



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

January 2, 2022: Sermon “Life Like a Watered Garden” Rev. David Jones

In the Christian calendar, until it is Epiphany, it is Christmas. For twelve days we are invited to look in on Mary and her Child, on Joseph and his adopted son, on the animals keeping them warm; to stand with all who have come to witness the arrival of God born on earth. For twelve days we are invited to keep our lights on and our ornaments up, to delay that new year’s diet—or any diet that doesn’t allow for cake, anyway. We are invited to continue being festive.

I think Christmastide is very important this year for our church community. Having had our plans disrupted just in time for Christmas Eve, it was, for many of us, a little more difficult to feel ourselves sitting next to the manger. We saw the star rising and we felt the warmth of Christ’s light and we heard that resounding silence before Christmas Day, but it has been harder (for me at least), to trust that this great thing has really happened. The news has been so frustrating and worrying.

But maybe this is why there are twelve days of Christmas. So that if life just insists on happening and our plans get upended, we still have time; still, we can *make time* to sit in the love and joy of a new family. And not just any family, but this particular one, this defiant one—this one where a poor mother sees how God will lift her and others like her; this one with Joseph who will choose love and kindness and faith over judgment and cruelty; this one that is strong because it is vulnerable, and is powerful because it has been denied power. It is not only Jesus that many of us worship; it is the powerful, world shaking love of a family’s compassion that we also revere.

Winter is getting cold and the news has been dispiriting, but this morning a warm light still shines through the splintered wood or cracked stone of a makeshift crib. A mother still holds her baby close, a new father still holds Mary up as she feeds Jesus tiredly. And this love gets cradled by the breeze and it baptizes everyone who dares to draw near, who dares to begin to outgrow the world as it is so that we might join in making the world that this family says is to come. We still belong right next to this holy fire; we are still invited.

Life is awfully hard. And for too long, and too easily, we have insisted on making it harder. We doubt that humanity is good, so we give up on other people. We end up narrowing our world until it is no longer related to the stars, until it is no longer *created*, until it no longer has meaning and purpose. We think we have such a small family that we can know everyone’s name, and fit them all neatly on one tree—as if trees are not fed by the light and held up by the soil, as if the tree does not live in a forest.

We think we only have responsibility for our parents or grandparents, our children or grandchildren. We think we have citizenship in one country and do not belong to a community of nations. We think how much wealth we have or how productive we are defines us, that some jobs are superior to others even when all of them need to be done. (Every day I see a commercial promoting another of these apps that will deliver you a meal or groceries—the ads never seem to show anymore the person doing the delivery, or the cooking, or the shopping. We used to talk about essential workers but they never became so essential that they would be paid enough to own a home and start a family. Maybe they can find a manger).

But then comes Christmas, and the twelve days when we are invited to look in on a poor family that can’t afford or demand a room; then comes Christmas, and these twelve days, when we gaze at a child we

have never met and call him 'brother'. At Christmas we gaze at a new sibling who doesn't look like many of us do, and listen to his parents speak a different language than ours do; we gaze at a family with a different nationality and religion, and *still know by faith* that they belong to us and we belong to them.

Christmastide is a subversive season. It re-imagines the palace, its court and throne. Now we see that the most important people to God are those who have little; the king of angels doesn't even have a bed. And somehow, this is the family we seek out. There is really nothing in our dominant culture today that says this family should have any role in our lives at all—they shouldn't even be in a commercial. Yet now we look in on them and see them bathed in glory. Now we look in on them and see God Almighty in the small hands of a child. Now we look in on them and all that we see is love triumphant, the new life of hope against hope. Somehow this child has come, and we have come to behold him.

I guess even though I'm crossing that line from early-30s to mid-30s, I'm still relatively young. And at Christmas, as long as I have made time to look in on this family, I feel even younger. If this is who God becomes, then truly anything is possible in this life. When I don't make time, I feel older. Because the little world that we have insisted on for so long—where our families are small, where some people get respect and others don't, where some are entitled to rights and to equality and others are not, where some are encouraged to take time off and rest and others are told to work or miss a paycheck, where some people's history is taught and some people's history is suppressed, where some jobs are demeaned and others are esteemed—in that world I feel a lot older. That world is going nowhere at all, let alone to the kin-dom of God.

But this manger is so sacred, the light inside so warm, because this family has pledged itself to another world and even given birth in its name. This manger is like our church sanctuary even in a bleak mid-winter, and this family is like our church community. We don't care what the world as it is today says is important, because we have stars in our eyes. Our eyes are as luminous as the sun, filled with as much warmth and energy, because they too were *created* like the universe by a reckless God drunk on love. That world is a place for us all to be young at any age—a place where all things are enlisted into the power of love to make a home for all right here on earth. That world is a place where nothing is so important as raising every child to love Creation and everything in it as much as God does.

At Christmas, we are all children of God. And after the remnant of Israel, we too will be gathered "from the farthest parts of the earth, those with child and those in labor, together, a great company. With weeping we will come, and with consolations God will lead us. By brooks of water, in a straight path so that none of us will stumble, God will be like a mother to us, like a father, and we will all come and sing—even I'll sing! -- and we will be as radiant as a mother with her child. And then, on earth as in heaven, our life will be like a watered garden, like a tree in a mighty forest. And though life will still have its rough patches and hardships—because it will be filled with love and love is filled with challenges—we will no longer languish. We won't feel alone or be left to wander. Because we will be as at home on earth as in heaven, surrounded by a family so big we won't possibly remember everyone's name, and we will stop trying to figure out who is who and just call one another brother, or sister, or sibling, like Jesus will do.

Desmond Tutu once said that "God's dream is that you and I and all of us will realize that we are family, that we are made for togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion." During these twelve days by the manger, God's dream comes true.

Alleluia and amen.