

“This as Scandal and Blessing”
Rev. Tom Steffen
16 December 2018
Zephaniah 3:14-20 Luke 3:7-18
Advent Series: “Find Joy This Christmas” Week III

The third word in our theme for the four Sundays of Advent (Find Joy This Christmas) is “this,” and there’s more to this than meets the eye. You’ll remember that “this” is a pronoun, used to point out a person or thing close at hand – “So this is the sweater you are wearing to the office party?” We use “this” as an adverb: “Should we tackle a job this big.” It is a word that allows us to speak of trivial matters – you know, when we speak of, “this, that or the other thing,” AND it is used to call attention to very important matters – “Now, listen to this!” But it isn’t the grammar of “this” that I want to explore, but the lofty phrase associated with the word “this” that theologians refer to—the “scandal of the particular.” It is the perfect phrase for Christmas.

A favorite 19th century poet of many, Christina Rossetti, explains the scandal of the particular as well as anyone:

*“Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, Love Divine.
Love was born at Christmas, Star and Angels gave the sign.
Worship we the Godhead, Love Incarnate, Love Divine,
Worship we our Jesus, but wherewith for sacred sign?
Love shall be our token, Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men and women,
Love for plea and for gift and for sign.”*

Did you pick up on what you now know about Christmas? Love, true love, that is, and not some faux representation of it, is quite literally the mysterious Reality of God fleshed out.

The word we tend to use in here is “incarnate,” which means God made accessible down here, which is not so much a direction or a place, but accessible because of the “particulars.” The temptation, of course, is to prefer the abstract, the universal, you know, the theoretical, removed from where the rubber meets the road. Now, unless your best friend works at Les Schwab, the likely reason you turn into the one on the east side of town is to repair the scandal of a particular tire that is going flat; it is not to discuss the combined properties of carbon black and silica, resins, oils, sulfur, wires, rayon, nylon, polyester and, of course, natural and synthetic rubber used to create the durable and dark donuts we all drive on.

The scandal of the particular, oh yes, and “this” involves more than just tires. God is only knowable with particulars: this flower, this galaxy, this Elizabeth, this John, this stable, this Mary, this Joseph, this Jesus. It is the mystery of the particular that opens the human heart to what Martin Buber called the “I-Thou encounter” that makes God knowable, and anything else worth knowing. Without it, well, there is little chance for faith or devotion; only theories to argue about. Somewhere in Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she writes: “The ‘scandal of particularity’ is the only world that I, in particular, know. What use has eternity for light? We are all up to our necks in this particular scandal.” Find Joy THIS Christmas. It means, that Christmas must be scandalous, a place of encounter, or it will go unnoticed, and it will remain unfound.

Remember the famous Wright brothers? Lots of stories about those two and their family. Concerning a fateful day in 1903, the brothers sent a telegraph to their sister, Katherine, with supposedly this message: “We have actually flown 120 feet. Will be home for Christmas.” Katherine hurried to share

the good news with a friend, who was the editor of the local newspaper. When she showed him the message, he said, "How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas." In a way, I guess, the editor missed one of the first breakthroughs in aviation history. But he didn't miss the possibility for joy at Christmas. Today, however, I worry that the opposite may be true for many of us thoroughly modern people. We rarely miss the headlines and breakthroughs, but it seems easier to miss Christmas. And we will likely miss Christmas if we are not prepared for *this* Christmas.

John the Baptizer said that preparing involves reaching out to signal that we really want what is coming. And how do we do this, John's listeners ask? Well, if we have enough, preparing suggests that we find someone who has little, not simply to give them what they want, but to partner with them to help them learn how to discover what they need. And when John said this, Luke tells us that people began to wonder, "Could this be the One who is coming?" as if such sharing – this reaching out – is the signal that the Divine Mystery is among us. And here's the rub, the scandal of the particular. When Love comes down at Christmas, says the poet, Love becomes our token, the currency of incarnation. Love to receive, yes, and Love to give away; Love for "plea, for gift for sign." And, now you can see that this is both scandal and blessing. When Love is our token, gift and sign, Christmas blesses both the receiver and the giver. Why? Because a real gift always comes with a giver attached. Christmas reminds us that God works best up close and personal. Not at a distance, not behind a mask with gown and gloves. I know that safely removed from the risk is the best way to start an IV or to dispose of toxic waste, but God isn't all that squeamish around flesh and blood. God seems utterly committed to the spread of the contagion of infectious Love. There's only one way to Find Joy This Christmas. We must somehow figure out who is waiting for us to be with them in the hopes that we will do what only we can do. May I repeat that? We will Find Joy This Christmas if we somehow figure out who is waiting for us to be with them in the hopes that we will do what only we can do. It is true: we are not called to do everything, but we are vitally important in the scheme of the limited things that we can do. The Divine Mystery waits for us to flesh out the Divine reach.

I want to close by telling you a story about Oswald Golter, a missionary who lived in China and India during and after World War II. Throughout his ministry, he and his wife had been placed under house arrest on more than one occasion. On one particular year, they were released from prison in time for Christmas. Someone had collected money to buy Oswald and his wife a ticket home to the states; and they were delighted. They made their way to the port to meet the ship that would take them home, but somehow word came to Oswald that a number of Jews were living nearby in attics and barns and finding it difficult to find a country that would accept them. Oswald located these families, and one-by-one asked them how he could help them.

"What would like for Christmas?" "We are Jews," they replied. "I know you are, but tell me, what would you like for Christmas?" "We are Jews, we don't believe in Christmas!" "OK, I know all that. But really, what would you like?" And then one of them said, "Oh, some German pastries would be wonderful." So, Oswald cashed in their tickets, found a place that sold pastries and other things I'm sure, and they returned to the families. He and his wife passed out all that he had purchased, and quietly wished them a "Merry Christmas." I'm told that years later, Dr. Golter shared this story with a group of seminary students one day, and one of the students objected and said, "Why on earth did you do such a thing! They weren't even Christians!" And Oswald supposedly said, "No, but I am." The Golters missed the ship that December, but they still made it all the way to Christmas. Amen.