

Sermon: Christmas Faith
Text: Luke 2:1-20
Date: December 24, 2017
Context: WWPC
Christmas Eve and Fourth Sunday of Advent
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Luke 2:8

In 1965, the Evangelical theologian Daniel Fuller published a dense, scholarly book called “Easter Faith and History.” (And, yes, I realize I just said “Easter”, not “Christmas”, but like the wise men of old, we’re on a journey to Bethlehem this morning, and we’ve got a couple of stops to make en route, so just stay with me.)

At the time, it was quite a remarkable thing that a man with that last name would publish a book with that title. Daniel Fuller was the only child of a then-famous radio evangelist named Charles Fuller, who went on to found Fuller Seminary, arguably the most prominent Evangelical seminary in America.

The remarkable part is that for Evangelicals of that time, the cross was the central pillar of Christian theology. (I’m frankly not sure what the central pillar of Evangelical theology is today. I’m not even sure I want to know.)

But for Evangelicals back in 1965 Christ’s death was the focal point of God’s saving act in history, the one thing that mattered above all else, the key that would unlock the door to eternal life in heaven, available to every individual everywhere.

I am no Baptist, but I am a Christian, so I’m certainly not going to contest that idea. But if you take the Gospel story as a whole, something else happened that first Easter weekend. And that something was Jesus’s boundary-breaking resurrection.

And so in 1965, Daniel Fuller began to ask whether that might have been important. He wondered what it might mean not for himself but for the world as a whole that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead.

And what might Easter faith -- the belief that the resurrection did happen and that it does matter -- what might Easter faith look like 2000 years after the fact.

I'm saying this today, on the Sunday before Christmas, because not so many years ago I found myself asking this same question, right around this same time of year. On January 12, 2010--so just days after we took down the Christmas decorations here in the sanctuary -- a massive earthquake struck Haiti.

Among the buildings flattened by the quake was Our Lady of the Assumption -- the enormous Catholic cathedral that served as a visual and spiritual anchor for the people of Port-au-Prince, a towering symbol of their hopes and dreams, proof that their life had meaning, despite the daily hardships and deprivations of lives lived in the grip of grinding poverty.

It took 45 years to build the cathedral. And on January 12, 2010, it took 35 seconds for it to be reduced to a pile of stones, with some of Haiti's most important spiritual leaders buried in the rubble.

You might think the role Our Lady played as a house of worship, as a landmark, as a beacon of hope, as a place of refuge, that all of this ended right then and there, in that 35 second span. How could the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere ever hope to rebuild such a priceless treasure?

But you would be wrong. Led by an expatriate writer living in Miami, the people of Haiti -- and indeed people from around the world--began to roll those stones away and to rebuild the cathedral.

So, a perfect example of Easter people, practicing Easter faith in the world as it is right now, a world marred by grinding poverty and prone to earthquakes. When you think all hope is lost, hope rises. When things you love and treasure, lie buried under a ton of rubble, their loss is not the end but a kind of new beginning.

I tell this story because I think it might be time to write the sequel to Daniel Fuller's book.

I believe we're living in a time that calls us to move from exploring the question of Easter Faith and History, to Christmas Faith and History, a time that asks us to dive deep beneath the surface of the Christmas stories we love so much.

Mind you, there's a reason we love these stories so much, a reason we're happy to come back to them again and again, year after year.

They're filled with wise men and shepherds, with a little baby born in a manger and angels heralding his birth to a people who walk in darkness.

It's why we make our Advent banners and organize our children's pageants, because the celebration of these charming stories makes for a perfect family holiday.

And there is not one person here today who would have it any other way. Indeed, this Advent has been especially meaningful for me personally. And I want to thank Vivian and Grace, and Kristin and Allee and everyone who lent their voices to our Advent services and who helped make this such a meaningful season.

But most of us also know that Christmas can be a difficult season. It doesn't take an earthquake to illustrate why this is so.

For many of us believing that the magic of Christmas extends beyond the four Sundays of Advent....beyond the carols and trees and the wreaths, beyond the poinsettias and the pageants and the presents, believing that the wonder of the season belongs not just to children but adults, believing that the promise of this holy season is a gift given not for a season but a lifetime, believing all of that is, well, sometimes it's an act of faith for all of us.

And that is truer this year than at any time I can remember. At staff meeting this past Tuesday we spent some time talking about what had happened in Washington, just days before Christmas.

I noted how angry I was, and how sad it made me, that a majority of our elected officials would vote in favor of legislation that would take money from the people who need it the most -- from middle and working class Americans -- and shamelessly give it to a tiny sliver of people who need it the least, to the very top echelon of this country's economic elite, which includes many of them.

But that wasn't the only heartbreaking feature of that legislation. The vote would serve to take health insurance coverage away from 13 million Americans, including some of the poorest and sickest people in America, so again from the people who need it the most, so that, again, the savings might be passed on to the people who need it the least, people who have luxury level health insurance, backed up by enough personal wealth to last ten or twenty lifetimes.

We talked about how cruel it was that a majority of Senators were willing to add 1.4 trillion dollars to the deficit but not willing to extend health insurance to nine million American children and 300,000 pregnant women covered by the CHIP program.

And unwilling to grant citizenship to millions of undocumented Americans brought here as children, who know no other country as home but this one.

And maybe worst of all, how heartless it was that after the vote, these same Senators openly laughed at the people who had gathered in the capital to protest it, literally begging their elected officials not to do this terrible thing.

It felt to me like the Grinch had conspired with Ebenezer Scrooge to deliver the worst news ever. The only thing missing from this new plan was a provision requiring people making less than \$60,000 a year to unplug their Christmas lights, for Christmas would be officially cancelled for them this year.

Far from making Christmas great again, the United States Senate had taken the Christ out of Christmas altogether.

Surveying the moral and spiritual wreckage of that vote, the damage all those decisions would do to our towering institutions, the harm they would do to ordinary people living in the real world, I wondered if that's what it felt like to walk outside in Port au Prince that morning and survey the wreckage of Our Lady of the Assumption---like we were gazing at something that was decades in the making, something people depended on and that gave them hope, and that had suddenly come crashing down in a pile of rubble in a matter of seconds.

So if that's the bad news, and the hard news, and it is both of those things, here, I believe, is the begging of the Good News. And it's a point that, of necessity, we've made several times in recent months.

This is not the first time in history such a thing has happened, and we are not the first people to bear witness to it. Or to resist it.

If we were to follow Charles Fuller's lead and actually sit down to write a sequel to his book, if we were going to document what Christmas faith looks like in the real world, the story I read from Luke could serve as the Introduction.

Because despite its many charms, the story of the first Christmas is not meant for children. This is a story for adults. This is a story about the real world, and how the light of God's love burst in upon a people who were walking in darkness. And first century readers would have known this immediately:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

These real-world details are not incidental to this story. They could have been lifted directly out of *The Jerusalem Post*, and Luke is careful to include them because they are essential to the story he is about to tell.

For the people to whom he is writing have been living now for many years under the thumb or an oppressive ruling elite.

They've had to bow down every day to a governing class that was busy erasing everything they cared about, a political and economic elite intent on dismantling everything they believed in, on taking ownership of everything they loved and draining as much profit out of it as possible, and keeping that profit for themselves.

Jerusalem was no longer the center of religious and political life. Rome was. Yahweh was no longer Lord and Ruler of the universe, Caesar was.

And as if that's not bad enough, as if that's not onerous enough, now the news goes out that a census will be taken. The powers that be are going to count the people, so that they can tax the people.

These taxes will perhaps not be used to build a wall, but they will be used to build roads.

The people's money will be used to turn dirt ancient dirt tracks into super highways made of stone. But not to benefit the people, not to transport animals or produce to market.

But to transport soldiers and chariots to the provinces, to project empire to the ends of the realm and beyond, to extend the reach and dominance of Rome, to extend the power and wealth of the ruling elites.

And so it came to pass that the people who once lived in the light of truth, the light of God's steadfast love and mercy, these people now walked in darkness.

Until this same God finally had had enough.

And so an angel is dispatched to bring to these same people good news of great joy. But this divine messenger is not dispatched to Rome, not even to Jerusalem. Instead the angel and her heavenly cohorts are charged to make this grand and glorious announcement to a band of shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

They bring the best news ever to a band of literal nobodies, living on the margins of society with no fixed address. Men who are so poor they don't even own the sheep they're keeping, on this cold winter's night that was so deep.

And it's to them the angels sing out this good news of great joy.

When you take all of that into account, when you consider the full sweep of that story, it almost sounds too fanciful to believe, too good to be true, a story fit for children.

And it would be, were it not for this one thing. That's what love does. Love takes on human form in the person of Jesus, to reveal to the world what love itself looks like.

So if Christmas sometimes seems hard to believe, maybe that's because, in a sense, we're doing it wrong.

In the real world, a world desperate for love, a world marred by poverty and prone to earthquakes and hurricanes, Christmas doesn't happen in here among the poinsettias and the candles and the banners and the wreaths.

It happens out there, among the nobodies. It comes to people who walk in darkness and who live their lives on the margins.

So in the weeks and months ahead, every time you find yourself sitting through yet another boring but necessary meeting about how to make our church and our community more welcoming to immigrants and refugees, remember, that's what love does, and so you are practicing Christmas faith.

Every time you find your glasses getting steamed up as you stand over a pot of soup on some random Monday in March, soup that you're about to serve to street people who've come to the ABCCM shelter, well, remember, that's what love does, and so you are practicing Christmas faith.

If you happen to find yourself doing hurricane relief in Houston on some sweltering morning in April, remember, that's what love does, and you are practicing Christmas faith.

Or when you find yourself sweating buckets as you nail tar paper onto the roof of a Habitat house on a hot August afternoon, nailing right alongside Maria and Jose, working to give this young immigrant couple a fixed address here in the land of hopes and dreams, well, remember that's what love does, and so you are practicing Christmas faith.

And while you're doing these things, I invite you to keep your mind and your heart and your ears wide open, for there is a reasonable chance you will hear the angels sing, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!"

Joy to the world, my friends. And Merry Christmas!