

SERMON: Unto You

TEXT: Luke 2:8-14

“Christmas just doesn’t work out for me.” That’s what the little boy keeps telling the other kids in the beloved Christmas movie titled, *The Polar Express*. He’s literally from the other side of the tracks, and when the train stops to pick him up his house looks dark and cold, with no decorations visible either outside or inside. He’s wearing an oversized nightshirt – probably a hand-me-down – and he hesitates whether to board the train. You can tell, he really wants to believe in Santa Claus and a magical Christmas Eve train heading to the North Pole, but he’s been disappointed so many times before. *Christmas just doesn’t work out for me.*

He hesitates a moment too long and must start running to catch up with the train that has already begun pulling away. Another child – who had also hesitated to board – sees the boy running and jumps to his aid by pulling the lever for the emergency brake. The boy climbs aboard the train but sits in another car by himself instead of joining the other children. It’s clear that he feels like he doesn’t belong.

As he meets the other children and they talk excitedly about Santa and presents and families and friends, he doesn’t share any similar stories. He makes

the excuse that Santa must be too busy to remember him, and simply repeats what he's already expressed: *Christmas just doesn't work out for me.*

Of course, if you're familiar with the story, you know that it has a happy ending. When the boy returns home from the fantastic adventure, he sees a beautifully decorated Christmas tree shining through the front window. Once inside, he finds a red and green wrapped box with a tag that reads, "to Billy."

While I enjoy watching this movie every Christmas, I must admit that it bothers me. I'm too much of a realist; there's no such thing as Christmas magic. Little Billy's common refrain is true for too many people. *Christmas just doesn't work out for me.* I guess the bell doesn't ring for me anymore.

On the other hand, when a movie has a message that bothers me, I tend to watch it more closely to see if there's a more subtle, hidden message or some greater truth that I can find amid the fantasy.

After several years of studying this movie, I've noticed a curious detail. Billy is the only child on the train who is called by name. Even the main characters are only referred to as "young lady" or "young man" by the conductor,

or “Hey, you” by the other children. In the cast list, they are called “Hero Girl” and “Hero Boy.”

But I’ll come back to that later.

As we read in the Gospel of Luke, the first people to hear about the birth of Jesus are the shepherds. “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* (actually, this is where I prefer the King James translation: *UNTO YOU*) *is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*”

Now, what you need to know about the shepherds is something that cannot be learned from a beautiful scene on a Hallmark card or in the most elaborate nativity scenes. In fact, it cannot be learned even from the words of scripture. Biblical scholars agree, shepherds in that time and place were not known for being gentle, quiet, or humble fellows, as we like to imagine.

One theologian explained, “Some commentators indicate that, in the context in which this account originated, the shepherds would be understood as representatives of the people. Others have suggested that shepherds, living away from settled communities, would have been regarded with some suspicion by respectable folk and might better be taken to represent the marginalized or outsiders, the sorts of people with whom Jesus would come to associate in his ministry.” (Charles M. Wood, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1*)

Furthermore, this same theologian points out an important detail: that the angels did *not* bring their tidings of great joy to kings in their palaces. The good news that Christ is born is *especially* intended for the poor, the marginalized, and the outsiders. This may be hard to hear, as it runs counter to our tendency – albeit subconscious, perhaps – to want to claim it only for ourselves and those *we judge* as deserving.

At the same time, however, I believe that *we are all poor* in the sense that we are in dire need of a Savior. Regardless of our social standing or financial position, we can still be poor in physical health, poor in mental health, poor in spirit, poor in meaningful relationships, poor in love of neighbor or love of

ourselves. Whether we know it or not, we *all* need the Good News that ONLY Christ can bring.

Back to *The Polar Express* and Billy, the boy from the other side of the tracks for whom Christmas just doesn't work out. The greater truth that I have found in the story is this: Billy is the only child named because he needs to hear more than any other the message of the angels. "UNTO YOU, Billy, is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." That's the real gift he gets. Not something under a beautifully decorated tree. Not a box wrapped in red and green. But the assurance of a Christ who loves him, whether Christmas works out or not.

With that feeling, that people outside the church – especially those who wander aimlessly along the sidewalks of downtown Cape – are the ones who need most to hear the Good News, we at First Presbyterian have reached out.

Since December 1st we have been inviting the public to write their prayer requests and place them in the manger located in our Peace Park. Those prayers are posted on the bulletin board in the Narthex. Some include names, some don't. But

God knows their names, and God hears their prayers. And the message of the angels is for them: UNTO YOU.

And God also knows the name of the person (or persons) who recently desecrated the bag which held the paper and pencils for these prayers. They especially need the gift of Good News and the assurance of God's love: UNTO YOU.

Now, I'd like to invite you to share the name of someone you know who especially needs good news right now (and it's okay to say your own name). I will re-read a portion of the scripture, and after you hear me speak the words, UNTO YOU, please say aloud just the first name of someone you're thinking of.

“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:*

UNTO YOU... (pause for names) ...

is born this day...a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, PEACE. AMEN.