

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, December 13, 2009 based on Philippians 4:4-9.

Advent Thought

There once was a man who looked upon Christmas as a lot of humbug. He wasn't a Scrooge. He was a very kind and decent person.

But he didn't believe all that stuff about incarnation that churches proclaimed at Christmas. And he was too honest to pretend that he did. He simply could not understand the claim that God became human. It didn't make any sense to him.

On Christmas Eve, his wife and children went to church for the midnight service, but he stayed home. It began to snow, "If we must have Christmas," he thought, "it's nice to have a white one." He sat down by the fire to read. A few minutes later he heard a thudding sound, followed by another and another. Birds caught in the storm, and in desperate search for shelter, had tried to fly through his window. Now they lay huddled miserably in the snow. "I can't let the poor creatures lie there and freeze," he thought. "But how can I help them?"

He thought of the barn. It was a warm shelter. He put on his coat and overshoes and tramped out through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the doors wide and turned on a light.

But the birds didn't come in.

"Food will bring them in," he thought. So he sprinkled a trail of bread crumbs from the birds to the sheltering barn.

To his dismay, the birds ignored the crumbs and continued to flop around helplessly in the snow.

He tried shooing them into the barn. They scattered in every direction – except to the warm, lighted barn.

They find me a strange and terrifying creature,” he said to himself, “and I can’t seem to think of any way to let them know they can trust me.

“If only I could be a bird myself for a few minutes, perhaps I could lead them to safety.”

Just at that moment, the church bells began to ring. He stood silently for a while, listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas.

Then he sank on his knees in the snow, “Now I do understand,” he whispered. “Now I see why you had to do it.”

Well, a blessed Advent everyone! Every year through music, through children, through words we tell this wonderful story of Emmanuel – God with us – the story of how God came into our reality through Jesus. It is an intriguing story with much mystery. But Jesus helps us feel close to God and makes God real. It is almost time to celebrate his coming.

Sometimes, in the midst of all the December activities, we need a reminder that we are celebrating somebody’s birthday. Christmas Day is a birthday party!

No one knows for sure the day of the year of Jesus’ birth. Christian in the western world began to celebrate his birth at a “Christ – mass” on December 25 to substitute for a religious festival of the Romans on that day. We continue that tradition and celebrate his birth every December 25. And like celebrating the birthdays of other great people, we remember the gifts and examples they gave us. In Jesus’ case we celebrate faith,

hope, devotion, prayer, compassion, justice, courage, and most of all love. These are the gift that Jesus gives us, and in turn we share these gifts with others as an expression of our faith.

One of the gifts that God gives us through Jesus is the gift of peace. The apostle Paul, who was in prison for his faith in God through Jesus, puts his understand of this gift when he wrote the Philippians in Philippians 4:4;

⁴Rejoice[□] in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.[□] ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Paul says that peace is a gift of our faith. It is like a sentry over our hearts and minds. Well, how can this be?

One of my favorite movies from the early 1990s was a movie starring Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks called "Sleepless in Seattle." I watched that movie this summer with my son one day. I liked watching the movie again, but I had forgotten an important part of the movie. It started at the beginning of the movie at Christmas when the Meg Ryan character took her boyfriend at the time to her family home to announce their engagement. After the announcement, Meg Ryan and her mother went up to the attic and began looking for wedding gowns and veils that had been stored their from earlier generations.

Her mother began to speak about love. She spoke about when she met her husband for the first time that there was something about him, and when he took her hand it was like "magic"!

Later that night, Meg Ryan was driving to see her fiancée's family when she was listening to a late night talk show. The Tom Hanks character

had been coaxed onto the phone to talk about the death of his wife and how it was affecting his life and the life of his 8 year old son. He was asked what was so special about his wife. He asked how long the program was and then said that there were a million little things like when he took her hand for the first time and it "magic"!

At the end of the movie, Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks meet for the first time at the top of the Empire State Building. Throughout the whole movie both characters had been wandering in the wilderness of their uncertainty and unsettledness about life and the future. When they met, Tom Hanks put out his hand, and Meg Ryan put her hand in his - and it was magic.

I believe that God is always walking beside us with his presence outstretched. When we put out our hand in faith and trust, God takes us by the hand, and it is magic – not in a superstitious or black magic sort of way but in a peace that surpasses all understanding sort of way – a presence that is real but hard to explain.

One of the benefits of believing in God is peace. It is a gift to us. It doesn't mean we won't ever worry again. It doesn't mean we won't have troubles. But a trust in God through Christ gives us a peace so we can address all things.

Like the man with the birds, sometimes we need to understand how God works so that we can understand the power and meaning of faith of trust in God. It is time to create some magic – not in a superstitious or black magic sort of way but in the presence of God sort of way that first gives us peace and then the gift of love to share with others. Christmas is

a magical time. Let's create some magic as we believe and share in the good news Christ for life! Amen.