

“The Gospel According to ‘A Charlie Brown Christmas’”

**Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday of Advent
December 24, 2017**

First Scripture Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7

²The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. ³You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ⁴For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. ⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. ⁶For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Second Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-20

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.



Sermon: *“The Gospel According to ‘A Charlie Brown Christmas’”*

According to the Pew Research Center, 9 out of every 10 Americans will celebrate Christmas this year. Their polling also shows that while 95% of all Christians will be celebrating tomorrow, so will 81% of non-Christians. Which raises the question, what are all these people celebrating? The Christmas holiday that

the Grinch hated so much, and that Rudolph used his bright red nose to save, has grown into something over the years that would probably be unrecognizable to the people who were there for the very first one.

It has gotten to the point now where one might be forgiven for thinking that Christmas is actually a contest to see who can spend the most money and/or incur the most debt in the weeks between Thanksgiving and December 25th. According to the National Retail Federation, last year Americans spent over 658 *Billion* dollars during the holiday season.² Their forecast for this year is for that number to climb to over 682 Billion.³ That's a lot of fruit cake and ugly sweaters.

You might also be forgiven for thinking Christmas is about lights and decorations. According to the National Christmas Tree Association, Americans bought over 27 million cut trees last year and another 18.6 million fake ones. That's about 4 billion dollars spent on something we use for a month and then either throw away, or shove in the basement until next year.⁴

Then there's *The Great Christmas Light Fight*, a "reality" show that's been airing on ABC every December since 2013. According to the network's website, the show "showcases the wildest and most spectacular Christmas displays in America. In each episode, four families from all around the country with over-the-top displays compete to win the coveted Light Fight trophy and a \$50,000 prize..."⁵ Nothing says "Glory to the newborn King" like turning your house into something that can be seen from space.

Unless, of course, it's eating yourself into a coma. An average woman eats about 2,000 calories in a day, while the average man eats about 2,500. But according to Dr. Lauren Whitt at the University of Alabama-Birmingham, the average adult eats about 3000 calories in a typical Christmas dinner, alone. Add in all the other things eaten on Christmas and the calorie intake for just that one day can be closer to 4,500, or about *twice* that of a normal day.⁶ The University of Arizona College of Nursing lists "overindulgence" as one of the top five reasons people visit an emergency room during the holidays.⁷

And Christmas has even become a political flash point in recent years as Americans have debated how strict we should be about Christmas and the theology of the Christmas story. Is it better to greet one another with the words "Merry Christmas", or is it okay to be more inclusive of other traditions with a hearty "Happy Holidays"? Pundits have debated the significance of holiday greetings, but another Pew Research Center poll conducted this year, found that while about a third (32%) of respondents preferred to be greeted with the words "Merry Christmas," more than half (52%) said they didn't really have a strong feeling one way or the other.⁸

With all the shopping and decorating and cooking and eating and debating, it can be really very easy to lose sight of what it was all for in the first place. What *is* the true meaning of Christmas? That is the question our last Christmas special seeks to answer. First airing in 1965, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* has been reminding us of the true meaning of Christmas for over half a century.

You may remember Charlie Brown as the creation of cartoonist Charles M. Schulz. Schulz wrote his daily comic strip titled simply "Peanuts" that ran in newspapers across the country from 1950 until his death in February, 2000.⁹ You still see reruns of the strip in your daily paper, but no new ones have been drawn since then.

Along with nearly fifty years of cartoons, (17,897 individual daily strips)¹⁰ Schulz also helped write and produce 66 animated Peanuts television specials and movies. The first of those specials was *A Charlie Brown Christmas* which tells the story of our titular hero's quest for the true meaning of Christmas as he

discovers over and over again that his friends and family members have embraced an over-commercialized holiday.¹¹

There's Lucy, the nickel-for-your-thoughts "psychiatrist" who points out that Charlie Brown's problem is really pantophobia, the fear of everything. This will be important later on. But more to the point, she also claims to share his concern about Christmas because, as she says, "I never get what I want, just a lot of stupid toys or a bicycle or clothes or something like that."

What would she really like for Christmas? "Real Estate." (Wouldn't we all sister. Wouldn't we all.)

Then there's Charlie Brown's dog Snoopy who is hard at work decorating his iconic little red dog house. The flyer that has inspired his work reads: "*Find the true meaning of Christmas! Win money, money, money! Spectacular super-colossal neighborhood Christmas Lights and Display Contest.*"

And then we meet his little sister Sally, who, needs help writing a letter to Santa Clause. Charlie Brown writes as she dictates a hefty wish list which concludes "If it seems too complicated, make it easy on yourself: just send money. How about tens and twenties?" Remember, she's supposed to be about 6 years old.¹² When Charlie Brown gets exasperated and walks away, Sally seems genuinely mystified. "All I want is what I have coming to me," she says. "All I want is my fair share."

But Chuck can't stick around because he has to get to the school auditorium. He's been invited to direct the Christmas play, you know. Parts are assigned, scripts are handed out, but when Charlie Brown calls for "action," Schroeder begins playing a snappy jazz number on his little piano, and all the children begin dancing. It is tempting to dismiss that as simple disrespect for Charlie Brown's directorial leadership. But actually, it shows that no one really understands what they're doing there. They celebrate because Christmas is about celebrating. But none of the gathered children seems to know *why* they're supposed to be celebrating.

So, Charlie Brown decides that having a Christmas tree will set the right mood and help everyone get into the spirit of the season. On his way out the door, Lucy tells him to get "A great big shiny aluminum Christmas tree." Remember those?

Charlie Brown searches a lot filled with tall, modern, brightly colored aluminum trees, but none of those inspires him, so instead, he settles on a real tree, a small, scraggly one, with needles falling off that looks nothing like the perfect aluminum tree Lucy had in mind. And predictably, when he returns with his tree, the other children ridicule it and him.

Charlie Brown cries out in despair, "Doesn't anyone know the true meaning of Christmas?!?" Then Linus steps to center stage and recites from memory the King James Version of Luke 2:8-14:

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord...

It's a beautiful moment that really defines the show. Heartened, Charlie Brown leaves the auditorium to go home, thinking over what Linus just said. The other children follow.

When he gets home, Charlie Brown sees that Snoopy did win first prize in that display contest. The twinkling lights and gaudy decorations have won accolades, while his own humble, living tree is despised. He takes a red ball from Snoopy's house and places it on his little tree, but it falls over. Just when Charlie Brown is ready to give up, the other kids arrive, and borrowing the decorations from Snoopy's prize winning display, they use them to decorate the little tree, transforming it into something far more beautiful than any of the aluminum trees Lucy could have imagined.

On one level it is a story of redemption. Charlie Brown's little tree really is beautiful. He hasn't failed. But this is not the answer to his question of the true meaning of Christmas. That can be found in two pivotal points in the show.

The first is when Linus steps to the middle of the stage to answer Charlie Brown's question about the meaning of Christmas. It is worth noting that he does not quote Luke 2:7 which describes the actual birth of Jesus "with the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes." Nor does he quote from Isaiah 9 or Isaiah 11 which are prophecies foretelling the birth of the Messiah. He recites instead the part about the angels' appearance to the shepherds. He recites the line about the shepherds being "sore afraid" and the Angel's reassuring words to them, "Fear not!"

And when he says those words, "fear not," Linus drops his blanket.

Now here's the thing you need to remember about Peanuts: Every character has their own defining "thing." Charlie Brown has his distinctive yellow zig-zag striped shirt, Schroeder has his little piano, and Frieda has her "naturally curly hair." Linus' "thing" is his blue security blanket.

He almost always has it with him and he almost never puts it down. For most of the publication run of Peanuts, Linus carried that blanket everywhere he went. It helped to ease his fears and make him feel safe. Snoopy makes a sport of trying to steal it, and Lucy often tries to threaten or shame him into getting rid of it. Twice during *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, she demands that he "get rid of that stupid blanket."

But here, at center stage, with all eyes glued on him, Linus quotes the words of the angel and when he says the words "fear not," he drops the blanket. It's so subtle you might miss it, but it's there. And then you get a long shot of Linus standing there with the blanket crumpled on the floor beside him. And we remember that this is animation, so we know that's not incidental. Someone had to spend some time drawing that blanket on the floor.

Now I'll bet I've watched *A Charlie Brown Christmas* about 100 times over the course of my life and I never once noticed that. But a pastor from Houston, Texas named Jason Soroski did and blogged about it. In that article he wrote that Linus dropping his security blanket at that very moment is significant because it symbolizes that "The birth of Jesus separates us from our fears. The birth of Jesus frees us from the habits we are unable (or unwilling) to break ourselves. The birth of Jesus allows us to simply drop the false security we have been grasping so tightly, and learn to trust and cling to Him instead."¹³

And then when you reflect back to the beginning, when Charlie Brown gets his nickel's worth of psychoanalysis from Lucy, we remember that he suffers from Pantophobia... the fear of everything. Linus reminds Charlie Brown that Christmas is about celebrating the birth of one who is more powerful than the things we fear, even when we fear everything. And that all of the things we rely on for comfort and reassurance, pale in comparison to the power of God, made present and real in Jesus, the Christ. That's

why Linus drops his security blanket. He is laying down the thing he trusts to soothe his fears, and heeding the words of the angel to “fear not,” for Christ has been born.

What security blankets do we need to lay down? In this time when we seem to have so much to fear, it can be easy to grasp onto the things of this world for security and comfort. But Christmas reminds us that our true comfort lies not in power, or wealth, or influence, or even our own abilities, but in the grace, mercy, and steadfast love of God made manifest in the life of a small child, born in a little-known backwater town of the Roman empire, over 2000 years ago.

Now if you’re paying attention, you will see Linus pick up his blanket when he walks off stage. And he is still carrying it when he joins his friends outside Charlie Browns house when they decorate the little tree. But the first thing Linus does is wrap his blanket around the base of the little tree’s trunk.

That may just seem like a practical step, taken to support the little tree and help it stay standing up. But here’s the other important, pivotal point in the show: while everyone else wanted a fancy, aluminum tree, those are cold, and hollow and there is no life in them. What Charlie Brown comes back with is something living, yet small, and fragile, and too weak to even stand up on its own... kind of like a baby.

Yes, that’s right, the little tree, weak and forlorn and despised, represents the Christ-child that comes into the world on Christmas, the one that, all appearances aside, embodies the power and grace of God almighty. The one who came to His own and His own knew Him not; the stone that the builder rejected that has become the corner stone of the foundation; the one who died a cruel sinner’s death on a cross, the reviled one who accepted the disdain of those who could not accept Him or the love of God He embodied.

That little tree that the children hated, becomes beautiful when they all come together around it, to give of themselves and to embrace the beauty that was already present.

And when Linus puts down his blanket at the base of the tree, he is symbolically laying his fears and insecurities, at the feet of Jesus. And this time, he doesn’t pick it back up.

The show concludes with the children huddled around the little tree, now made beautiful by their acts of love and compassion. They lift up their voices in song. And while we might expect them to begin singing “O Christmas tree, since that *is* the tune that has been playing in the background for several minutes, and because this seems, at least on the surface, to be about a tree. Instead they lift their voices with the familiar words

*Hark the Herald angels sing, glory to the newborn King.
Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.
Joyful all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies;
with the angelic host proclaim, Christ is born in Bethlehem.
Hark! The herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king.*

That’s the meaning of Christmas, Charlie Brown.

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

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