

Sermon Christmas Eve Family Service, 2018

“What Will We Offer?”

Texts: Isaiah 11:1-10; Luke 2:1-20 [Based on “Why The Chimes Rang” by Raymond M. Alden]

Rev. Jeff Colarossi, Westwood First Presbyterian Church

In a faraway country where few people have ever traveled there was once a wonderful church. It stood on a high hill in a great city. In the church was a magnificent organ that people could hear from miles around. No such church as this was ever seen before. It was especially wonderful when it was decorated for Christmas and filled with people. But the most wonderful and unusual thing about the huge church was the sound of its bells. Their sound was very special. Everyone who'd heard them said their sound was the sweetest in the world. Some said they sounded like the singing of angels. The bells were Christmas bells. They weren't meant to be heard at any other time. It was customary, on Christmas Eve for the people to bring gifts to the church for Baby Jesus. When the greatest gift was given the music of the Christmas bells would be heard. But the sad fact was that the bells had been silent for as long as anyone could remember. Some said that people had become less generous, less thoughtful of their gifts. Others said that no gift was great enough to cause the bells to ring. Each year there were many gifts, each year the service was wonderful, but the bells did not ring. In a far-off village lived a boy named Pedro and his younger brother. They'd heard about the bells and the Christmas Eve service and made plans to travel to the church to attend the beautiful service. Pedro said to Little Brother, “People say that the Baby Jesus comes to bless the service. “Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could see Him?”

The day before Christmas was very cold. It was snowing, and the ground was frozen. Pedro and Little Brother slipped quietly away that afternoon. As the sun was setting, they saw the big city just ahead of them. They were about to enter the city when they saw that a poor woman had fallen. She was sick and unable to go any further. Pedro knelt beside her and tried to wake her. Then he looked at her silently and knew what he had to do. “It's no use, Little Brother,” he said. “You'll have to go on alone.” “But you miss the Christmas service,” said Little Brother. “I know,” said Pedro “but this poor woman will freeze to death if nobody cares for her. Everyone has gone to church. You must go too and when you come back you can bring someone to help her. I will stay and try to keep her warm.” Little Brother reluctantly agreed. As he turned to go Pedro handed his brother a small silver coin. He said, “Little Brother, I brought this to give to the Baby Jesus. It's up to you to give it to Him. Be sure to give it when no one's looking and don't let anyone see you. Come back after the service as quickly as you can.”

The great church was beautiful that night. When the organ played, and the people sang the walls shook with the sound. Toward the end of the service came the moment to bring gifts to the Baby Jesus. Rich, important people gave their gifts, and many brought gold. Last of all, came the king. He was hoping, as everyone was, to earn for himself the music of the bells. The people watched as the king took the jeweled crown from his head and offered it as his gift. “Surely,” everyone said, “we shall hear the bells now.”

But all they heard was the cold wind in the tower. The people shook their heads. Some said that they never really believed that the story of the bells was true. They said they didn't believe the bells ever rang at all. The giving of gifts was over, and the closing hymn began. Suddenly the organist stopped playing. Everyone looked at the old minister who was holding up his hand for silence. Not a sound could be heard from anyone in the church. But as all the people listened softly – but clearly – came the sound of the bells in the tower. Their music began to fill the air and was much sweeter than anything they'd ever been heard. People in the church stood still. Everyone looked toward the front of the church to see what great gift had caused the bells to ring. All they saw was a child – they saw Little Brother. You see, he had silently moved to the front of church when no one was looking. He had given the Baby Jesus Pedro's small piece of silver.

What a wonderful story. My question then is: what will we bring to the Christ-child? What will we offer? The whole world's been moved and affected by Jesus's birth. All of creation has offered something. It can do nothing less and neither can we. These aren't just characters, props, or scenes in the story. They are aspects of our own lives. They are parts of ourselves and our world. It's not difficult to make the connections. We've had visions of peace and we've acted with fear and anger. We've sung praises and followed the star searching for something new, something beyond ourselves. We've also closed the doors of our lives and hung a "no vacancy" sign. We've planned our future and we've grieved its loss. Christmas is our story. We cannot come to the manger empty handed. To come to the manger with nothing is to come as mere spectators of history. To bring our own stuff to the manger is to come as participants in Christ's birth. Spectators might see God's son born in Bethlehem, but participants will experience God's son born in themselves. That's what I want for you, for me, and for the world. After all, what does it matter if Jesus was born "in those days" and "in that region" if He's not also born in these days and in the region of our hearts?

Meister Eckhart, a 14th century monk, once wrote "What good is it that Christ was born in a stable in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago if He is not also born in us?" What good is it indeed? Whatever we bring to the manger is our way of participating in the birth of Jesus. So again I ask: What will we offer? Perhaps we bring the hopes and fears we want met in Him tonight. Perhaps it's our thanksgivings and disappointments, our joys and sorrows of the past year. What desires and longings have bought us here tonight? And what secrets make us want to turn and run? What did we celebrate this past year and what broke our hearts? Whatever we offer at the manger let it speak the truth of and about our lives. Whatever it is I'm certain that the manger is generous enough and big enough to receive it. I also know that Christ-child is able to transform us and our world even when we can't see it or don't believe it and no matter how hard we may resist it.

I suspect that's why we keep showing up here on Christmas Eve, especially on a Christmas when life is – or has been – difficult and challenging. Some might say, "Fine, but can this Child's birth really change our lives? Well, let me ask you this. When has the birth of a child ever NOT changed someone's life? I mean, did the birth of your children – or grandchildren – change you and your world? Did your birth change your parents' lives and their world? You bet it did, and probably in more ways than you can

count – or realize. So it is with the birth of **this** child. The promise of Christmas is that we won't not leave here unchanged. It might take a while to recognize and live into this change, but the promise is trustworthy and true. To us "is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord." And that is "good news of great joy for all the people" in every time, in every place, and in every life.

Come Lord Jesus.

Amen and amen.