

“Plenty of Room in the *Kataluma*”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

December 27, 2020 – First Sunday after Christmas

Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Luke 2:22-40

We are gathered today on this last Sunday of the 2020, and a new year is just before us. Today’s scripture readings from Isaiah and the Gospel of Luke point us to being hope-filled as we look forward to beginning this new year together.

In the gospel reading, we also look back and remember one of the most wonderful things that God did in the past. We find Mary and Joseph taking their young son, some 40-days old, to the temple in Jerusalem, so that they could offer a sacrifice to God as directed by the Law of Moses, which required after the birth of a child the sacrifice of a lamb or two turtledoves or pigeons for those who could not afford a lamb. As Jesus’ parents were poor, they offered birds. And the lowly holy family was visited in the temple by two God-inspired elders, the prophet Anna and a man named Simeon. Both of these recognized in Mary’s son the blessing of God: that he was the Messiah who would bring blessing to Israel and the world.

Even the child’s name, Jesus, points to his identity as one who will bring blessing. The name, given to Mary and Joseph by the Lord’s angel, was common Jewish name, Yeshua, meaning “the Lord saves.” Throughout the Hebrew Bible, prophets or children of prophets were often given symbolic names by God or God’s angel, such as Hosea’s children, Jezreel, meaning “the Lord scatters,” Lo-ammi, meaning “not my people,” and Lo-Ruhamma, meaning “not loved.” My favorite is Isaiah’s second son, named Maher-shalal-hash-baz, meaning “quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.” My guess is that Maher-shalal-hash-baz will not be on any of the 2020 end-of-the-year top ten lists for baby names.

Lucky for Mary and Joseph, their child was not to be given this name, but was to be given the same name as one of Israel's greatest heroes, Joshua, the conquering general, and the expectation was that, like Joshua, he would be a savior for his people.

Elders Simeon and Anna echoed this expectation in seeing and celebrating baby Jesus as the Messiah or Christ. At the time, the people of Israel, then living in a land occupied and oppressed by Rome, longed for the coming of the Messiah, God's anointed warrior, who would, like Joshua and King David, be a military conqueror. The people longed for the Messiah to come and rid the people of their Roman oppressors and their puppet kings, the Herods. And in Jesus, a decedent of David, the Messiah did come, but not to conquer with the sword. He would, in fact, violently lose his life at the hands of the Romans. Instead, Jesus would save by conquering death itself, by defeating the grave. Jesus saves by setting us free from the oppressors of aimlessness and sin. And he is the Messiah who gives us hope for new year filled with newness, ones in which we can expect life and love to come to us and the world around us in unexpected new ways.

One of the messages emphasized throughout Luke's gospel is that this saving work of Jesus is *universal* and gives hope to *all kinds* of people. In the characters of elders Simeon and Anna and the young couple of Mary and Joseph, we find that the message of good news comes to the elderly and the young, to women and to men. And as Simeon states, Jesus would be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." In Luke's gospel, *all* types of people are included in the salvation to be brought by the Christ-child.

This good news, that all are included, that all are welcome to receive God's gift, no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey, was given in the gospel of Luke, and it has been lived out by many

generations of Christ-followers ever since, just as it was lived out by the first followers of Jesus who lived before the gospel was written.

There has always been diversity and inclusion in the Christian tradition, or more correctly stated, the Christian traditions, beginning with the first followers of Christ, who were a diverse bunch. Some were harvesters of the sea and smelled of fish; others were collectors of taxes and smelled of money. Some were business owners; others were common laborers. And they belonged to a variety of different Jewish groups and factions. Yet these men and women found themselves bound together as one family of faith, siblings in a common cause to follow the ways of Jesus Christ and to further his realm in their world.

We know that the bonds that held them together were tested greatly as their message went out with them in the world and their numbers grew. One of the first great controversies in Christianity was over how Jesus-following could be done by Gentiles as well as Jews and how their family could be united even through their expanded mission. And as the Christian family spread throughout the Roman Empire and became more and more diverse, it struggled to remain a united family, where all are included just as they were.

While there was a unifying force in Christianity when the Roman Emperor Constantine embraced it as his own religion in the early fourth century, there remained a diverse set of practices among the churches spread throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia.

After Martin Luther and others formed their own communities of faith in the sixteenth century, there was even more diversity within the faith, and a diversifying force. For the earliest of the Reformers, they struggled to embrace the different ideas and practices of one another, and our one family of faith seemed to become more divided than unified, less inclusive and more exclusive.

One famous episode demonstrating the reformers' inability to welcome one another's ideas involved a meeting between German Martin Luther and Swiss Ulrich Zwingli, during which they agreed upon much, but could not come to consensus concerning the meaning of the Lord's Supper. For Zwingli, the celebration of communion was purely symbolic; for Luther, however, the sacrament celebrated the actual body and blood of Christ present in the elements. Throughout their argument, Luther kept writing in Latin *hoc est corpus meum*, meaning "this is my body," on the table with his finger whenever Zwingli explained his own position (this was Luther's version of sticking his fingers in his ears and going "LA-LA-LA...I can't hear you!" every time he heard something with which he disagreed). The meeting did not produce unity, but rather an ongoing division between Luther, Zwingli and the like-minded John Calvin, and those who followed them. In Germany, the followers of Zwingli and Calvin, known as the Reformed Church, had no fellowship with their neighbors who were Lutherans (called Evangelicals), mainly because they disagreed about the sacrament of communion.

Fast forward two hundred years, King Frederick William III of Prussia in northern Germany, required the Lutherans and Calvinists to "figure it out," to come together and form a unified church, and the Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union was formed. The Germans who came from Prussia to the United States brought their Evangelical church with them, settling mostly around the Great Lakes and American Mid-West. The churches of the descendants of these Germans, in 1934, formed a denomination along with the descendants of Calvinist Reformed Germans who had earlier come to America, settling primarily in the Mid-Atlantic region. The united denomination, known as the Evangelical and Reformed Church, almost immediately from its creation began discussions to unite with other Christian groups.

One of these was the unified but diverse collection of churches known as the Congregational Christian Churches, also formed as a denomination in the 1930s from like-minded Congregationalists, primarily in New England, and a group known simply as Christians, spread mostly throughout Appalachia and the American South. In the spirit of unifying with others while holding on to unique traditions and beliefs, the Congregational Christian Churches merged with the Evangelical and Reformed Church in the 1950s, forming the denomination to which we now belong, the United Church of Christ.

Here on this last Sunday before the new year, and we look back on who we are and where we've been and look forward at what we will become and do, we remember that we are a congregation of this diverse but united and uniting tradition, and we remember that we are called to become even more welcoming and inclusive as a denomination and as a community of faith here in Stoneham.

Each Sunday, when we gather, we read a statement of welcome and are reminded that: No matter who you are, whom you love, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. What do these words of extravagant welcome mean?

- Regardless of the shade of your skin or the ability of your body, you are welcome here.
- If you are one of our youth or if you are a child of a previous generation, you are welcome here.
- No matter your political allegiance or how you voted this year, you are welcome here.
- Whether you prefer to be understood as she, he, or they, you are welcome here.
- It does not matter to whom you are attracted or whom you love; you are welcome here.

- If you are or have felt broken and unworthy of God's grace or the love of others, or if you feel alive and well and full of God's Spirit, you are welcome here.

No matter where your spiritual pilgrimage has taken you, or where you now find yourself on life's journey, you are welcome here.

Friends, we live in a broken and violent world, in which many prefer not to be so welcoming, but to hurt those who differ from them. We've divided ourselves up into different camps, tribes, and teams, and we can't seem to find a way to live at peace with one another and work together. But we, dear church, are a Pentecost people: We are the house of God's Spirit, and there is plenty of room in our *kataluma*, this dwelling place, for all! And this is a proclamation of good news for a wilderness-wandering world, where people are longing to be welcomed and included just as they are.

So, this new year, let us recommit ourselves to living this good news and sharing this good news through our acts of extravagant welcome: Let us welcome and love one another, let us continue to use our resources to reach out to others, to feed the hungry, gather toys that bring joy to youngsters in need, and include all in our worship through our online video ministry. Let us grow into this identity and own it even more, day by day, year by year. May our extravagant welcome shared with one another and the world loudly proclaim the good news that Jesus saves! Amen.