
So, now what?
Chapel in the Park United Church
December 31, 2023
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 2:22-40

This is one of my favourite services of the year. That's because this is the first "normal" service after Christmas. Are you surprised? I know. I know. For some people this time of year and this service are really lame. Some of us probably came here today expecting a low turnout. Perhaps some of you expect no real sermon - that I will just come into the congregation and ask you to share Christmas stories with me. We've just come through all the build-up to Christmas, which included lots of joyful singing. We had our Longest Night Service. We had our Christmas Carol Sing-along, We had our UCW potluck luncheon. We had our Christmas Eve Service. Today, we are back to normal. Where is the fun in that?

Not only that, but all our preparations for Christmas are now in the past. Advent is over. Turkeys and hams have been eaten. Presents have been unwrapped. Toys have been played with. Some toys are likely already broken. If we've been lucky, we've spent time with family and friends that we don't see too often. For many of us, there is nothing left to look forward to. Where is the fun in that? For many people, Christmas is over. For many people, there is nothing now to look forward to, except extended dark days, more snow, and even colder temperatures. Yes, we know in our minds that the days are getting longer again, but we know it will take many weeks before we actually feel that in our bones. Where is the fun in that?

And the season of Christmas is one of the few times during the year when you can approach friends - and even strangers - with a big, cheesy grin on your face and give them a warm greeting. Without being arrested I mean. I'm sorry, but you can't do that any more. We are finished for another year. As of today, you have to stop being nice to strangers.

One year during Advent while I was going home on the GO train and passing through Union Station, I dropped \$20 at Tim Hortons for the benefit of the customers

standing in line behind me. And yes, I watched from a distance while customer after customer put on broad smiles at receiving an unexpected gift of free refreshments. Now that Christmas is over, I won't be doing that again. Good cheer? Cheer yourself. I'm done!

Which - strangely enough - is exactly why I enjoy this service and this time of year so much. Maybe we do stop being nice to strangers, but at least we start being ourselves again. You see - I love advent and I love Christmas, but in the final analysis, I enjoy normal life even more. I like Christmas, but I like what we are left with after Christmas even more. We have just survived the “exciting” part of Christmas, the breathless part, full of anticipation and wonder and magic. Full of full-voiced singing and many things that delight. But today, all that has burned away. And we are now left with ... well, what are we left with after the sugar and debt induced frenzy we call “Christmas” is over for another year What is the long-term, slow-burn “left-over” from the excitement of Christmas? What are we left with - today?

Obviously, there is something. Even common sense tells us that the birth of a child is - in part - the end of a story. But clearly, the birth of a child must also be the start of a new story too. The event of Christmas may be over, but the meaning and purpose of Christmas surely lies in the future. In our future. Advent is a journey, remember, and that is how journeys work.

In our reading from Luke, Jesus's parents are on a journey too - and they take a still very-young Jesus to the temple as was required by their tradition. And, they meet Simeon. And Simeon announces both the beginning of a journey and the end of a journey. Simeon's own journey ends, because he was just waiting for a sign from God of the coming messiah, and that sign came to him in the form of baby Jesus. After blessing the family, Simeon is now prepared to die. But Simeon also announces the beginning of a journey - specifically, the journey that Jesus will embark upon when he begins his public ministry. A journey that will include the falling and the rising of many people, and the revelation of God's glory. Jesus and his family also meet Anna, a prophet, who also pre-sages the significant journey that Jesus will eventually be on.

I always wonder how Mary reacted to all this. After going to the temple and meeting two different people who had messages for and about her infant baby ... how

would Mary have felt walking home again later? Perhaps Mary was thinking how grateful she was that her pregnancy had ended well, and she was safe again. But what would she feel hearing those words from Simeon and from Anna? Safe? Probably not. Mary and Joseph, walking home, had already started down their own journeys of bewilderment and wonder. That's a journey familiar to all parents. Whatever else happened on that trip, there is no doubt that that visit to the temple caused many things to change. Journey always lead to change.

So - if journey always leads to change, and if Advent is a journey. Then this Advent, all of us had the potential for change ourselves. Perhaps that is the long-term, slow-burn "leftover" from Christmas. Because each year, we are invited - as we ourselves mature - to look for a more mature and helpful understanding of Christmas. When we were young, we thought Christmas was about waiting for Jesus. OK - we were waiting for presents, but we knew that we were supposed to be waiting for Jesus. But as we age and mature, we have probably noticed at some point that babies do not in fact come from Christmas trees. Moreover, we come to realize that the gifts we want at Christmas are already present in our own lives, if we just look for them properly.

This first service after Christmas is also a reminds for me - that Christmas Eve services are a lot like weddings. Both Christmas Eve services and weddings are steeped in traditions and rituals. And both signify a change in focus - a gateway between our past and our future. The main similarity between Christmas eve services and weddings for me is this. Both Christmas eve services and wedding services point to something that is vastly more important than the actual services themselves. And we can completely miss that if we are not paying attention.

For example, weddings. Weddings can be a lot of fun. They can be great opportunities for family and friends to come together to celebrate love. I'm a fan of weddings. Weddings are usually little bubbles of "perfection" - the perfect dress, the perfect table-centres, the perfect minister of course. But at the same time, weddings are simply not very important when compared with what comes after the wedding - marriage. Marriage is the long-term, slow-burn leftover from a wedding. Living life in imperfect reality in partnership with another person. Marriage is about ups and downs, highs and

lows, making mistakes and creating forgiveness in our midst. Marriage is about living in actual imperfect reality that includes love, joy, fear, pain, sorrow, grief, and everything else we bundle under the label “the human condition”.

Weddings are great, but marriage is much more important. Moreover, you could attend 100 weddings and learn nothing at all about marriage.

Similarly, Christmas eve services can be a lot of fun. They can be great opportunities for family and friends to come together to sing and to celebrate love. I’m a fan of Christmas eve services. But at the same time, Christmas eve services are simply not very important when compared to Christian faith, which is about how we live our lives. How we become better human beings. How we live, cope, and thrive with the ups and downs of life, while making mistakes and creating forgiveness in our midst. How we live in community with others in actual imperfect reality that includes love, joy, fear, pain, sorrow, grief, and everything else we bundle under the label “the human condition”.

Christmas Eve services are great, but living out our Christian faith day-by-day is much more important. And you could attend 100 Christmas eve services and learn absolutely nothing important about Christian faith.

I like this time of year. During Advent, we were invited to wait for Jesus. But now that Advent is over, we are invited to stop waiting.

I want to share a true story about a friend of mine. He decided after many years that he had to actually get back into shape. This story is not about me by the way, because I am still in denial about getting into shape. My friend had moved past his denial. And he decided that he could manage 30 minutes a day to work on his personal health. So he began at the start of a new year. Around March, I asked him how his fitness plan was working. He said he had successfully made time for 30 minutes per day, 5 days per week for his physical health. I congratulated him. I asked him if he was now stronger than before. He said, no. I asked him if he was more fit than before. He said no. I asked him what had changed for him, and he said his endurance was better. I didn’t understand how his endurance could have improved without him becoming either stronger or more fit. So I finally broke down and asked him what his fitness routine was. He told me proudly that he had been praying. He had been praying that God would make him fit. He was

spending 30 minutes in prayer, 5 times per week, expecting that God would give him a more fit body. I won't repeat here what I said to him.

But how often do we do that ourselves? How often do we pray for something that we could achieve ourselves by just working for it? How often do we wait - even in prayer - for something that is already within our grasp? How often do we expect God to do something for us that we are not willing to do for ourselves? How often do we choose to wait instead of getting active in our own salvation?

Are we - like Simeon - waiting to see Christ in our midst? Christ has already come. Christ is already here. There is no need to wait. There is only the need to look. Look in church by all means. But look in other places too. And if you struggle to see Christ in our midst, then you are invited to be Christ in our midst. I know that sounds crazy, but for many people in our own community, that will be enough. You will be enough. Remember, you and I - simple people that we are - are the hands and feet of Christ. What more do we need to be than that?

Christmas came. Christmas went. A baby was born. And birth is certainly a miracle. But the miracle of birth is completely overshadowed by another miracle. That is, the miracle called "life". Normal, everyday life.

So, now that Christmas is over, I hear someone asking, "Now What?" Well, I don't know, but whatever it is, I do know that it will be disguised as "normal life". And I look forward to finding out with you just what that "normal life" is in 2024.

What do you hope to see in 2024? Who do you hope to be in 2024? And I mean that as individuals, and as a congregation.

I look forward - with you - to both seeing, and being, Christ in our midst this year. And really, we do not need more than that.

Amen.