

Rev. Dr. Gary Shahinian
Sermon
December 24, 2013
Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Christmas Eve Sermon: 2013”

Dear people of God, it’s a very special night, isn’t it? We have all gathered here tonight as the clock nears midnight in this place to testify that this night is very special to us. What’s so special about Christmas? What sets this evening apart from every other day on the church calendar? Perhaps you will be entertaining relatives tonight or tomorrow. Maybe some of them have traveled great distances to be at your home. What prompts them to crisscross the continent to be with you tomorrow? Why is it that they will spend hundreds of dollars, perhaps even over a thousand dollars, to be with their family at this time of year? What exactly is it that we are celebrating?

The obvious answer, of course, is the birth of Jesus Christ. But how is that played out in our lives, really? What does his birth really signify? On no other day of the year do we experience such deep yearning to be with family, to be at peace, to feel loved and to give love in return. At no other time of year do we really feel connected to loved ones and friends.

The words of the angels to the shepherds truly resonate with us, for each of us craves that peace and goodwill which they proclaim.

At Christmas, our memories race back to our childhood. Even if we're not fully grown up, we still feel nostalgic about Christmasses past. My childhood Christmas experiences were probably similar to many of yours. When I was 4 or 5, my sister would wake me up on Christmas morning about 5:00am and we would rush to the living room to find all sorts of presents under the tree, presents that were not there the night before and we knew that Santa had visited us. The excitement and noise of opening our gifts would wake up our parents and they would join us in celebrating the joy of opening presents. When I was 13 and my sister no longer was living with us, I still woke up early on Christmas morning. I rushed to the tree and, sure enough, Santa was still faithful in delivering presents. But it didn't seem right for me to open gifts alone. Something was missing. There wasn't the same excitement. And so I waited until my parents and grandparents woke up and joined me. Sometimes that wouldn't be until 8:00am. But I didn't mind, because I wanted to be with them so that we could all open our presents together. But I remember even at the age of 13 that I was already feeling nostalgic about earlier

Christmasses.

As the years went by, I wasn't always with my family for Christmas. Separated by distance, separated by death, separated by occupation--yes, Christmas is a vocational vulnerability for clergy as we rarely have the opportunity to be with relatives on Christmas Day--nevertheless the longing for togetherness with family has remained strong, as I am sure it remains strong for all of you on Christmas.

That's why at Christmas we make every effort to contact our loved ones who are not with us and to wish them a Merry Christmas and tell them that we love them. No matter where we are in life, those deepest yearnings for family and friends with whom we have shared past Christmasses cannot ever go away. If we don't see or even speak to them during the year, we at least try to communicate our good wishes to them at Christmas, if only in a Christmas card.

Each of us has this intimate need for community and to be loved and accepted. This need awakens us at Christmas more than at any other time of year. We make a great effort in turn to show our love for others at Christmas by means of spending lots of money on gifts and much of our time hosting and entertaining.

I find a paradox in this hectic pace in which we immerse ourselves every December. We busy ourselves with purchasing gifts and throwing and attending Christmas parties in order to receive and show love, but it seems that many of us still miss out on the essence of what Christmas is all about. Of course it's about the birth of Christ. But what does that mean? Why is Christ's birth so important that much of the world goes into high gear for, not just one month anymore, but two months now, of hustle and bustle all leading to one grand celebration on December 25?

It's really all about being accepted as we are, unconditionally and cheerfully, by those who matter the most to us. What each one of us really ultimately craves is someone, somewhere, somehow, who can touch our inner soul. We find such people among our relatives and friends. But we also find it in the tiny baby born in the manger. *What* has attracted Jesus Christ to so many throughout the last 2000 years, so that today approximately 2,200,000,000 persons claim to be his followers? I think deep down, we all know the answer. It's because more than any other person, Jesus Christ represents love, the love of God, the love of God for each one of us.

Our secular culture has promised more than it can deliver.

We've been taught that there are ready-made answers to all of our problems. We've been taught that we can find the secret to always being positive and feeling good. I was in the bookstore the other day in amazement at all the feel-good books for sale. Everyone thinks they have the answer to how we can find happiness in life. They usually narrow it down to ten steps or some such simplistic formula. These books invariably make us think that there's something wrong with us if we don't always feel good about ourselves.

But I think most of us are smart enough not to fall for that nonsense. Life is not so simple. It can be very difficult. Sometimes it can be tragic and overwhelming. Sometimes we don't know how to cope with it and all the problems that it throws our way. Instead of pat answers and methods, what we probably are in need of most is a tenacious faith and spontaneous trust to help us get through the turbulence of everyday life. Real life contains the unexpected, the daring risk, the reversal of fortune, the sudden change of heart, the indiscretion and blunder, the crippling effects of guilt and shame, and always the baggage of unfinished business.

Real life is a mystery for which our secular culture has not provided

sufficient solutions.

This is where the story of Christmas finds its place in our hearts. Christmas offers the mystery of God in tender human circumstances. We are touched by Mary's teenage pregnancy. We are touched by the welcome of a stranger's barn for delivery of her firstborn. We are touched by the arrival of the helpless infant, needing his mother's warmth and nurture. We are touched by this tiny baby enfolded in his mother's arms, yet wrapped in the divinity of God. We who contemplate this mystery find our own faith sanctioned in life's array of goodwill.

At Christmas, we see the aspirations and troubles of all people focused on one tiny child, whose destiny included the hopes and desires, the fears and sufferings of all humanity. More than anything else at Christmas, we know that we are not alone, because that tiny child represents the deepest passion of who we are.

This is the importance of Christmas, for it awakens the mystery of care and compassion, which only love and acceptance can teach us to understand. Love alone makes our eyes shine as we watch the gruff, tough-skinned shepherds kneel in adoration before the newborn baby. Love alone makes us wonder in amazement as we follow the trek of the

Magi along their almost 1000-mile route until they reach the infant Jesus and offer to him their most precious and expensive gifts.

It was not an accident that the Christmas story has found its way into the deepest longings of the human heart. Its story of courage, compassion, and conviction casts its spell upon all wherever it is correctly commemorated. It unchains our most intense need for love and acceptance, enveloping it with peace and security as it gifts us with the unconditional love and acceptance of God in God's unfolding universe.

In the words of the famous philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, Christianity "does not emphasize the ruling Caesar, or the ruthless moralist, or the unmoved mover. It dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love; and it finds purpose in the present immediacy of a kingdom not of this world" (*Process and Reality*, 343).

Merry Christmas and God bless all of you as you celebrate the magical birth of Jesus Christ. Amen.