



**Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church**  
*Connecting faith with everyday life*

December 31, 2017 – “Living Out the Christmas Story”

Part 1

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Rev. Andy Acton

*Merry Christmas!!!! Born to us is a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord!  
 The light of God has come into the world! Let's rejoice and celebrate! ...*

Wait a minute. That doesn't sound or feel right, does it?

After all, we've been celebrating Christmas since the day after Thanksgiving. And Christmas Day was nearly a week ago. We've opened every present and eaten more than our fill. We've removed the tree and put all the ornaments and knick-knacks away. We're even going to stay around after worship this morning and help un-hang the greens that were set up at the beginning of Advent.

Sure, there's still the ringing in of the New Year with the ball drop and parties. But many of us, if we don't fall asleep on the couch by 9 pm, simply toast a glass in our pajamas and head to bed at 12:01 am on January 1. The celebrating and festivities are mostly done. It's almost 2018; time to get back into the daily grind of work and school, and the hustle and bustle of life.

Except, there's one tiny problem... *it's still Christmas!!!!*

In the life of the Church Universal, Christmas is not just one day but a season of 12 days. And we're more than midway through with today being the seventh day of Christmas. Nearly two weeks of Christmas—that's something to rejoice! Like the first stanza in the hymn *Joy To the World*, which we sang earlier in the service:

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come!  
 Let earth receive her King!  
 Let every heart prepare Him room,  
 And heaven and nature sing,  
 And heaven and nature sing  
 And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://hymnary.org/text/joy\\_to\\_the\\_world\\_the\\_lord\\_is\\_come](https://hymnary.org/text/joy_to_the_world_the_lord_is_come)

Did you catch the phrase, “*Let every heart prepare Him room*”? The minister and hymn writer, Isaac Watts, has tapped into the true meaning of the Christmas season. While the decorations are wonderful expressions of our joy, Christmas doesn’t hinge on them. Whether we put them up or take them down is not what’s vital. What’s important is that we prepare our hearts, not our physical space, for the Christ-child who has arrived among us.

The Whos in Who-ville remind the Grinch that lesson in Dr. Seuss’ classic tale, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, which many have heard numerous times over the years. After the stealing all of the presents, ribbons, wrappings, tags, tinsel, trimmings and trappings in the town of Who-ville, as the story goes, the Grinch discovers that his dastardly efforts didn’t prevent Christmas from arriving:

*Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small, was singing! Without any presents at all! He HADN’T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME! Somehow or other, it came just the same!*

*And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling and puzzling: “How could it be so? It came without ribbons! It came without tags! It came without packages, boxes or bags!”*

*And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn’t before! “Maybe Christmas,” he thought. “doesn’t come from a store. Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!”<sup>2</sup>*

Christmas is so much more than the trimmings and trappings. Christmas is about the amazing work and wonders of God who, throughout all of time, is always doing something new in a broken and fearful world.

The prophetic words of Isaiah in this morning’s Old Testament reading offers praise and affirmation to the God who brings forth transformation, who “will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations” like a well-tended garden.

In a commentary on the text, Old Testament scholar Patricia Tull explains:

*Throughout the passage, "righteousness" ... is an expression of overflowing goodness, originating from God, transforming the world, visible to all, a new order entirely, ushered in along with justice, praise for God, and divine glory.*

*In fact, what shimmers throughout these five verses is the unavoidable visibility, the unquenchable luminosity, of God's deeds and their results. They are as festive as celebrative clothing, designed to be admired by all. They are no longer seeds covered by earth, but have sprouted in God's garden for all nations to see. They*

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<sup>2</sup> *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* by Dr. Seuss, 1957. Random House Publishing. New York.

*shine like the dawn and blaze like a torch in a darkened room, visible across the world. This is no secret, but a redemption that will not be overlooked.*<sup>3</sup>

God is doing amazing deeds in our lives. We've all been witnesses this past year to the radiant light of God that shines through the darkness, dispelling fear and mending brokenness. From powerful, sacred moments during worship in the sanctuary to fun-filled, spirited gatherings in Fellowship Hall and classrooms to poignant visits with the sick and dying in hospitals and home hospice to compassionate acts of service at places like Kim's Laundromat in Duluth, the Clifton Men's Shelter in Atlanta, non-profit agencies in Raleigh, NC, and a village in Honduras.

We will continue to be witnesses in this coming new year to more of God's light. And the light will give nourishment to the seeds of compassion that we plant and empower them to sprout and grow beyond our expectations and imaginations.

God is in the business of transforming and redeeming, of removing the debris from the garden that gets in the way of growth—the annoying pebbles of self-doubt and loathing, and the strangling weeds of bitterness and judgment. We are called to be a part of God's transformative and redemptive work that allows others and ourselves to flourish. Preparing our hearts to make room for God means we have to toss out the things that clog that vital organ and our very beings—fear, hate, envy, stubbornness, selfishness, greed, prejudice.

For God has moved into our lives with a desire to decorate our hearts and clothe us in the glories of God's righteousness--fashioning each us as precious jewels for whom the Lord will forever use to help illuminate the world with love:

*He rules the world with truth and grace,  
And makes the nations prove  
The glories of His righteousness  
And wonders of His love,  
And wonders of His love,  
And wonders, wonders, of His love*

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1155](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1155)

Part 2  
 Luke 2:22-40  
 Rev. Jennie Sankey

The people in this story are going about their days, doing what is expected and normal. Mary and Joseph are taking their son to the temple for the regular rituals faithful parents do when a baby is born. For us, this might be baptism. For them, circumcision and purification.

Simeon and Anna are going about their normal routines as well, Simeon going about his daily business and Anna keeping up her usual pattern of fasting and prayer in the temple. Nothing out of the ordinary.

But as we know, nothing is normal about this child. Simeon and Anna remind us that in Christ there is no normal—once we see Jesus, our lives are changed because we carry God’s message of salvation. And no matter who we are, we can share it.

The first people to get word of the amazing gift of Christmas was a motley crew. We’ve got Zechariah, a priest, and Elizabeth, an old woman. Mary, a poor unmarried teenager, and Joseph, a carpenter raising a baby that isn’t his, and now Simeon, a devout man, and Anna, an elderly widow. There are no limits on who gets to share this message, as we’ll continue to see in the stories of scripture, when greedy people, desert people, demon possessed people, wealthy people, men and women, youth and elder, all proclaim the good news: God is here to save us.

Now I know we get a little edgy about the word “salvation,” sometimes. The Christmas story is easy to tell, because to most people it isn’t new, and it has a nice ending. But the birth story isn’t the ending. The rest of the message is what’s hard to talk about sometimes. But what is the birth story without Easter? Without Jesus’ time spent with the outcasts of society? Without the disciples making mistakes? Without grace and forgiveness? Presbyterians sometimes get a bad reputation for being “the frozen chosen,” but I don’t think it’s because we don’t know Jesus’ love and light in our lives, and I don’t think it’s because we can’t get out of our pews to tell other people about it. It’s just that it’s a BIG message, one that has life and death, difficult stories that we would rather not talk about and parables that often don’t make sense. It really is just easier to pack all that away in storage with the Christmas decorations and live life outside of these walls like everything is normal. Today we are “unhanging” the greens, resuming church life as normal. Andy is right, it doesn’t matter if we take down or put up Christmas decorations, it’s about how we prepare our hearts for Christ. But what if we didn’t completely pack Christmas away? Maybe that would help us start to tell the story of salvation, the story of how God came to be with us.

During Christmas, we fill our homes with decorations to celebrate the season. Keep something out in your house this year that reminds you of Christmas. It doesn’t have to be big. I just moved, but once I find my Christmas things again, I’m getting out my nesting doll nativity set and putting it on my kitchen windowsill. The Acton family keeps their favorite nativity set displayed atop a bookshelf all year long. (Partially, because it’s easier to not pack it up but mostly because it looks cool)

During Christmas we sing songs about Jesus in and outside of church. Keep singing. It doesn’t have to be away in the manger. At the end of the service, we’ll sing “Go Tell It On the Mountain.” Let it be stuck in your head when you leave. During Christmas it seems natural to think about giving to those in need. Keep giving. People are hungry and cold and tired all year long. Bring in a care meal to put in our freezer for folks in need this winter. During Christmas, it’s easier to invite friends and family to church, because it’s a normal place to be on Christmas

Eve. Keep inviting them. Make it the normal place to be every Sunday. During Christmas, we love reading the Bible. It has animals, angels, babies, a little danger, and a happy ending-Keep reading, it gets even more interesting. Pay attention for some special small group Bible study opportunities starting in February.

I'm not saying you have to keep your Christmas tree up all year, but we can keep Jesus unpacked and in our lives every day. Unlike Simeon and Anna, we don't have to wait out whole lives to see God's salvation. Christ has come, Christ died for us, rose for us and lives with us. Young and old, rich and poor, carpenter and tax collector, men and women, insiders and outsiders disappointed and unsuspecting, we can practice Christmas all year long living the example that Anna gave us, praising God and speaking about the child who was born, and the gracious God who remains with us. Amen.