

## **“Linus: Not an Easy Road”**

December 30, 2018

*A Charlie Brown Advent series – Sunday after Christmas*

*Note: We're grateful to Faith Church in Bellafonte, PA for the idea for this series.*

I'll confess to you that there are times I'd like to stay at the manger. I'd like to stay in the peaceful atmosphere of Christmas Eve when we've sung "Silent Night" and this sanctuary is filled with the light of hundreds of candles. And I'll confess that I sometimes feel like Ricky Bobby in *Talladega Nights* when he prays to the infant Jesus, and when his family tells him that Jesus grows up, he says, "I like the baby Jesus the best. I like Christmas Jesus best."

Now before you consider it sacrilegious to quote a silly comedy film when I'm talking about Christmas, maybe we can relate. We might want to stay at the manger. We don't know much about Jesus' early life, and there are some "silent years" in Scripture.

But if we're honest, we'd rather not remember this troublesome time. We might want to skip to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, but here we are. We're faced with the reality that Jesus - Savior, Messiah, Lord - started his earthly life - his young life - with a difficult road ahead.

Certainly Linus' sledding attempts aren't quite the same as what Jesus faced, but it's a reminder that life isn't always easy. And Linus' struggle reminded me of my first experience skiing. It wasn't a stellar one. It was a youth group ski trip in high school. I was on the bunny hill, and I couldn't stop. I ran full-on into a snowbank. Needless to say, I haven't skied a lot since.

Scripture is clear that it wasn't easy for Jesus and his family, and following Jesus isn't a guarantee of an easy life either. We know this, but hearing it as we're celebrating in these twelve days of Christmas matters. As we're facing a new calendar year, wondering what's ahead can be both exciting and scary.

It was in 1992 - 27 years after the first Christmas special aired - when Charles Schultz and friends collaborated "It's Christmastime Again, Charlie Brown." There are multiple storylines happening at once, but there's still an attempt to share the true meaning of Christmas. Even 27 years later, Linus tries to keep the Gospel in front of his friends, even going back to Luke chapter 2 when Sally is still distracted by her desire to get more stuff "while the getting is good."

And it's easy for us to become distracted after Christmas Day is over. It's this in-between time when we lose track of the day and the time. And then we're ready to

race into a new year without much thought for Jesus and his family. Think of what Mary and Joseph had experienced - visits from angels, a difficult trip to Bethlehem, not the best place to welcome a new baby - and all of it shrouded in mystery and likely surrounded by people gossiping about how this all came to be!

Fast forward a couple of years and a visit from magi from the East bringing gifts – gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, and myrrh that was used to anoint a body for burial – gifts that remind us who Jesus is. But then a dream changes the Holy Family's plans.

Perhaps they had planned to go to Nazareth to be near their own family. But then the dream comes to Joseph - and he heeds it. He knows the importance of dreams because that's how he came to know that child Mary was carrying was the Messiah.

And Herod was power-hungry to the point of disregard for others and absolute evil. He had murdered his own family to get rid of any threats to his power. So it's no wonder that he would have no issue in killing anyone who might be a threat - even every young male child!

We may want to ignore this part of Matthew's Gospel after the magi leave. But we can't. This is key to a full understanding of who God is and how God is Emmanuel. Jesus was born in a dangerous time, in a dangerous place, under dangerous circumstances. Herod's plan to find this newborn king and kill him is almost more than we can even imagine!

But Joseph and the magi remind us to pay attention - to look and listen for God every day - sometimes in the things that seem most insignificant to us. Joseph paid attention to his dreams. He listened to God and took action to protect Jesus. The magi paid attention to the things we might think are insignificant - like the stars.

God really does work in the everyday stuff of our lives. What are the God moments when God can use us and lead us? How will we seize those moments and grow closer to God? Maybe it will happen in your work when an opportunity comes to talk about your faith or simply that you go to church.

Maybe you'll be moved in a time of worship or serving others or prayer. If you've taken up journaling in this season, perhaps you can already see how God is working to offer wisdom or bring clarity. Maybe it will be in a time of Sabbath rest that you'll be able to listen to God more closely, or maybe reading the Bible or a devotional will enlighten you. How might you come to know God through interactions with others?

So we're challenged by the story of Jesus' early life to remember that God is at work all the time and we're also challenged in our current climate. The rest of Jesus' story confronts us in a time when issues around immigration are front and center. I'm very aware that this can be difficult and divisive, but I hope we can hear it clearly. Jesus

and his family are refugees who flee to safety in a land that was not their own. Jesus and his family knew what it meant to be outsiders, having to rely on the kindness of people in Egypt.

Jesus was up against the powerful – a king who resorted to violence – even as he came as the Prince of Peace. Jesus was in danger from the very beginning, and it never really went away. He was always up against the powerful - whether it was those in the religious arena or the political realm. He was standing up to power and speaking truth to power, and it led to his death on the cross.

Joy Carroll Wallis says, “This story that begins in a smelly barn finally ends on a cross. By human standards it is a message of weakness. But Christmas reminds us that our God has come into our broken world, and that human judgments are not the last judgment, human justice is not the last justice. The power that humans exercise over us is not the last power.”

Following Jesus isn’t an easy road, and the answers around how to engage current issues of immigration aren’t simple. But I pray we’ll be prayerful - and seek God’s wisdom and guidance and as we respond to real human need with faith and courage. I grieve the news of young lives cut short because of illness, and I can’t imagine how I’d respond if I was trying to protect my child - but Mary and Joseph experienced it with Jesus. This is a part of the story we claim as followers of Jesus.

I hope we’ll remember that God loves the world and everyone in it, and that we’ll balance a need for safety and security with the call to love God and love neighbor - the person in need. Our call is to love - and sometimes that means we stand against the ways of the world. Our call is to seek God’s Kingdom first. I’m grateful for our larger United Methodist connection and all of the ways that we reach out in love and service to others - sharing the love of Christ widely and boldly.

How does this New Year look? I’m looking forward to spending time with my family and watching Ana and Luka learn and grow. I’m looking forward to my niece’s wedding in August. I’m excited for mission and ministry here at Lake Harbor as we seek to love God and love neighbor. I’m wondering how our special session of General Conference this February will turn out.

I know that right now there are people waiting for an end to a government shutdown. There are people living paycheck to paycheck. There are people facing health issues. There are families struggling with relationships. There are people grieving losses.

How can we enter this New Year with a reality check - knowing that following Jesus isn’t easy, but it offers us hope, peace, joy, and love that never fails? How can we

accept the grace that Jesus offers and then offer it to others? I invite us to hear words to the early church:

**SHOW SLIDE:** Colossians 3: 12-17 (TNIV)

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

<sup>13</sup>Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. <sup>14</sup>And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

<sup>15</sup>Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup>Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. <sup>17</sup>And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Throughout this series, we've been searching for meaning with Charlie Brown. And we sang it earlier today: "Love is the peace our hearts are seeking." May the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Spirit lead us always.

Let us pray...

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE