

***“And Try To Keep It All The Year”***

**Reverend Bill Gause**

**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**

**1<sup>st</sup> Sunday After Christmas**

**January 1, 2017**

**First Scripture Reading: John 8:2-11**

<sup>2</sup>Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. <sup>3</sup>The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, <sup>4</sup>they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. <sup>5</sup>Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” <sup>6</sup>They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. <sup>7</sup>When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” <sup>8</sup>And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. <sup>9</sup>When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. <sup>10</sup>Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” <sup>11</sup>She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

**Second Scripture Reading: Luke 1:67-79**

<sup>67</sup>Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: <sup>68</sup>“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. <sup>69</sup>He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, <sup>70</sup>as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, <sup>71</sup>that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. <sup>72</sup>Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, <sup>73</sup>the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us <sup>74</sup>that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, <sup>75</sup>in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. <sup>76</sup>And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, <sup>77</sup>to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. <sup>78</sup>By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, <sup>79</sup>to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”



**Sermon: “And Try To Keep It All The Year”**

The story of Jesus’ birth that we hear at Christmas is filled with colorful and familiar characters. The virgin Mary and her betrothed, Joseph. The shepherds, the wise men, the angels. Though there is no Inn Keeper explicitly mentioned in the story, there had to have been one around. And if Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem to be registered because of their lineage, surely there were other members of their family there for the same reason, right?

But when the New Testament story moves on from Jesus’ birth, we hear no more about any of these figures except Mary and Jesus. Joseph is only mentioned once more, when 12-year-old Jesus gets separated from his family and is later discovered teaching in the temple.<sup>1</sup> But even here, Joseph is not mentioned by name.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:41-42, NRSV

Which has always left me wondering, what happened to those shepherds after they go back to their fields and flocks? What did the innkeeper do when he figured out what had happened in his cattle stall? What did the Magi do after returning home from their visit with the Messiah? What was Joseph's life like after the birth of his first son? Did the events of this first Christmas change them? What effect did their experiences of the newborn Christ-child have on them in the days and weeks and years that followed? What happens next? Which are all good questions to ask especially on this, the first day of a New Year.

The month of "January" is named for "Janus," the Roman god of beginnings and transitions. Janus is usually depicted with two faces, one looking backward, the other looking forward. As a threshold from one year to the next, January has traditionally served as a new beginning; a chance to reflect on the 12 months just past, even as we anticipate what may come in the next 12.

A new year presents us with a blank slate; a book of clean pages waiting to be written upon. We make resolutions to be better and to make positive changes in our lives and in the world around us. We resolve to eat better, to work harder, to embrace the challenge of a new hobby. Some we will keep, most we probably won't. But we make New Year's Resolutions because we have come to believe that the beginning of a new year is a good time to start over.

One of my favorite things about starting a new year is turning the page on a brand-new calendar, uncluttered with appointments and things to do. Those calendar pages are pristine and white. Anything could be in them. Anything. Before us are 365 days of decisions and choices about who will be and what we will do. What will drive those choices? How will those decisions be made? Will they be based in our desire to be skinnier, wealthier, or more successful? Or will they be driven by something else?

It is interesting that New Year's Day follows so closely after Christmas on our calendars. Scholars tell us it is unlikely that the birth of Christ (as the story is told in the New Testament) could have happened in the winter. More likely it was a springtime event. But the good thing about it being celebrated this late is that it comes right before the new year. As we look forward to the possibilities of the new year, we do so fresh from our celebration of the infant Jesus. Like Janus looking forward and back, any consideration of how we will greet the new year should be done with an eye toward our recent encounter with the newborn Christ.

What happened to the other characters of the Christmas story? I cannot believe that they came away from the experience unchanged. Because meeting Christ *should* affect us; it should change us.

Throughout the Gospel story there are hundreds if not thousands of people who meet Jesus. For some of them the initial changes are obvious. The hemorrhaging woman is healed. The Gerasene demoniac is set free. The woman accused of adultery is saved from death and sent on her way. The wealthy Zacchaeus welcomes Jesus into his home. But what happens next? All of these people were scorned, looked down upon by the society of their time and place. But encountering

Jesus, they were given a chance to start anew. Where do these people go after their brief appearance in the Bible ends? What do they do next?

The new year is a time when we already think about fresh starts. Having so recently encountered the newborn Christ, we should begin seeking the answer to that question for ourselves. What do we do next?

The second scripture reading this morning was the prophecy of Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. In it, Zachariah praises Jesus as the promised Messiah who will restore Israel, but he also calls to mind our responsibility, having been "rescued from the hands of our enemies," to "serve him without fear."

In case you missed it last week, that was our Christmas day message: that the baby Jesus was not a silent vision of infant beauty to be admired, he was a squalling, crying baby that moved people to action. Our experience of the Christ-child at Christmas should be fresh on our minds as we face the limitless prospects of a new year. As we seek to fill the blank pages of the book before us, it must be with the intent to serve him whose birth we have just celebrated, without fear.

It is awful easy to fall in love with the Christ-child. I've always loved Will Ferrell's take on this in the movie *Talledega Nights*.<sup>2</sup> In the film his character Ricky Bobby is asked to say grace before dinner and so he does, addressing his prayer to "Dear 8 pound, six ounce, newborn infant Jesus; don't even know a word yet; just a little infant; so cuddly, but still omnipotent."

I laugh at that scene every time. But part of what makes it funny is the truth beneath it. Ricky Bobby "like[s] the Christmas Jesus best." And so do we. We tend to see the Christmas Jesus as one who smiles and coos from the manger. But Christmas Jesus invites us to reflect on God's love that reaches out to us. Experiencing the Christmas Jesus is meaningless if it doesn't inspire us to respond to God's gifts of grace and mercy and steadfast love by reaching out ourselves.

One of the great classics of the holiday season is Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.<sup>3</sup> In it, Ebenezer Scrooge, a cold, solitary figure who rejects all relationships, attachments, and feelings of sentimentality is (spoiler alert!) transformed into a warm-hearted man who embraces life and connections to other people. His redemption is centered on Christmas and by witnessing visions of Christmases past, present, and future, Scrooge comes to understand that there is more to life than his own work and personal well-being. Scrooge recognizes the need to be in relationship with others and to share what he has, particularly with those in need. But even though we tend to think of *A Christmas Carol* as a holiday story, its main theme bears significance far beyond Christmas day.

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<sup>2</sup> *Talledega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*. Dir. Adam McKay. Perf. Will Ferrell, John C. Reilly, Sacha Baron Cohen. Columbia Pictures, 2006. Film.

<sup>3</sup> Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol ; The Chimes and ; The Cricket on the Hearth*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004. Print.

As his transformation comes to completion in the presence of the Spirit of Christmas Future, Ebenezer Scrooge makes a pledge that will define his life going forward: “I will honor Christmas in my heart, *and try to keep it all the year.*” For Dickens, Scrooge’s Christmas redemption changes not just his understanding of that day, but of his entire life. Scrooge does not just see Christmas differently; he sees life differently.

And so must we.

We do not know whatever became of the shepherds, or of the Magi, or any of the people who encountered the newborn infant Jesus on that holy night those many years ago. We can assume, and imagine, but the gospel writers did not see fit to carry their stories on any further.

As we face the coming days and weeks and months of a new year, we *can* know how *we* as individuals and as a Church will respond to God’s breaking into the world in the life of the infant Jesus, because we will write those stories ourselves.

May our stories yet to be written, be stories of love and mercy and compassion and service and discipleship and may they be stories that honor Christmas all the year.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.