SERMON
St. Peter's UCC
November 30, 2025
"Humble Birth – Grand Vision"

Scripture:
Isaiah 2:1-5 The Future House of God
Psalm 122
Matthew 24:36-44 The Necessity for Watchfulness

Joseph didn't bribe the concierge to get a nice room at the hotel; warm shower, clean towels and a chocolate on the pillow, with a continental breakfast in the morning. No, we know the story. The holy couple had to travel about 90 miles to get to Bethlehem. It probably took about a week. Mary was as pregnant as you can get. Tradition says she rode on a donkey, although that's not in the Bible specifically, but whether she walked or rode – who can imagine? Then the humble birth; the baby placed in a manger, a feeding trough for animals.

Following this humblest of births, however, we have angels in the sky; we have excited shepherds, amazed at what they saw and heard; we

have wise men; we have the revealing of heaven incarnate, come from God.

So, we start with a humble couple, forced to bring their firstborn into the worldwhere animals feed, and in great contrast to that, we have heavenly angels breaking into our world with a vision of peace on earth, goodwill toward all.

A humble birth and a grand vision. A baby, but also elderly prophets visioning for God of "swords beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore."

Yes, on this first Sunday of Advent, we can dare hope, and I'm not talking about just a little hope or pretty good hope. We can dare hope of things so grand as to be beyond our imaginations, because what God desires will be done, and God desires nothing less than an end to separation; an end to the gap between heaven and earth; even an end to death, for in that child of the humble birth is the conqueror of death itself.

The anticipation of Christmas for children is full of wonder, excitement, and hope. Thank goodness that, even for grown-ups, the wonder of Christmas never quite leaves us. It may not be as intense as with children, and it may only fill us at certain special moments, but the Christmas Spirit seems to always find a way.

Every year, hope springs eternal; not just in the spring, but also in the dead of winter. In the darkest of days, in the bleak midwinter, whose darkness seems so impenetrable, so devoid of life, a child is born.

As miraculous as a rose blooming through the snow, a child is sent to save the world. This is not mere hope, but hope in human form. In a world that struggles in so many ways, heaven sends its own heart to us.

We have great reason to hope! As wonderful as is the magic of Christmas, more wonderful, if you will believe, are the endless gifts of a heavenly God. The wonder of Christmas, the joy of Easter, the majesty of heaven, the promise of eternity forevermore; for all such things we dare to hope and believe.

When we adults are touched by the Spirit of Christmas each year, many quietly think, “If only … if only it were true, and the magic of Christmas were the real part of life.” But too often for many adults, sadly, we let the spirit go, until the next year.

Well, we Christians can, and should, believe in a God of wonder and joy and peace and love; a God of Christmas and Easter and heaven; even heaven on earth. These are our truths and the truths of countless Christians through the centuries; truths to be hoped for and believed in; as real as that big oak tree behind the church.

On this first Sunday of Advent, with its theme of hope, I not only encourage you to hope and believe in wonderful, magical, heart-lifting things - for truth is such things – I also encourage you to accept that we are empowered by God’s Spirit to help create such things.

Our Gospel lesson today speaks of Christ’s return; the second coming. It reminds us that we don’t know when that will be. However, in the meantime, Christians are not to wait passively. Instead, we are to

prepare the way of the Lord by giving the world good reasons to hope; to hope in such things as the Spirit of Christmas.

Advent means coming; the coming of Christ. We celebrate that Christ has come and will come again. We hope, we believe in that hope, and we act on that hope. We share that hope by sharing the Spirit of Christmas in word and deed.

Every church, every Christian, can make hope real. St. Peter's, you might say, is a hope factory, and out of that hope, real, tangible, concrete blessings emerge.

For those who serve God, most of us don't look like Santa, but we can help people feel as hopeful as kids waiting for Santa. We can fill empty hearts with hope; a hope that leads to new life, even in the bleak midwinter.

Christmas fills the imagination with wonder, but even beyond that, in the fullness of our faith, the promises of God are so grand and so wonderful that they are beyond our imagination, yet no less real; in fact, more true than our limited view of things.

As a minister, I get to appeal to the "wondrous" in people of all ages; turning their gaze for a time, away from daily responsibilities, and instead, up to angels in the sky breaking into our world, and singing, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace and goodwill. I can speak of a guiding star and wisemen. I can speak of a silent, holy night, and a birth that literally changed the world.

As wondrous and magical and beautiful as Christmas is for a child, I get to appeal to the spirit of Christmas in all of us. I get to say, "Believe!" Believe, because in our mundane world, heaven has broken through in a way bigger than Santa, bigger than gifts; in fact, more amazing and miraculous than words can express.

I believe in the promise of God. I believe that the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," is really an Advent prayer, anticipating the Second Coming, when the fullness of God will be pleased to dwell with us, and God will be all in all; God will make all things new.

I can't wait for the fulfillment of that promise, but in the meantime, our waiting hardly has to be a passive waiting. As people of God, we are to live out an expectant kind of waiting; an active waiting. We are to be a beacon that may not be heaven's light, but will offer a glimmer of that hopeful light. We are to be a joyful community that cannot match the peace of heaven, but can give a sense of the peace that is to come. We may not perfectly be the love and joy of heaven, but we can find great joy in at least striving to be perfect in love. I can't wait for the second coming, but the kind of waiting God wants us to do is by staying occupied; occupied in the work of the church; preparing the way.

St. Peter's may be waiting for the second coming, but waiting is never about calculating chronological time; calendar time of what year it may come. Our kind of time is an opportune time; that is, seizing the present; the gift of each moment, and in those moments, sharing God's love in word and deed.

I know that the Anointed One of God was born; I know he died and rose again on the third day. I also absolutely know and believe that the

fullness of God's promise of a new heaven and a new earth will come someday. I don't know if it will be in our lifetime, but I do know that, in the meantime, we can be living expressions of that promise. We can help that heavenly vision come true.

God is with us. God has broken into history in Jesus Christ. That story begins with this wonderful time of year of a humble birth and also grand visions. In these Advent and Christmas seasons, we will read well-known and beloved scripture passages, but we should not see ourselves only as readers of the work of God. We are actually in the very heart of that story; we are in the middle of that story; we are connected directly back to Bethlehem and the shepherds and wisemen. We are part of a story ongoing.

Friends, this is a wonderful time of year. I pray that in this church season of Advent, you will prepare yourselves to receive the message and Spirit of Christmas. May the gift of Christmas warm your hearts and bring renewed hope to your spirits; for its message is true and to be believed. All the hope and anticipation and magic we experience at Christmas time

should never be let go, because it's a door into heavenly and miraculous things; now and forever.

Be of good cheer and rejoice! "The Desire of nations shall bind all peoples in one heart and mind, and bid envy, strife and discord to cease. He shall fill the whole world with heaven's peace. Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee!" Amen.