

Christmas Eve

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Third Presbyterian Church
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There was a time when you didn't watch TV shows on your phone, whenever you wanted. There was a time when you didn't watch them as a downloadable file on a laptop. There was a time when a laptop was a lap top. There was a time when you didn't watch TV shows from a disc, or a tape (VHS or Beta!). A time when you actually had to sit through the commercials.

Now I don't want to return to those days – I am all for being able to watch an obscure Swedish drama with French subtitles streaming on BBC Canada at 2:00 in the morning, or something like that.

But what I do miss is the once-a-year occurrences of families – or my childhood family, at least – gathering around the big old TV to watch a show, which would not be on again for another 12 months.

One show in particular, “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” It probably hasn't been cool to reference Charlie Brown in several decades, if it ever was cool, but why should an abject absence of coolness stop me now.

When it first aired in 1965, more than 45% of Americans who were watching TV at the time watched “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” Watch it again if you haven't recently. You can stream it or download it quite easily! It is charming and measured and amazingly prophetic, with sparse animation and the use of real children's voices and Vince Guaraldi's awesome jazz score. It is “innocently unencumbered and openly introspective,” one critic wrote, an extended fable about the interplay of culture and the Christmas story, where Sally actually asks Santa for cash.

At the heart of “A Charlie Brown Christmas” is the preparation of a Christmas play. Charlie Brown is an epic fail as director, and is banished to find a Christmas tree to redeem the performance. He and Linus go searching. He finds a scraggly little tree: “This little one seems to need a home.” Linus expresses his doubts, but they take it back to the play rehearsal where it meets immediate and utter

derision. "What kind of tree is that? You're hopeless, Charlie Brown, completely hopeless."

The ridicule works. "I guess I really don't know what Christmas is all about," Charlie Brown responds, dejected and defeated. Linus then delivers his soliloquy, simply telling the story we've rehearsed tonight, quoting the gospel of Luke, a controversial thing at the time. Linus concludes, famously: "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."

Charlie Brown's spirits are lifted, somewhat, and he takes his tree home to decorate it. He, again, fails, as the single red ornament causes the tree to topple. "Everything I touch gets ruined."

He exits in discouragement. The friends show up and decorate the tree, transforming it. Linus: "It's not bad at all, really. Maybe it just needs a little love." Another voice: "Charlie Brown is a blockhead, but he did get a nice tree."

Then the group begins to hum, hum a traditional Christmas carol. Charlie Brown returns to the scene. He is braced to receive more scorn and ridicule. "What's going on here?" He looks at the transformed tree, and is puzzled. "Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown," they all shout out. And then, turning their heads heavenward and singing in that weird Peanuts way, they add words to the tune they had previously been humming. "Hark! The herald angels sing. Glory to the newborn king. Peace on earth and mercy mild. God and sinners reconciled."

Charles Wesley wrote the words in 1739, and we have been singing them ever since.

God and sinners reconciled.

"In Christ," the Apostle Paul wrote, "God was reconciling the world to himself." That is what this night is about. God's mission made flesh and blood on this holy night. God and sinners reconciled. God and creation reconciled. God and humanity reconciled.

After whatever brokenness, alienation, fallenness, whatever woundedness, estrangement, injustice there is in your life or the life of the world, the birth of this baby, an unlikely birth in even more unlikely circumstances, will bring everything together. Here and now, and as history unfolds, its arc bending toward reconciliation.

I found a book on my father's bookshelf, now almost 60 years old, by the theologian Arnold Come, called Agents of Reconciliation. Come asserts that because of this birth we are agents of reconciliation, each of us and all of us, no spectators to the drama, but active participants in it. He writes that reconciliation begins with healing our brokenness with God. It then heals our brokenness within, our brokenness with others, and the brokenness of the world.

That is what this night is about. Made one with God, we can now claim our calling with the angels and shepherds, to sing with hope and joy, to heal the world.

Denise Levertov's poem "On the Mystery of the Incarnation" describes the need for, and the promise of, reconciliation well.

"It's when we face for a moment/the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know/the taint in our own selves, that awe/cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart:/not to a flower, not to a dolphin,/to no innocent form/but to this creature vainly sure/it and no other is god-like, God (out of compassion for our ugly/failure to evolve) entrusts,/as guest, as brother,/the Word."

God entrusts the word of reconciliation to us.

Marcus Borg wrote that "God wills our reconciliation, our return from exile." Your exile is yours and mine is mine, and together we discern the exiles from which our church and culture and world need to return. But the good news this night is the gift we receive, to be invited to find a place at the stable.

Chris Rice writes that "the journey of reconciliation begins with a transformation of the human person." Whatever else we experience this night, whatever else we believe or don't believe, wherever you are on your journey, my prayer for you is that you live into the reconciling transformation that incarnation offers, that Christmas offers, live into the promise that God yearns to welcome you home.

Embrace that, and then embrace your calling. Your calling as an agent of reconciliation. It is your calling, and it is the calling we share together.

"When the song of the angels is stilled," Howard Thurman wrote, "when the star in the sky is gone,/when the kings and princes are home,/when the shepherds are back with their flocks,/the work of Christmas begins:/to find the lost,/to heal the broken,/to feed the hungry,/to release the prisoner,/to rebuild the nations,/to bring peace among the people,/to make music in the heart."

To that we add – to reconcile. The work of Christmas, and its absolute gift. Peace on earth and mercy mild. Amen.