

The Comfort Stick

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
December 15, 2024 – 3rd Sunday of Advent
Text: Psalm 23

We all get our Christmas spirit from different things, if we're lucky enough to have any at all. Things seem rather subdued in my neighborhood reflecting back to previous years. At least it seems that way to me. I admit I am grateful there are fewer inflatables in my neighborhood this year, relegated to homes where little ones reside so that their presence is a delight every day. My neighbor does have a gigantic octopus in their front yard. I mean huge. It was a Halloween decoration with this gigantic head in the center of the front yard and several arms supposedly pushing their way up out of the front lawn. I mean, odd. I keep hoping they will at least put a Santa hat on it. No such luck. Yet.

I read something on Facebook just as I sat down to write this and one of the first posts was written by someone who is apparently a fan of hugely overdone Christmas displays at homes. She says that your outdoor Christmas decorations express the Christmas spirit so it should look like Christmas threw up on your lawn. Uh no. Just no.

I've been known to do a lot of Christmas decorations, outdoor and indoor, at our house. I come by it naturally as my dad loved Christmas, and loved, loved, loved putting up all those lights at our house. He would outline the house with colored lights which was something because from one angle – the one facing the main street – the house was three stories high. My mom would have a fit. Then he also put a candle in every window and our house had a LOT of windows. It was my job to turn them all on each day. I must say that his over the top decorating probably had something to do with the fact that my mother would not permit our tree to go up before December

20, at the earliest. Her preference was December 24, the German custom. They tried it one year when I was little but never again. It was magical to go to bed with no Christmas in the house and then wake up with presents and Christmas everywhere. But, as I said, this only happened once. Apparently they quickly realized no one needs to stay up all night to make Christmas happen.

The thing is Christmas happens anyway. Every year. Sometimes there are surprises – like my neighbors’ octopus – but more often than not, Christmas just unfolds for us in the midst of our jam-packed, frenetic lives. My Christmas surprise this year was most unexpected and you can see it right here on our altar, enjoying its guest appearance as our creche for this week. Yes, this is the Peanuts Nativity Creche set. I could not believe it when I saw it at CVS on Friday and I snagged it immediately. It was the last one. And it makes me so happy! Why? Oh, I don’t know but can any of us explain why certain Christmas things make us happy and others just makes us feel ... well, nothing. This nativity set recalls the beloved comic strip *Peanuts* and its iconic cartoon Christmas special *A Charlie Brown Christmas* which I am old enough to have watched the first time it aired in 1965. In it, Charlie Brown is wondering what the real meaning of Christmas is. In response, Linus tells the nativity story from the Gospel of Luke thus reminding Charlie Brown and the entire audience that the real meaning of Christmas is to be found in the birth of a tiny baby in a backwater town no one ever heard about. This baby would grow up to change the world by teaching one simple message: God’s love for all is unconditional.

Dear ones, that is still the meaning of Christmas. We still find it in the scriptures, in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. Christmas is not inflatable Santas or the Polar Express. Christmas is not flying reindeer, one with a bright red nose. Christmas is not presents or

stockings filled with treats. Christmas is not even Christmas trees bedecked in any one of a thousand different ways.

Christmas is, at its core, a tiny baby born practically outdoors to an underage refugee mother and the man who would be her husband. It is about angels singing and dumbstruck shepherds. Christmas is now, as it has always been, about God making the unbelievable sacrifice of giving up divinity to live among God's beloved people as one of them. God is about life made new again, pure and simple. How easy it is to forget that in this new Christmas landscape, growing more crass and commercialized by the minute it seems. This is why being here, in church, making the effort to remember the real Christmas is more important than ever this year.

But how can we do that? How do we go out into this world of Christmas inflatables and grimacing Grinches? Well, I'll give you a hint, and it has to do with this little nativity set up here. If you look at the Charlie Brown character who is supposed to be portraying Joseph in the impromptu Christmas pageant they are staging, you see that Charlie is holding something. Can you see what it is?? ... It's a shepherd's crook. Joseph is often portrayed holding a shepherd's crook although technically that makes no sense since he was a carpenter and not a shepherd. But, allowing for dramatic license which has been centuries in the making, I think Joseph's (in this case Charlie Brown's) shepherd's staff is meant to be seen as something which enabled Joseph to protect the very pregnant Mary as they made the arduous journey to Bethlehem for the Roman census. I am confident it made the journey easier, both for Joseph as a source of support and for Mary as a source of comfort that Joseph would somehow keep her safe until her baby was born.

So, Joseph's staff was in a very real way a comfort stick. I use this phraseology of "comfort stick" intentionally to describe this stick

as one essential item of “sacred stuff” which we are reflecting on during this season as we light the candles of the Advent wreath. I have an actual walking stick here, this one coming from a branch that came down in our yard from our beloved tree (it’s the reason I insisted we buy *this* house) years ago. A walking stick has some things in common with a shepherd’s staff in that it can and is used to offer support to weary walkers and hikers. In a pinch it can be used to ward off critters which might accost you on the journey as well. So, it is a sort of comfort stick that allows you to make progress on a journey even as it gives you some sense of safety and well-being. In the case of this particular stick, it also calls to mind happy memories of a beloved tree.

A comfort stick. If this sounds vaguely familiar in concept that’s not surprising. You heard a very similar reference in this morning’s scripture text – the 23rd Psalm. I realized when I chose this as an Advent text this year that it would most likely seem an odd choice. And in many ways, it is. Psalm 23 most often appears in connection with memorial services and funerals. This is because it speaks so eloquently, so poignantly, of God’s ever present love for each of God’s beloved – no matter the difficulties of the journeys they are undertaking. Here God is described as a shepherd, the one charged with taking the best possible care of the most vulnerable of God’s creatures, the sheep. If you know anything about sheep, and I don’t know much, you know they are not the brightest animals. They tend to wander off, fall into crevices in the pasture, get stuck in brambles, get themselves hurt, etc. So a good shepherd is someone who knows and understands this and appreciates that the sheep is just this way. It’s not purposely trying to aggravate the shepherd. It’s just being its best sheep self. In Psalm 23, we read a description of all the ways God cares for the sheep – that’s us, the good ones as well as the wayward

ones. God as shepherd leads the sheep to the best places to eat and sleep and rest. God guides the sheep to places of refreshment from the harshness of life to a place of rest and restoration. God is with the sheep through the darkest of valleys and the most dangerous of locales, never abandoning it. It is here that the rod and staff – the comfort stick, makes its appearance in this song of joy for the unfailing love of God.

“Your rod and your staff – they comfort me.” The rod and the staff are two distinctly different tools of the shepherd’s trade. The rod is more of a weapon, smaller but heavier than the staff. It would be used to ward off intruders in the sheep’s fold, both human and critter. The staff, on the other hand, is a mechanism for offering care and support to the sheep itself, even as it provides extra support to the shepherd traversing the rocky hillsides of Judea. The shepherd would use the staff to prod the sheep along when it was time to move to a new patch of grass for grazing. He would also use it to rescue wayward lambs from brambles and crevices and even ponds. Thus, it offered the lambs and sheep both comfort and safety as they lived their lives each day. It was indeed a comfort stick.

So, this brings me to my advice for dealing with the glitzy, over-commercialized Christmas shenanigans all around us these days. Look for the shepherd’s crook, the comfort stick. It won’t be easy to find, and it won’t be visible in all Christmas displays, that’s for sure. But they are out there. In all those outdoor nativity scenes – the new plastic ones lit from inside with extension cords, and the old ones made of plastic or wood, illuminated by spotlights. They’re out there and you’ll find them if you just look hard enough. And once you start looking for them, you will be surprised at how they pop up in the most surprising places. Like the shelf in CVS where they keep the nativity sets. Like the Home Depot or Loews or Job Lot where the Holy family

is hanging out, probably next to the Grinch. Irritating, yes but so very appropriate. Yes, dear ones, look for all those comfort sticks of Christmas and whenever you find one, pause and savor the moment. Wish yourself a Merry Christmas and the Baby Jesus a happy birthday. And smile. Because Mary and Joseph are almost to Bethlehem and the Christmas star is shining ever brighter even if we can't always see it. The journey goes on. Amen.