

**Sermon**  
**“Unto You a Savior is Born”**  
**Becky a. Hebert**  
**December 24, 2010**  
**St. John’s Chapel UCC**

**Luke 2: 1-20**

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were **terrified**. But the angel said to them, “Do not be **afraid**; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for **all the people**: (to you is born this day in the city of David **a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord**.) This will be a sign for you, you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went, with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about the child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

## SERMON

On Christmas day so long ago, a child was born who brought hope to the world. This hope given in a simple stable became the son of trust. This year Christmas comes at a time of great anxiety in our world. Many of are struggling and are afraid for their future. It is not easy to hope when times are bad. Well I am here to tell you, things weren't that great when Jesus was born—as it has not been at numerous points in history. Generations upon generations have felt at times that they were walking in darkness, surrounded by wars, carrying heavy burdens, struggling with not having money or enough to feed their families, or feeling demoralized and the rod of an oppressor. Of course, the bad times with which we personally struggle, always seem the worst. My mother-in-law used to say when someone was down, “Just think how good you have it in comparison to the people in Africa (or whatever country seen at its bleakest). I don't know about you, but when I'm down, I do not want to hear about others for whom I should commiserate.

I just want you to sympathize with me for awhile as if the worst thing that had ever happened to anyone is happening to me. Eventually, after we've **waddled together in my misery, then I want to hear a word of good news.**

This is the night that comes bearing that good news, that offers the hope of a way out of our depression and anxiety.

“Do not be afraid, for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city David a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Unto you a Savior is born. That's it! That's the good news. We're receiving this evening that which will save us from all that's wrong with the world.

Charles Dunham told me awhile back that he would come to church if I'd preached a sermon on salvation. Salvation! I told him I could do that. He said he realized that Christmas might not be the time to do that. I said, "Why not! After all, that's what Christmas is all about, isn't it?!" Unto to us a **Savior** is born. Christmas is the birth of salvation.

Salvation! What is it? Most of us have grown up on the word, but may not understand its meaning for us. We know we do not like it when our more conservative brothers or sisters ask us, "Have you been saved?" Most of us have come up with a counter to this. Mine is, "Saved from what?"

"Have you been saved," is usually said in the same breath with, "Have you taken Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?"

Have you ever wondered why this bothers us so? For some of us, it is the emotional conversion experience that is cited as occurring at an exact day and time. We much prefer the more rational approach of saying, "Yes, I have made the decision to take Jesus as my Lord and Savior."

Maybe it also has something to do with our lack of really feeling saved when we decided to follow Jesus. Maybe we envy those who experienced a conversion experience. Or maybe it leaves us sort of confused. When someone tells me they have been saved by the blood of the lamb, I have doubts. How does that work exactly? Smear on a little holy blood and you will feel better? Then they go on to explain how that works by telling me that they have been saved from their sins because Jesus died for them.

Saved from our sins? I thought the hope born in Bethlehem was a Savior that was going to save us from walking in darkness, surrounded by wars, carrying heavy burdens, **struggling with finances** and feeling the rod of an oppressor. Aren't these heartbreaking loads we carry in

our hearts, that weigh us down, have more to do with the sins of others than our own? I think the question of salvation has more to do with how that tiny baby is going to save me, you, and the world from our misery—not our sin.

According to Chuck Gackstetter, my spiritual director, tonight, and every night and moment of existence, hope is born in a stable in Bethlehem because this enfant we lovingly hold in our hearts will grow to show us the way to completely trust in God.

Chuck Gackstetter found out he would have to resign as a pastor of a UCC church in Joplin, because he was losing his sight. Concerned about him, I called one day to ask if there was any way we could get together for lunch. He said, “Yes, sure!” This he would do if I was willing to drive to Willard. He said he did not like having to depend on others to always get him places. If I met him at the Junction Café in Willard, he could walk over. What started out as an attempt on my part to help someone I thought must be in misery, became my salvation. It was undoubtedly the most enriching of lunches. I called Chuck back later and asked if he would be willing to serve as my spiritual director. He graciously agreed.

On December 7<sup>th</sup> of this year, I journeyed over (as I now do most months) to the Junction Café in Willard, MO, to meet with my spiritual director—and I woke up to a whole new understanding of salvation. It was as if something I knew in a sleepwalking state jarred me awake.

The conversation began with me telling Chuck I was trying to write, thanks to Charles Dunham, this Christmas sermon on salvation. After all, it was on Christmas Eve that an angel announced that unto us a savior was born—but for some reason I was having one heck of a time getting it going.

To this he asked, “Do you want to know what has been my salvation?”

“Sure!”

“As my eye sight faded, and with time on my hands to reflect and meditate, I realized it all boils down to trust, complete and absolute trust in God. Ultimately God is in control and God wishes only the best for me. This has been my salvation.”

“Trust in God has been your salvation?” I repeated.

“Yes, the moment I began working to put all my trust in God, come what may, my fear of walking in darkness went away.”

“Well, what about the old doctrine about salvation from sin?” I asked. “We who have been raised in the church have been told all our lives that salvation is about being saved from sin.”

“Not trusting has everything to do with sin, Chuck informed me. “When we do not trust, we become fearful. And it is from fear that we do our most sinning. We become fearful so we wage war with countries, our neighbors, our faith families, our spouses, our partners and our best friends. And we do it in the name of God. We call them holy wars. We feel certain we are saving the world, ourselves, our families, or our church from some tyranny. Out of fear we do hurtful, stupid things. We sin.

“Trusting God removes sin. And that tiny baby we receive at Christmas time came to live the example of what it means to trust completely—even unto the cross. Salvation does not mean life gets easy—it means we are freed from fear.”

Another Chuck, Chuck Andrews, noted once how often the Bible says, “Fear not!” As it does tonight, “Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.” Chuck decided to get out a concordance and see just how many times “Fear not!” appears in the Bible. He discovered it occurs 365 times--one verse for every day of the year.

Each time the Bible says this, it gives us the reason we are not to be fearful. Tonight we can put aside our fear, for tonight is born to us a Savior—the very one who can teach us how to put all anxiety and fear aside by trusting completely in God. So pay close attention this year to what Jesus has to teach you.

*Be attentive. Salvation comes. Do not let it pass you by.*

As the hymn goes, “Christ our Savior was born on Christmas day, to save us all from Satan’s pow’r when we have gone astray.” To free all those who trust in God from ...Satan’s pow’r and might.” To free us from the hold fear, anxiety, resentment, hatred, and bitterness has on us.

O, dear God, how much I need to have this Savior born to me this day.

*Be attentive. Salvation comes. Do not let it pass you by.*

*Merry Christmas!*

Where do I can look to find a way out of my misery?

What are the burdens borne by those in your congregation in this season, in this hour? How do folks feel pressed down, lost, in the dark? What are the "empires" that rule over us – materialism, militarism, consumerism, racism, nationalism?

The reading from Isaiah presents a portrait of a people lost, afraid, depressed and demoralized, a people on whom a light then shines, and whose spirits are lifted up. The promise of peace is dramatically depicted in the burning of the boots of warriors and the bloody garments of those who have suffered violence. What is the deepest longing of the people of your church? What is the deepest hunger in the people of your community, in your setting of the church? Where, in that longing and hunger, is s well it has been at so many points in human history. People have

**Scripture:** Luke 2: (1-7) 8-20 (emphasis on Lk 2:11)  
**“Unto You a Savior is Born”**

**Theme:** Salvation, Charles Duham’s request, being saved from ?  
Carol. (Lk 2:11)

**Title:** “Unto You a Savior is Born”  
• Elaine’s e-mail on Spanish athem

**I was there that night so long ago when skies were ablaze with angels**

**On Christmas day so long ago a child was born who brought hope to the world, This hope that was given to us in a simple stable became the son of trust. Without trust we become fearful. And fear bred war and hatred.**

**Psalm 97: 3 “consumes his adversaries” with love, not with violence**

Mary, as she waited for the birth of her child into an uncertain world, knew how to live with hope--to believe the promises of God. So now is a time when we celebrate, with Mary, the birth of new life into a world living in the shadows of death.

***Christmas Eve reflection questions:***

At so many points in human history, people have felt that they were walking in

darkness, carrying heavy burdens, and feeling the rod of an oppressor. What are the burdens borne by those in your congregation in this season, in this hour? How do folks feel pressed down, lost, in the dark? What are the "empires" that rule over us – materialism, militarism, consumerism, racism, nationalism?

The reading from Isaiah presents a portrait of a people lost, afraid, depressed and demoralized, a people on whom a light then shines, and whose spirits are lifted up. The promise of peace is dramatically depicted in the burning of the boots of warriors and the bloody garments of those who have suffered violence. What is the deepest longing of the people of your church? What is the deepest hunger in the people of your community, in your setting of the church? Where, in that longing and hunger, is there a call for your community of faith? How is God still speaking to your congregation and to the United Church of Christ in this hour and this place? In what ways can we be people of peace in this world, embodying the promise of peace that we hear on this night, year after year?

Psalm 96 reminds us that "the gods of the peoples are idols" and again, we might ask, what are the gods that we have shaped in our own culture? Do we ever think of ourselves as guilty of the sin of idolatry? To what do we truly give our hearts? In this Christmas season, what is the word of true hope, what is the truest promise that we have received? What is the true gift of this season, and how do we experience that gift as enduring beyond a holiday season or few weeks of celebration?

Fear and glory: God is still speaking to us today, in the midst of our fears and uncertainty, and saying, as the angel did: "Do not be afraid." What are your greatest fears? How do you experience the comfort of God when you are afraid? What is the glory of God shining around you, even in the midst of your everyday work, like the shepherds? How do you hear the voice of God reassuring you and bringing you good news? Does your community of faith hear this good news afresh in this Christmas season, and give glory to God themselves? How does our anticipation of Christmas relate to our anticipation of the love and promise embodied by the child, Jesus?

### ***Christmas Day reflection questions on John 1:1-14:***

We celebrate Christmas in many ways, among them gathering with family and friends, exchanging gifts, holding pageants, and sending cards. Perhaps the most moving and memorable way we celebrate Christmas is singing Christmas carols. Our musical memory lasts through the years, from our childhood into our old age, the melodies familiar and comforting, the words hauntingly beautiful and instructive at the same time. The readings for this morning are like songs, too, and their lyrical celebration of God at work in the world, saving, vindicating, calling, and comforting, links us to our ancestors in faith who shared our common hope and longing. We sing with them today.

What is the good news we are waiting to hear, or waiting to see fulfilled? Are we waiting for a messenger who will tell us that the tide has turned, that the day of vindication and hope has arrived, that God is still with us? Or have we secretly, privately, given up hope? Worse, have we assumed that it is all up to us, or that we can even begin to make everything right?

In what ways do we experience ourselves as a city in ruins, like Jerusalem so long ago? How is God still speaking good news to us, today, in the "ruins of Jerusalem"? What are the broken things, the malfunctioning systems, the things that need to be made aright? What are we doing, as we wait for this messenger? How does Christmas morning do more than remind us of what God has done but instead proclaim that God is active in the world today, in this setting of history? Do you feel tired and relieved on Christmas morning, or energized and renewed? What is the new thing that God is doing in the life of your congregation, in your own life, in the life of the United Church of Christ? In this day, how is God revealing God's own self in the life of the community? How is your church "anointed with the oil of gladness"?

I like Epiphany, I respect Lent, I wish we did Eastertide more and better, but it's Advent that I love.

I love gathering greens from the cedars in our backyard to fold around the Advent wreath. I love the new purple candles, ready and waiting. I love getting out the silver candle snuffer that a college professor gave us as a wedding gift and laying it beside the wreath.

I love the first, haunting strains of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," on the first Sunday of Advent. I wait eagerly to sing, "Watchman Tell us of The Night," and "On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry."

I like purple.

I love that when the stores' Christmas decorations are already getting tired, Advent is just getting going. I love lighting candles around the house as evening comes and laying a fire in the fireplace. I like hanging the Advent calendar on the wall, and taking turns opening one window a day.

I like the waiting and the watching, and the anticipation. My grandmother, Victoria, used to say, when something good was coming, that she had, "The Anticipates." Advent is a season for "The Anticipates." It may be dark now, but a change is coming.

I like the Advent idea of "keeping faith, hope and love alive in the midst of dark times," because that's where we so often are and so often need to be. I love that,

just when we want to hibernate, Advent says, "Wake up," startling me like a noon factory whistle. "Wake up," says Advent, "the world is open at the top."

I love that when anxiety and fear seem to be so all-over-the-place, Advent's call to be alert isn't about fear but hope; that Advent isn't for mad anxiety but glad urgency. I love the mystery of it.

Advent is a season I love.