

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

A: Christmas Day
Luke 2:1-20

25 December 2022
Salem, Bridgeport

“Christ, Be Born in Us – Today!”

“One day, during the great depression,
when many people struggled just to put food on the table,
a little boy heard that a circus was coming to town.
The little boy came running home, full of excitement and hope.
Maybe, just maybe, his dad could give him the dollar he needed for a ticket!
When he asked, his father gazed down on him with deep sadness in his eyes,
knowing he couldn’t afford to give his son that much money.
But seeing the hope shining in his son’s eyes, he said,
‘If you can earn half the money doing odd jobs, I can give you the rest’.
The boy worked feverishly and, just a few days before the circus came to town,
he had earned 50 cents, and taking that and the 50 cents from his dad,
he literally ran into town to buy his ticket for the big day.
When the circus got to town, he grabbed his ticket and rushed to the main street.
He didn’t see anyone collecting tickets, but as he stood on the curb, the circus parade went by.
He was thrilled to watch the elephants and monkeys and brightly costumed performers.
He eagerly watched as the rest of the parade went by.
After the parade, the boy rushed home and told his father that he had been to the circus
and how much fun he had had.
The father, surprised that the boy was home already, asked him to describe the circus.
The boy told of the parade that went down the main street,
and about all the animals & performers he had seen.
The father looked at in him in surprise,
‘Son, you didn’t see the circus; all you saw was the parade.’”

That boy reminds me of so many people at Christmas time,
both outside the church and inside it, caught up in the trees and wreaths and mistletoe,
the carols and cookies and Christmas cards, the lights and gifts and get-togethers.
But all they’re doing is seeing the parade and missing the main event,
the true joy of Christmas, the joy which the angel announced on that first Christmas night,
“Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy
...for all...people; for today...there has been born for you a Savior...Christ the Lord”

The shepherds heard the news and ran to see the newborn baby the angels had described,
and when they got there, something happened, something far more than seeing a baby.
They experienced something so real, something so extraordinary, something so miraculous,
that they ran out, glorifying and praising God!

Now those of us who are here today know that there is something more to Christmas than just the Christmas cards and the decorating and the cookie baking and the gift-giving. We know that Christmas is about Jesus, which is why we are here this Christmas morning. But what I want to say to you this morning is that even this isn't the real circus – this is just the parade.

As much as we may enjoy being together and singing Christmas carols, and seeing some Christmas decorations, and hearing the Christmas story, each of those things and even all of those things put together are not what Christmas is about.

What we are doing here is much more like the circus parade than the circus.

Yes, a Christmas worship service can be beautiful and pleasurable and even exciting, but it's really only meant to draw us to the main event – which goes far deeper than what we see and hear with our eyes and ears,, far deeper than ideas and words and stories, for deeper than our minds can comprehend.

Because Christmas is about a mystery that we cannot understand or explain.

It's about an all-powerful, omniscient, transcendent God who created all that exists, the entire universe, including all of space and time, all matter and energy, and its contents of planets, stars, galaxies, of which just what we can observe is 93 billion light years in diameter.

It's about that awesome God who also planned and designed and created you, who knows not only everything you have done and every word you have spoken, but every thought you have had and ever will have, who knows every hair on your head, and every freckle on your skin, and every molecule in your body, who loves you and delights in you and wants only the best for you.

It's about that loving God who offers you abundant life that is not dependent upon anything or anyone else, but instead transcends every situation and circumstance of your life, filling you with love and joy, peace and patience, faithfulness and self-control, and goodness, kindness and gentleness.

It's about a God who has a plan and a purpose for your life, who, no matter what choices you make, continues to use every experience and every interaction and every moment to move you towards your fulfilling your dreams and your destiny.

Of course, this is what God has desired for each and every human being who has ever lived. God has worked through many religions, including Judaism and Christianity, giving us first the Law, and when that wasn't enough, giving us the Prophets, and when that wasn't enough, giving us Christmas.

God has always offered humanity the way to abundant life, but somehow humans kept straying from the path, losing the trail,

and getting lost in a world that promises life but leads to death.
And so, God gave us Jesus to show the world how to stay on that path to abundant life.
And still, we stray, lose the trail, and find ourselves either missing out on all the joy,
or mistaking the joy at watching the parade as being all there is.

There were people in Jesus' time
who followed the letter of God's laws as closely as any human being could,
who dedicated their lives to doing so,
and to making sure others did as well,
but they mistook the circus parade for the circus.

There are people in our time
who have come to church faithfully all their lives, who have gone to Bible study,
who have said their prayers every morning and night and said grace before meals,
who have pledged and given their offerings and maybe even tithed,
who have served on church committees and participated in church organizations,
who have volunteered their time to help others,
but who have mistaken the parade for the circus.

So how do you know if you've been to the circus or the parade?
Our Christmas story tonight lays out 3 things.

The first is sign and fulfillment – it's how God initiates it all.
An angel came to the shepherds and said, "This will be your sign... Go and look for it."
It's a strange sign – who would put a newborn baby in an animal's feeding trough? –
but they went and looked – and found it!
They were given the very sign they had been promised!

The second is the need to act and to share – those are the 2 appropriate outer human responses to God.

First of all, when the angel sends them to find their sign, they go.
Even though it sounds like a fool's errand, even though it could be a wasted trip,
even though they could make themselves laughing stocks, they take the risk and go.
They act.
And second, once they get their sign,
they are so overcome with amazement that they couldn't keep the new to themselves.
They share – and their amazement becomes contagious.

The third is a 2-fold response of glory and praise –
those are the 2 appropriate inner human responses to God –
they give God glory for who God is and they praise God for what God has done.

How do you know if you've been to the circus or just the parade?

You will have been given a sign and fulfillment.
You will have acted in faith and you will have been so amazed at seeing a sign fulfilled

that you have not been able to keep from sharing your story.
And you will be filled with such gratitude and awe
that every time you remember your experience you will be God all the praise and glory.

The real circus, the real Christmas, you see, is not about what we do, but about who we are.
It's not about Jesus being born in Bethlehem, but about Jesus being born in our hearts.
It's not about a theoretical, abstract, ephemeral, transcendent God,
but a God who came to earth to live as a human being,
and who sent the Spirit so that we can know a real, concrete, immanent God
who wants to be intentionally involved in each and every moment of our lives.
It's about a God who gives us signs, calls us to act in faith, and then fulfills those signs
in such remarkable ways that we not only give glory and praise to God,
but share the news with all the world that Jesus Christ is born – this day – in us! Amen