***The Gift***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

December 24, 2023 – Christmas Eve Service with Communion

Text: Luke 2:1-20

 Welcome to this Christmas Eve service here at the United Congregational Church of Westerly. We are so very glad you decided to spend part of your Christmas with us. Christmas has changed a lot over the years, hasn’t it? I’m confident that brainstorming together we could easily come up with quite the list of how different Christmas 2024 is even from Christmas 2000 or even Christmas 1994. But I’m not one to dwell on the past. After all the future is just too interesting! For one thing, I am just fascinated by the dark turn Christmas celebrations have taken in recent years. What do I mean by that?

Well, for one thing, the Grinch is an ever present part of Christmas these days and I admit that confuses me. I am old enough to remember when Dr. Seuss’ book *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* was first published in 1957 and old enough to have watched the first television special based on the book which aired in 1967. It was an animated show featuring the original book illustrations come to life, quite the amazing thing in the 1960’s! Boris Karloff was the voice of the Grinch and the narrator, adding a certain gravitas to the production. Karloff at that time was one of the leading men of the horror movies of that age and was best known for his portrayals of Frankenstein in several movies. So, his presence as the voice of the Grinch left no doubt that the Grinch was a sinister character indeed. Fast forward to today and it has not escaped my notice that, as I drive around my neighborhood to look at all the Christmas decorations folks have on their lawns, the Grinch has become the preferred decoration this year. In fact, I’ve seen more Grinches this year than Santas. Even my next door neighbor, the one I mentioned who a had left their gigantic Halloween octopus out on the lawn, has now replaced the octopus with a giant inflatable Grinch next to a strobing lights Christmas tree. I had been hoping for a Santa hat on the octopus and maybe a few lights but no such luck. However, I can report that the guy around the corner and a few blocks down has left his more than life size viper on his front lawn and it does sport a Santa hat. So, there’s that.

I’m talking about the Grinch this year because I admit the proliferation of Grinches has me concerned about the overall emotional well-bring of our country, and even the world. How can it be that Christmas has devolved from a simple story about the miraculous birth of a special baby destined to bring the message of God’s unconditional love to the world to a holiday devoted to a green creature with a hideous smile and evil glint in his eye. Yes, of course, the Grinch is reformed at the very end of the book and all the subsequent movies, his heart which was two sizes too small now growing larger and larger. But, honestly, is the Grinch we celebrate in all these lawn decorations everywhere, the reformed Grinch with the loving heart of gold? No, I’m afraid it isn’t. What I see everywhere are the celebrations of the Grinch who hates Christmas and has no compunction about the prospect of ruining Christmas for everyone else. He doesn’t, of course, and the villagers of Whoville show him that Christmas is not about the gifts or the presents or the delightful foods of the holiday season when they gather around the town Christmas tree to sing as Christmas day dawns. They are showing the Grinch they will celebrate even without all the trappings of Christmas. Of course, that is a wonderful message. But allow me to point out one thing here. The song the Whoville townspeople are singing to mark the dawning of Christmas day is not a song about the birth of the Christ Child but instead, its words are nonsensical containing only an oblique reference to the holiday “Christmas” with no explanation of what it really is. What’s curious to me here is that this story – the Christmas story which is really not about Christmas – has become the defining identity of Christmas this year. Why is that? Why has the hope of the world personified as an innocent baby born to poor parents in a backwater part of the world been replaced by a grimacing green creature? Why have other dark stories of Christmas like, *The Nightmare Before Christmas,* become so popular at the same time*?* I confess folks, this is all very confusing to me. How and why have we lost sight of the original Christmas story? I’d love to hear your thoughts on this but the only answer I can come up with is that we have lost it as we have surrendered to the secularism of contemporary culture. We have allowed ourselves to become incensed by stories of abuse of all kinds by clergy in multiple Christian communities, Catholic and Protestant, that we have literally thrown the baby out with the bath water. Or perhaps more accurately, the baptismal water. We have allowed our outrage at the narrow belief patterns of a few Christian communities who focus more on who they exclude than anything else to turn our backs on all churches, assuming all Christians are the same. Dear ones, please let me assure you they are not. How to make this truth more visible to those outside our walls has been our goal this Advent season. And from what I’ve seen, people are hungry for the message of kindness, love and welcome we offer everyone in this church.

This is also the reason why we chose to do something different for the liturgy surrounding the lighting of the candles on the Advent wreath this year. If you’ve been with us the past several Sundays, you already know this. If you’re just joining us this evening – Yay! – you may have noticed our emphasis with those candles has not been on the typical themes of peace, hope, joy and love. No, instead we have been pausing to reflect on the meaning of Christmas through the ordinary stuff of Christmas. The things which are part of the Christmas story that we don’t usually notice. Like the wreath itself which symbolizes the unending circle of life and God’s love upholding it all. Like the lamp which we can imagine Joseph holding to guide him and Mary forward on their long journey to Bethlehem, symbolizing the light always defeating the darkness. Like the staff carried by Joseph and the shepherds to provide strength and stability for the journey, symbolizing security and determination. Like the manger itself, the wooden structure built not to hold a baby but to provide nourishment for the simplest of God’s creatures, symbolizing that human hands were needed to transform the manger into a bed for a holy infant. And this evening we celebrate the final “thing” of Christmas which is the gift. But just what is that gift? That is the question, isn’t it.

Let’s consider that for a bit. We definitely associate Christmas with gifts, giving them and receiving them. Right now there are wrapped gifts under Christmas trees at our homes or perhaps, like at my house, unwrapped gifts awaiting tissue paper, scotch tape and ribbons. When we remember Christmases past, we also remember those special gifts given and received. Perhaps from loved ones now in God’s nearer presence. Perhaps from a season in our lives now over but still tenderly recalled. Gifts are a part of Christmas, no doubt. But here’s a question for you. How are the gifts of a Grinch Christmas different from the gifts of a Baby Jesus Christmas? Or are they different? Worth thinking about.

 You will not be surprised to hear that I believe there is a difference between Grinch Christmas gifts and Baby Jesus Christmas gifts. I’m sensing that Grinch Christmas gifts are too often bought begrudgingly because it’s expected for whatever reason. I’m also thinking that Grinch Christmas gifts might have the tendency to accrue too much debt for the gift giver, just because they don’t want to see gift recipients disappointed. And I would venture a guess that Grinch Christmas gifts are driven primarily by paying too much attention to ads encouraging the purchase of this or that as THE gift of the season for whomever.

On the other hand, Baby Jesus Christmas gifts are given from one heart to another. The gift represents the same thing as the original gifts of Christmas – the Wise Ones’ gifts to the Christ Child. That is a recognition that the most precious part of Christmas is the Christ Child and what Baby Jesus represents – new life, new beginnings and hope that a new way of being God’s beloved people together is becoming visible. In other words, the Grinch gifts are about stuff and money which God doesn’t recognize as holding any real value. The Baby Jesus gifts are always about new life now possible.

 So let me conclude this Christmas message by thanking you for allowing this church – this moment of worship together, in person and online – to be a part of your Baby Jesus gift to yourself. By joining us tonight here you have given yourself the gift of this community of followers of Jesus gathered together in this moment. Never underestimate the power, the joy and the strength being a part of such a community can bring to you. Here in this church you will find a safe place to be whoever you are, whoever God has created you to be. You will find a place to grow and mature in the practice of faith. You will discover a sanctuary from the world’s pressures that will allow healing of your body and soul. You will know that the greatest gift of Christmas embodied in the Christ Child is God’s unconditional love – for you. Dear ones, there is no greater gift. Merry Christmas. Amen.