

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

Alice M.C. Ling, Senior Pastor

Christmas Eve 2004

11:00 p.m.

What are we doing here? Why in the world have you come out in the dead of night on this brisk and breezy winter night? I dare to presume that most of you are normally in bed by now, some normally having been there long enough to have settled into the deepest, most restful stage of sleep. Even I, who as Ben loves to say, come most awake about 10 pm, am usually settling down and getting ready to turn in by now. Why is this night different? And if by any chance there are some of you who still have presents to wrap or gifts to assemble, why have you put that off to come here? What are we looking for? Hoping for? Are we expecting something? Just why are we here?

I suspect that for some this is a chance to try and bring some focus to the season, to hear the stories that stand behind and before and at the center of the hullabaloo that has been driving us for weeks. Some have probably come to sing the carols that we love, to savor the brass, the organ, the choirs. To see the candle glow, to feel it's warmth, to hold the light in our hands and dare to believe once again, for at least a few moments, in the possibility of hope and peace and joy, a world of love and goodwill. There's something magical and mystical about this night that we wouldn't want to miss. We want to catch a spark of that elusive thing we call the Christmas spirit. That spirit that catches in our throats, bubbles up and spills over in our hearts, that spirit that helps us hear something, see something, feel something that we've been longing for and looking for, that graces us with joy and grounds us in hope. We want to hear the angels sing, to bask in the glow of the star, to stare in wonder at the tiny newborn child, and to wrap ourselves in the warmth of God's most gracious gift.

But all of that is about what we hope to get out of it, and most of that won't last beyond the night, or at best the weekend. And I dare to presume that God has more in mind for us than that. As deeply generous as God is, and as thoroughly as this night is about God's astounding gift to us, I do believe that God hopes we'll come ready to give as well as receive. That something will happen to us and in us here, tonight, in this season that we won't be able to pack away when we're done with the tinsel and gift wrap.

Yes, we're here to remember and celebrate the birth of a child in the backyard stable of a barn, laid in a feeding trough because there was no room, bed or cradle to receive him. His first visitors were dirty old shepherds and his arrival was announced by a world class chorus of angels, singing a symphony never before performed in all the world. There was a star that guided visitors to the barn, and that shone brightly for days – perhaps as long as two years – for any who would watch it's brightness and follow it's beam. If you're a romantic, it's enough to give you shivers. If you're a pragmatist, you shake your head and say, I doubt that that's quite how it happened. But either way, there's more for us here than that. And no matter how we look at it,

this story, this night, this birth represents a whole lot more than a simple celebration of something that happened a long time ago in a far away land.

This night and this story are not just about what happened long, long ago in a land far away. They are also a story that God hopes will happen again, in us, here and now. If God breaks into our lives with the unexpected, unexplainable, and let's be honest about it, the unwelcome news that we're the one in a million who has been selected to usher a new day onto center stage, will we say yes, opening our homes, our hearts, our bodies, our calendars, our wallets to the workings of whatever God has up God's sleeve? Whatever it is that sparked that twinkle in God's eye? If the angel comes to us while we're working, or God stirs around in our dreams, and begins the song of Peace on earth, Goodwill to all, Glory to God in the highest, will we pick up the tune and keep it going? When we receive the light of the candle that represents the light that has come into the world and which the darkness of hate and fear and mistrust and evil cannot overcome, how long will we let it burn? Oh, I know there will be someone standing at the foot of the stairs when you leave, waiting to relieve you of the glass and candle so we can reuse them again next year. That's not the question. The question is how long will the light of the world, the light of Christ's love, the light of Christ's gentleness, the light of Christ's stubborn commitment to walk in God's ways no matter how unpopular it may be burn in you, in the way you live, the love you share, the welcome you offer, the peace you share, the hope you depend on.

God has come to live among us, taken on the fragile, dependent, vulnerable form of a newborn, and asked us to turn over our lives to the care and feeding and well-being of this new life. We've spent four weeks soaking in the promises of hope and peace, joy and love. The question now is if we'll continue to wait for God to do something to make them real in the world, or if we'll join God in using our hands, voices, feet, bodies, homes and hearts to do all we can to bring them to birth. We've come to this service tonight to celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus in Bethlehem long ago. The question is whether we'll let him also be born into our lives and lifestyle, if we'll make room for him and his teachings in our everyday routines and vacation schedules, our politics and economics, our decisions and our daydreams.

I know, you thought that sacrificing a couple of hours of sleep for the sake of some beautiful music and an ancient story seemed like a good idea. It was. I hope you'll also let the music, the story, the love and the light continue to play in your lives long after the tinsel and the gift wrap have been put away, long after the poinsettias have wilted and dropped their leaves, long after the shepherds and angels have found their way home. Or as Howard Thurman said,

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost, To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry, To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations, To bring peace to earth,
To make music in the heart.

May it be so. Amen.