

**New Hampshire Conference  
United Church of Christ**

**Worship for the  
First Sunday of Christmas  
December 27, 2020**



**Christmas Reflection – “I Was a Boy in Bethlehem”**

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As some among you know, I grew up as a PK – a preacher’s kid. As a matter of fact, the earliest days of my life that I remember are when my father served as Pastor, right down the road from where I live now, at the First Congregational Church of Hampton

Now I want to encourage you not to believe all the rumors you hear about PKs. They are not all true. But there are some... For example, we PKs are not born with an innate ability to sit quietly in church and appreciate every sermon ever preached. That is a learned ability, just like it is for everyone else.

As matter of fact, I remember well the first sermon that ever really caught my attention. It was a Christmas Eve in the mid-70s at the First Congregational Church of Hampton. My father told this Christmas story from the voice of one of the characters in the Biblical narrative. I was transfixed. That sermon changed my understanding of Christmas in that moment and has colored my understanding of Christmas ever since.

In my career, I have written probably 12 to 15 of these first person sermons myself – ranging from the perspective of an angel above the Bethlehem hills to the donkey being ridden in the Palm Sunday parade. But there has always been something special to me about the one I heard on the Christmas Eve long ago.

I know in 2020, we all need Christmas to hold on to us a little longer. So this morning I’ve decided to share with you this message, told by my father, the Reverend Dr. Donald J. Rankin entitled, “I Was a Boy in Bethlehem.”

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable unto Thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I am an old man now and I have lived many a year. But I can remember and I can remember very well – I can remember when I was a boy in Bethlehem – for that is where I grew up and that was my home.

Now I know people say that Bethlehem is a beautiful city, but to be honest with you – I have to tell you that I did not always think so! You see, as I remember back, my

memories of Bethlehem are those of a youth who was never really loved and never really wanted.

There was this night, my parents were with a caravan and we stopped at an inn in Bethlehem for it was along one of the main merchant trails. Oh, yes, that is same one you read about and hear about. But it wasn't very pretty then and probably isn't very pretty now. Early the next morning, my parents arose with the rest of the caravan – and they left me there. A little child and they left me there.

The innkeeper found me and he kept me – I guess that one of those strange things in my life that I will never understand is why he kept me – because he really wasn't a kind man. But somehow – for some reason – he kept me.

Maybe he thought I could do some work for him – maybe he thought I could be of some benefit to him. I am really not sure. But you know, it all kind of backfired on him. It didn't work at all. I remember that, as I grew up, he put me to work in the inn. And there I was working one day...waiting on a table. And there was this beautiful woman – a fine woman in a radiant gown. She was there eating with other people. I brought her some wine and she looked at me and she knew I was deformed – and she screamed and she cried, "Get this animal out of here!"

I learned something that day. I learned that neither clothes nor outside beauty really mean very much – It's what is in the human heart that is important.

That is just one of the lessons I learned in that inn. It wasn't very long before the innkeeper decided I couldn't work in the inn – so he put me to work out in the stable. I hated that too!

Or at least at first I hated that...but somehow I accepted that like I accepted everything in my life, believing that God – if there was really a God – had separated me from all the other people to hurt...and to curse...and simply to make my life bad.

But it's strange how God works because it really wasn't all that bad. Pretty soon I actually began to like it out in the stable. I didn't have to work with people. I could work with animals. And animals...somehow...get beyond what you look like and know what's in your heart. *And they love back!* I have always wondered why in the world people couldn't do that too. I remember how the animals almost became like my brothers and sisters. I loved them – and they loved me – and we knew that. And it didn't matter what I looked like. And it didn't matter what I had or what I didn't have. They knew what love was about. And it was good!

But let me pause here a moment and tell you about one night – a particular night – a night I will never forget if I live to be five hundred years old – for it was a night that changed my life.

It was midwinter... and it was getting cold out as the hours passed on. And so I decided to get a little more hay and give it to the animals. As I was doing this – gathering up armfuls of hay and going about my way – I noticed a commotion out in the courtyard and I peeked through the door to see what was going on. It had been a busy day – an extremely busy day. Pilgrims had been coming and going all day for Caesar had levied some tax. I just hoped and prayed that all this commotion would not mean that more people would be coming...more people whose animals I would have to care for.

As I looked out, there was just two figures – a man who was walking and a woman sitting on an animal. I heard the man almost begging the innkeeper, saying, “We’ve got to have a room. Can’t you see – she cannot go on any farther – not even another step.” Then I heard that grating voice of the innkeeper as he said, “Be gone with you. I want to go sleep. There is no room here anymore. Leave me alone!” The man begged on – he just seemed to be insistent that they had to stay – that they had to stop right then and right there. Yet, as man looked at the woman his anger seemed to melt away. He looked at her and asked, “Mary, how are you feeling?” For some reason - I guess I will never know what that was - I ran to door, swung it wide open, and shouted, “The stable – the stable. It’s warm and it’s clean. Why not come in here?” I will never forget the look of the innkeeper as he glared at me – almost as with fear. You think I would have been used to that hatred I had experienced it so much, but this just pieced my heart.

But that was broken because the woman spoke. She said, “Joseph, the youth is kind.” And she smiled at me. You know – that was the first time in my life anyone had ever smiled at me – that anyone had ever accepted me as a human being – that anyone had ever shown any kind of warmth or tenderness towards me. And that was so important. THAT WAS SO VERY IMPORTANT. So I decided that I had to do something – do something for her, because I felt like she cared about me.

So I ran again and grabbed up an armful of hay and went to the farthest part of the stable – away from all the animal – and I put it down, so that she could have a bed. And I took my cloak off and laid it down for I knew that hay was prickly ... and I wanted her to be comfortable

And as they came in, I knew – knew for the first time – why the man had asked her how she was feeling. She was going to have baby. She was going to have a baby!

Even that moment was again broken by bitterness and hatred. This time it was the innkeeper’s wife demanding payment – demanding payment for a room or if all the rooms were filled surely the stable should be the price of a room. I didn’t understand that – but I guess that is the way the world is – not always fair – and not always honest.

I remember the innkeeper telling the man, “We’re just too busy. I have no one to send to help you. You’ll have to do for yourself.” And the innkeeper and his wife left. They left me there with these two people. The man looked over at me and said, “Son, can you help us?”

That was the second miracle of that night. First there was the warmth and the love and now they were asking me – asking me to give of myself. No one had ever done that. No one had ever known me to be worth anything in life. And they were asking me to help – asking me to care – asking me, too, to love as they had loved. At that moment I would have done anything.

It seemed like hours, yet in the same moment it seemed like just seconds. But I worked and worked. I brought them a lantern...and I brought them some water ...and I brought them whatever they needed to be comfortable.

Shortly after midnight, I returned from the inn ... and there was the mother *with her baby*. **THE TRUE MIRACLE OF THAT NIGHT**. And, you know, that child was different from any child that anyone could ever see. That child seemed to enter the world as if he knew the world. All the hope and all the prayer, all the sins and all the care of humanity seemed to be within that child. And there was a strange kinship...a strange kinship with me...and perhaps a kinship with all the world.

Before long commotion started anew out in the courtyard. Again, I went and looked. This time there were groups of people – all kinds of people. And I thought...oh, no...they're not going to break into this moment. But I listened and they were talking about a star in the heavens – a star showing the place where the savior would be born. Then I understood – but I didn't really understand. Because I had always believed that God would be in the temples...God would be where all the fancy people would be...God would be where all the beauty would be. God wouldn't be here. God wouldn't be here where I live. God wouldn't be in my life. God wouldn't be for everyday people. God couldn't be for me. Could God?

*Just think about it! THE SAVIOR BORN HERE IN MY HOME!*

I looked again and there were beautiful people. Even awe struck shepherds from the hills. They had all come to see this baby.

The people entered – slowly and reverently – but they entered. All kinds of people – men, women, youth and children – poor and rich – people of all colors – people of all backgrounds. People like me – people who needed to know God. And they entered.

Strange how people change, isn't it? Strange how people's attitudes and thoughts change. I can hear the innkeeper now as he brought the people in, saying how wonderful he had been to this child to give him a place when everything was full in all of Bethlehem. How he had cared for him and brought him water.

In the midst of all the commotion, the innkeeper's wife looked over and she saw my cloak. She grabbed it up and threw it at me, crying "This is not worthy of the Savior!" You know – that was the first moment I had been cold. And it may have not been good enough for her – but that didn't matter – because it was my cloak...and I had loved...and I had cared...and for the first time, I was a person. A person of worth. A

person who had reached out. And in spite of her bitterness and in spite of her hatred, something wonderful happened to me that night.

The mother looked at me once again and she said, "Boy, thank you!" *Thank you.* And my life was changed...never to be the same again...to be constantly different. Because God was now there. God had entered in.

I told you that I am an old man now, and that was so many years ago. And yet God has changed everything about my life. The way I understood myself, and the way I understood all of God's people.

And I have heard of that baby. I have heard of what he has been about. How other people have known him to change their lives also. How he touched the poor people...the people in need...the sick...the people who did not understand God. How he changed their lives...and healed them.

And I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe that people could be so foolish. Even with all the hatred I experienced, and with all the rejection I had felt, I couldn't believe it when I heard they killed him. I couldn't believe that sin could be so cruel that humanity could turn their back on God.

But the miracle is that God is greater than all that. And the message – the Christmas message - still lives. For that babe that was born in Bethlehem and that Christ that was crucified once again lives within the hearts of women and men – to change them as he changed me. Not just in the past. Not just for my life. But for each of us and for all time.

For the baby boy that was born in a Bethlehem stable...for that Christ that is born anew in each of us...to teach us of God's eternal love ...I say (this day), "Praise be to the Living God." Praise be to the Living God. Amen.