

“Christmas Traditions”

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2023

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Ben Dorr

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I'd like to talk with you this evening about traditions.  
Christmas traditions.  
Do you have any?

I suspect you do.  
We all have Christmas traditions, right?

One of MY traditions, in the days leading up to tonight, is to watch  
“A Charlie Brown Christmas.”

How many kids here tonight have ever watched “A Charlie Brown  
Christmas”?

How many adults here tonight have ever watched “A Charlie  
Brown Christmas”?

There's probably been a December in which I failed to watch “A  
Charlie Brown Christmas,” but I don't remember when it was. Maybe  
the reason is that Charlie Brown and church and faith go way, way back  
for me....

You see, one of my earliest memories of church comes from when  
I was about 5 years old...and the minister at the church in which I grew  
up, would, in his sermons, periodically quote Charlie Brown.

This was a big deal!  
I was 5 years old.  
My minister read Charlie Brown, and I read Charlie Brown!

If any of you used to read Charlie Brown, I'm sure you will recall the football saga...how Charlie Brown kept trying to kick the football for 50 years, and how Lucy kept pulling the football away.

A few years ago, an article came out in which the author actually went back through all the Charlie Brown comics ever written to see if there was a consistent reason for Lucy pulling the ball away.

What he found was a variety of reasons, and some fascinating explanations:

- In 1966, it was physiological: a “ten-billion-to-one” muscle spasm, Lucy says to Charlie Brown.
- In 1975, it was psychological: “I’m not your mother, Charlie Brown.”
- And in 1980, it was biblical: “To everything there is a season...and a time to pull away the football.”

But the author also found an interesting twist.

In the late 1970's “there appeared a sequence of strips where Charlie Brown took seriously ill. When Lucy hears that Charlie Brown's return from the hospital is uncertain, she breaks down, realizes how much he means to her, and promises that she will INDEED let him kick the ball...if only he'll get better.”

So, in August of 1979, upon Charlie Brown's recovery and release from the hospital, Lucy does something that she had never done before.

Lucy decides **not** to pull the ball away!  
She's going to let Charlie Brown kick the football!  
Does anyone remember what happens next?

Charlie Brown being Charlie Brown,  
 he runs up to kick the football...and he misses it!  
 And he kicks Lucy and breaks Lucy's arm instead!<sup>1</sup>

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If you read Charlie Brown for 50 years, hoping that one day you'd finally get to see him kick that football...it never happened.

Why didn't it happen?  
 Well, it was TRADITION.  
 Some things never change, right?  
 It's going to be the same thing—year after year after year...

It's not just true about Charlie Brown missing the football.  
 It's also true about Christmas.  
 It's part of the reason we look forward to tonight.  
 The traditions.

The Christmas story from Luke.  
 A darkened sanctuary.  
 Singing "Silent Night" by candlelight.  
 And then breaking out into "Joy to the World"...

Some things never change.  
 Christmas is a powerful time for tradition.

Well, let me pause right there.  
 I say some things never change...but you and both know that's not entirely true.

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Schulmiller, "All Your Life, Charlie Brown. All Your Life. The complete history of Lucy's pulling the football away," *Slate*, 10-8-2014. The article can be found at [www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/10/the\\_history\\_of\\_lucy\\_spulling\\_the\\_football\\_away\\_from\\_charlie\\_brown\\_in\\_peanuts.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/10/the_history_of_lucy_spulling_the_football_away_from_charlie_brown_in_peanuts.html).

According to local Christian leaders in Bethlehem, there are approximately 35,000 Christians who live there these days.

Typically, at this time of year, a giant Christmas tree has been set up in the city center on a stage in Manger Square—the place where Mary and Joseph are said to have looked for shelter on that first Christmas long ago.

And a tree-lighting ceremony always takes place with great fanfare at Christmas in Bethlehem.

But not this year.

This year, there is no tree-lighting ceremony.

This year, the church steeples that normally dot the city’s skyline,  
and the streets that are always filled with decorations—  
it’s all empty and bare.

It’s a city in MOURNING.<sup>2</sup>

Because of Hamas’s horrific attack on October 7,  
and the warfare in Gaza that has claimed thousands of lives,  
Christmas in Bethlehem looks very different this year.

But of course, we don’t have to live in a warzone to know that life itself can intrude on our traditions.

Maybe you some of faced a health crisis this year.

Or others of you lost a loved one this year.

And it was a difficult blow.

And this Christmas looks and feels very different than any other Christmas that you’ve ever known...

Christmas, you see, is not ONLY about tradition.

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<sup>2</sup> Yara Bayoumy and Samar Hazboun, “God Is Under the Rubble in Gaza: Bethlehem’s Subdued Christmas,” *The New York Times*, December 23, 2023.

It's also about **transition**.

Walking through moments that we've never experienced before.

Wondering, hoping that the love of God we've known in our traditions, in the familiar—

that that very same love will also be with us

in our life TRANSITIONS,

in the unfamiliar...

I think that's what tonight's scripture from Luke is all about.

The story we hear from Luke is not about a young married couple doing what they've always done before. It's about Mary and Joseph walking a path that no one had never traveled before.

Which is why the message that the angel gives to the shepherds is so important.

“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy....”

Do not be afraid...

Can you imagine Mary and Joseph hearing those words from the shepherds on that night long ago?

Far away from home.

Far away from their traditions.

Far away from the familiar.

In a darkened stable, with their firstborn lying in a manger.

**Do not be afraid.**

And Mary and Joseph know, perhaps like they've never known before, that no matter what happens next in their lives, God is traveling with them, and God's love will never leave them...

Can you think of a transition in your life right now, a journey you're on, where you really need to hear those words?

**Do not be afraid...**

When the creator of Charlie Brown, Charles Schulz, was approaching the end of his life, he found himself in the hospital, and he said to a friend:

"You control all these characters and the lives they live. You decide when they get up in the morning, when they're going to fight with their friends, when they're going to lose the game.

"Isn't it amazing how you have no control over your real life?"<sup>3</sup>

So let me invite you not only to consider your Christmas traditions tonight, where you know the love of God is constant and visible and strong.

Let me invite you at this moment, to ALSO consider a place of transition in your life. A path that you've never walked before. And you really want to have control, but you know, deep down, that you have no control...

Can you get that place in your life in mind?

Not too long ago, I heard a story from a colleague about something that happened in a Presbyterian Church with which he was acquainted...

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Boxer, "Charles M. Schulz, 'Peanuts' Creator, Dies at 77," *The New York Times*, February 14, 2000.

It was getting close to Christmas.

In the congregation, there was a seminary student named Dink Williams, a child of the church. Dink was the son of Mabel and Harold Williams.

It was Dink's first year at seminary, and when he came home from his first semester at seminary, he arrived back at his house shortly before Christmas, and he walked in the back door of his home...

Guess who's home, he said.  
No response. No one there!  
Then he saw the note:

Dink, I've taken your father to the hospital.  
He's all right. We'll explain when we get home.  
Love, Mom

P.S.: It really wasn't my fault.

The incident referred to in the note happened because Harold Williams, Dink's father, had been doing some last-minute Christmas shopping. Harold wanted to get his son something that would remind Dink of Christmases from years ago...

He wanted to find something traditional and meaningful.  
Something his son could take back with him to seminary.

So Harold got an idea.

Years earlier, when his son, Dink, was still a boy, the family had a nativity set that Dink really loved. He would get it out every Christmas and tell the story of Christmas, to anyone who would listen, with that nativity set.

But then one year, the family got a puppy for Christmas.

And the puppy, when no one was looking, got hold of the nativity set and bit the head off of Jospheh, gnawed on a couple of the wise men...one of the shepherds disappeared entirely.

It was ruined.

But instead of throwing it out, Harold boxed up what was left of the nativity set, and stored it in the attic somewhere.

So, many years later and with his son now in seminary, Harold set out to find a nativity set just like the one that Dink had loved as a boy.

(This was in the days before the Internet, no Googling “nativity sets” and finding one in five minutes on Amazon.)

So Harold went out to the shops.  
He looked for weeks without success.

But then, on the day that Dink was due home, Harold went shopping one more time, and wouldn't you know it, he found one.

It was just like the old set that they had.  
It was the last one in the store.

As the clerk was wrapping it up, however, the clerk paused.  
She was staring at the nativity set.

“What is it?” asked Harold.

“This nativity is missing the baby Jesus! You don't still want to buy this, do you?”

Well, Harold was about to give up.



But then he remembered that one of the pieces left intact in that old nativity set was the baby Jesus, and if he could just find the old set up in the attic, he could take the baby Jesus from that set and slide it into this nativity set and Dink will love it.

So that's exactly what he set out to do.  
Harold rushed home with the incomplete nativity set.  
His wife, Mabel, was not home at the time.

He rushed up into the attic to find the old nativity set with the baby Jesus, and while Harold was in the attic looking for it, Mabel returned.

And Mabel heard noise in the attic.  
And she didn't know that it was Harold making the noise.

She looked to see if the dog was in the backyard—he WAS there.

Which meant that Harold had NOT brought the dog in, as he ALWAYS did first thing when he gets home.

She looked where Harold usually left his keys, they weren't there.

So Mabel assumed that whoever was making the noise up in the attic was not her husband. It was an intruder. She silently moved to the attic door, reached in, and turned off the light to the attic that was right by the door.

This, of course, startled Harold, who was bending over a box.  
And he lost his balance.  
He stepped off the plywood.

And he went right through the den ceiling, so that half of him was in the den, legs hanging down...and the other half of him was still above, in the attic.

Harold twisted his ankle coming through the ceiling.  
He lets out a yell.

“Harold...is that you? What in the world are you doing?”  
And Harold replied: “I’m looking for Jesus.”

She helped him get dislodged, and then she took him to urgent care, where they determined he broke his ankle, and Harold got a cast put on his foot.

That’s where they were when Dink arrived home from seminary.  
They explained what happened.

And a couple days later, on Christmas Eve, they went to church, where they had to explain to everyone what had happened...

The next morning, Christmas morning, they opened presents.  
Dink opened the one from his dad.

The nativity set: “Dad, this is perfect. It’s just like the one I used to love!”

“Not exactly, it’s missing the baby Jesus.”

And without missing a beat, Dink replied:

“That’s ok, Dad. He was born in the manger, but he’s not there anymore. He’s out in the world. That’s where you’ll find him. You just have to look for him out in the world.”

To which his father replied, “Well, you sure won’t find him in the attic!”

But Dink was right, wasn’t he?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I heard this story in a sermon by the Rev. Tom Are, preached at Village Presbyterian Church, Prairie Village, Kansas, on December 25, 2022. Some of the details have been adapted for this homily.

You don't have to go to seminary to know that Dink was right.

Jesus started in the manger, but he's not there anymore.

He is out in the world.

And he's right here with you.

No matter what transition you're going through.

You know that place where you wish you had control,  
but you know you'll never find it?

It is there, in THAT place—  
that Jesus will find YOU,  
and Christ will be born for you...

Amen.