver Tea" for the women of the Church (well, the women plus Brian and me, but we don't count), so you hear "Silver Tea," you think: dignified, classy, proper. The ladies of Greenfield Hill elegantly gathering for a lovely social. Well, not quite—there was something in the air this year. It was loud. Exuberant. The joy could not be contained. And then, our Christmas tree lighting

outside the sanctuary at night. Two hundred people, lots of kids, our Children's Choir leading the singing, a brass band on carols, hot chocolate, smiles . . . and a whole lot of joy. Joy *IS* essential to Christmas. The Christmas message is called "The Good News." Good news, by its nature is joyful.

With our grandson living with us these last two years, we had the pleasure of reliving life with a teenager, with all of its slips and turns and drama, and most especially, the dreaded college application process: SATs, campus visits, applications and essays, interviews. And the waiting. Pressure. Stress.

This past Thursday was D-Day. He heard from this college and that college, with this scholarship offer or something better. With each acceptance, his smile got a little broader, his bursting into the room to tell us got louder, and his joy got bigger. The waiting was over—and worth it. Like the joy of Christmas morning. Like the joy of "Good News." Like the joy of angels and shepherds that first Christmas.

Another essential is the baby. The world of religion is populated with gods of every size, shape, and type. They are invariably strong, majestic, scary, powerful, intimidating, forceful, demanding.

We get a baby.

When I was picking the Scripture for this sermon, trying to get at the essentials of Christmas, I picked the verse where Mary is told her baby will be known as "Emmanuel," which means "God with us."

There are lots of moving parts to the Christmas story, and I'm sure we all have favorites. Mine are the shepherds, those hard-working, open-minded, humble, blue-collar workers who chose to believe the unbelievable and rushed about to tell everybody. Their unbridled joy is fun to imagine.

And I love that "Star of Bethlehem," wandering across the heavens, leading the mysterious Wise Men carrying their precious gifts to worship . . . well, someone. I even love the harried Innkeeper, with

no room in the Inn for the Holy Family, but with a kindly gesture offers the simplest shelter of a stable.

Last week Alida and I made our annual Christmas pilgrimage to the Knights of Columbus Museum in New Haven. Every Christmas they have a special exhibit of Christmas crèches from around the world.

They can be tiny, the whole Nativity scene set inside a single walnut shell. Or gigantic, a Neapolitan village scene, hundreds of characters, lots of animals, all of daily life going on, while up in the crevice of a hillside the Holy Family nestled.

One crèche made entirely out of cornstalks and corn silk, another out of aluminum foil. Most carved out of wood or stone; one fully life-sized. And always, always, always centered on the baby.

The one that really caught our eyes, especially after the presentation of my new short story about Joseph, in which Joseph tells about being mostly sidelined, but in this one crèche, Mary had handed the Baby Jesus over to Joseph. Joseph is holding the baby. The centrality of Jesus as a baby is vital to the angelic promise that Jesus would be "God with us."

Last week, I mentioned a Christian marketing company that features just three words: "He Gets Us." Jesus gets us. He understands, empathizes, knows us inside and out. For that to be true, he can't be beyond us, out of touch.

My baseball hero is Ted Williams, the legendary Red Sox Hall of Famer, fighter pilot in World War II and Korea, often called "the greatest hitter who ever lived." When he retired, he became the worst baseball manager because he could not relate to the everyday, average, all-too-human player. He was beyond them. He could not "get" them. He didn't understand their lack of skill, lack of discipline, lack of focus, lack, period.

The divine decision for God to be "with us," to become fully human, requires that Jesus begin at the beginning: Birth. Baby.

All year long we can grapple with the divine nature of Christ, we can wrestle with resurrection, we can marvel at miracle, we can wonder at walking on water, we can believe, not believe.

But this week we don't have to grapple or wrestle, we have a baby. We have this new life, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

It's a beautiful, wonderful, universal, very, very, very human experience.

Alida and I have been there so many times. A baby is born to a church family. We go to the hospital. We've been in birthing rooms and waiting rooms and NICUs. We've been there when the newborn is brought to the mother. We've held the babies in our arms an hour after their birth. That birth, that baby, that new life is the perfect expression of Divinity and humanity, of God and us, of God *with* us. It is the most human of miracles . . . and the most miraculous of humanity.

We've had a Baptism this morning, haven't we? A Baptism on the Sunday before Christmas, how perfect! And what did we say? We said in our prayer, "Lord, we know you have given Briggs certain gifts and abilities and interests. And we know that you have a plan for Briggs's life, and indeed, that our world is a better place because Briggs is born. So use Briggs mightily."

That's our prayer at around 11 a.m. in a little Church on top of Greenfield Hill, December 18, 2022. It is exactly the same prayer we would have said 2,000 years ago in a stable in Bethlehem, if Mary and Joseph called us and said, "We just had a baby."

At that moment, now and then, here and there, everything is possible. That's the joy . . . of a baby. Two essentials of Christmas.

Our final hymn this morning is "Go Tell it on the Mountain," No. 167 in your Hymnal.

*Go tell it on the mountain,
over the hills and everywhere.*

*Go tell it on the mountain
that Jesus Christ is born.*

*1 While shepherds kept their watching
o'er silent flocks by night,
behold throughout the heavens,
there shone a holy light. [Refrain]*

*2 The shepherds feared and trembled
when, lo! above the earth,
rang out the angel chorus
that hailed the Savior's birth: [Refrain]*

*3 Down in a lonely manger
the humble Christ was born,
and God sent us salvation
that blessed Christmas morn. [Refrain]*