



Plymouth Congregational Church
2001 E. Grand River Avenue
Lansing, MI 48912

November 27, 2011

FROM PLYMOUTH'S PULPIT

“THE CHRISTMAS INVASION”

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GOSPEL LESSON: Luke 2:1-7

Today is the first Sunday of Advent – the beginning of the church calendar year! Happy New Year! We have completed our Thanksgiving celebrations and now it's time to prepare. Yes, Christmas is coming. Crossing our minds around this time of year is the fantasy of the perfect Christmas. There are many versions of the fantasy, and especially those of us in the northern states find ourselves dreaming like this:

It's an attractive old house sitting securely on its wooded parcel of land. There is snow falling gently, silently, the air is crisp and cold. Inside the house, members of a large extended family are caught up in the holiday celebrations. Parents host their grown children and grandchildren, various aunts, uncles and cousins are there and the occasional in-law, fiancé' or friend. The entire clan is attractive, respectable, well-mannered. All are successful in school, advancing in their careers or enjoying a comfortable retirement. No one is mentally unbalanced, seriously ill, chronically unemployed or even socially inept. And they all have broad smiles and straight teeth.

Most extraordinary, however, is that the members all get along so well with one another! Despite hours of close proximity and rich food and drink, no simmering hostilities boil to the surface. No grudges are revived, no harsh words

are spoken or even muttered. The animated conversation is mixed with frequent laughter, celebrated memories and new stories.

In the kitchen, many hands make preparation for dinner go quickly and peaceably, and soon the table is covered with a variety of fragrant, tasty dishes. Everyone sits down and enjoys a splendid meal. After dessert, the air echoes with compliments for the cooks. The entire family helps clear the table and cleans up, and it's not long before the kitchen counters are empty and the dishwasher hums contentedly.

And then there are the gifts! The presents are stacked beneath the tree and opened neatly, one by one, with the paper folded and placed in a box. And each gift delights the recipient. It's always the right size, color and style. Children gleefully take off the brightly colored paper and smile gratefully at their elders as they lay their new underwear and socks in a special place. No one lashes out in envy, bursts into tears or damages one of the remarkably complicated digital toys.

A dreamy state of tranquility overtakes the revelers as the fire in the hearth burns low. Outside, the gentle snow continues to fall and beautify the setting. What a picture! Wow! The perfect Christmas!

But there's just one problem. Christmas doesn't happen this way! Christmas day may feature drizzle instead of snow like the rain pouring down this morning. Someone precious may be missing from the family circle – maybe for the first time. Someone hard to tolerate may be present – perhaps a screaming overtired child, or a critical controlling adult, or even someone we find incredibly boring.

As for the rest, they are down to earth people with less than perfect profiles. A little overweight, a little eccentric, a little shy. In fact, most of us do not qualify as the best and the brightest. We do not live the lives of which fantasies are made. We're just ordinary folk. And with ordinary folk, there are sometimes fights, or arguments or heated discussions, depending on what your mother chooses to call them. One brother in law remembers how much he resents another. A

grown up daughter again feels suffocated by her elderly mother. A nephew despises the uncle who sold him a car with a cracked engine block. An argument erupts in the kitchen over the way to make turkey dressing or lump free gravy. And raised voices defend rival opinions about various matters.

Oh, it's not that it all happens every year. But any of it could! And we know it. There's testimony to the indomitable human spirit in the way families continue to gather again and again despite the often painful consequences. And added to the emotional dynamic is all the labor, so much of which falls on the women of the household who are expected to make perfect cookies like Martha, decorate like Ralph Lauren, provide a tree that compares to Macy's, select mood music and provide delicious food that compares to the finest restaurant and then clean it all up! Whew!

You see, our fantasy of Christmas and the pursuit of an elusive perfection leads only to frustration and disappointment. And so we enter this Advent time with fear and trepidation! When the leftovers are stored away, the tree taken down and the trash is out at the curb, we may find ourselves wondering whether Christmas is our kind of holy day! Is it a holy day??? Perhaps Christmas is for the perfect; those perfect people who live in the imaginary subdivision just over the horizon. but not for our family.

Well, I've discovered that when that fantasy begins to sneak up on me, I do myself a favor. I go back – back to the beginning. We can look at the original Christmas story and recognize that it was far from a perfect setting. We heard part of the story read this morning. the Emperor demanded a census so they had to travel in spite of Mary's advanced pregnancy. While they were in Joseph's home town, it was time for Mary to give birth and she delivered a son, wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger. Remember, there was no room for them in a proper inn. They had to go to the barn.

Do you get the picture? Forced by a government bureaucracy, they travel to Bethlehem. Not a single relative

with a bedroom to spare. No hotel for love nor money. The new baby is laid in a manger where the cattle feed. Meanwhile, Joseph is trying to get his wits about him. The months leading to this birth have not been easy. He nearly brought his relationship with Mary to a sudden end, but in a dream he found God demanding that he accept Mary the child. Now this sleepless night in a barn.

A perfect night for Mary? Hardly. First the discomfort of traveling on the back of a donkey and then the pains of labor. Once her baby is delivered, she is exhausted and sleeps. But then we read the Shepherds arrive from the hillside. These ruffians approach, hat in hand, eyes wild as they proclaim the story of angels filling the night sky with song. Joseph wonders if there is wine on their breath as they fall on their knees before the baby and then they go off into the night praising God. They are drunk alright, but not with wine of this world, but with heaven's joy.

Christmas in a barn is less than perfect. The circle depicted in our crèche scenes is made up of people with real problems. But Christmas in a barn is real! The baby is born, wet upon the blankets. Hard-living shepherds hurry to meet him. But that small stable becomes wide enough to encompass the world, an imperfect world with people like you and me. The Gospel makes clear that there's room at the manger for imperfect people.

The perfect Christmas is actually a fantasy of our own making. If we just bake more and better cookies, give better and more expensive presents, smile more broadly – then surely it will happen. We try to live up to some fictional standard and we will always be disappointed.

The Gospel comes to us as an awkward surprise. It's almost an invasion into our fantasy. It comes as an early Christmas gift and shows us right from the start that God accepts us in our incompleteness, our imperfection. God in Christ comes to us in an eminently imperfect, unmanageable way, with all the disruption of a baby born in a barn and put to bed in an animal feeding trough. God in Christ relates to our little imperfect selves by becoming smaller, less power-

ful, more dependent than any of us who are old enough to walk and talk.

The good news of the day is that God knows our imperfection and loves us just as we are! God does not require us to be perfect and certainly does not require a perfect Christmas celebration. God only asks that we become real, as real as his love.

We start this Advent season with a story that invades us and causes us to take stock. And all we need to do is put down the burden of a perfect Christmas and accept the freedom and the power of the real Christmas – a new birth of the soul. We can gather around the manger with living people and actually find acceptance. Right here. Right here in his church. Perhaps it would help if we begin to think of this Church as the barn of Christ. This is where it all begins today. Happy New Year! Let us begin. Amen.