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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
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Luke 1: 25-55

**“She’s Having a Baby!”**

What do you say we begin this sermon by singing a well known Christmas tune? Don’t make me sing it by myself . . .there’s a reason I’ve never joined the choir after all these year!

Oh! You better watch out,  
You better not cry,  
You better not pout,  
I’m telling you why:  
Santa Claus is coming to town.

He sees you when your sleeping.  
He knows when you’re awake.  
He knows if you’ve been bad or good so be good for goodness sake!

Oh! You better watch out,  
You better not cry,  
You better not pout,  
I’m telling you why:  
Santa Claus is coming to town.

Ah yes, the quintessential Christmas song that parents use at this time of year as a behavioral modification strategy. Santa sent e-mails to everyone at my house bearing the good news that everyone is on the nice list . . .of which one of them remarked, “Good! Now I don’t need to try so hard after Christmas!”

I have an app on my phone called “Santa’s Bag” that I use to enter information on who I’ve bought gifts for and how much I’ve spent. I can even enter if I’ve wrapped and given the gift. As of Thursday I had purchased 72 gifts . . .72! When I announced that at dinner one of the kids said, “Nice.” And the other, “50 of them for me.” Someone must think he’s been really good.

In all seriousness, though, the app and song and dinner conversation got me to thinking about the whole idea behind Santa only bringing gifts to good girls and boys, especially after hearing James Dobson and Mike Huckabee blame the CT shooting on people they consider “bad”. It sounds to me like James Dobson and Mike Huckabee believe in a Santa Claus God. I mean seriously, who appointed them Jerry Falwell’s heir apparent? And why do people keep handing these guys a microphone? Dobson said:

*I mean millions of people have decided that God doesn't exist, or he's irrelevant to me, and we have killed fifty-four million babies and the institution of marriage is right on the verge of a complete redefinition. Believe me, that is going to have consequences too. And a lot of these things are happening around us, and somebody is going to get mad at me for saying what I am about to say right now, but I am going to give you my honest opinion: I think we have turned our back on the Scripture and on God Almighty and I think he has allowed judgment to fall upon us. I think that's what's going on.*  
[\(<http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/dobson-connecticut-shooting-was-god-allowing-judgment-fall-upon-us-turning-our-back-him>\)](http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/dobson-connecticut-shooting-was-god-allowing-judgment-fall-upon-us-turning-our-back-him)

Despite what Dobson and others like him think, God is not like Santa Claus who only delivers presents to good boys and girls and threatens the “bad” ones. Dobson’s words are disgraceful, exploitive, and unchristian, and we should be outraged. It is a shame that certain Christians feel compelled to speak for God at moments like these, because the results give Christians a bad rap. And I believe that at times like these, we have a responsibility to speak up and repudiate such bad theology.

So how do we speak of God in times like these? Well, I believe we turn to the same source Dobson does . . . the scriptures. But rather than using them to bash people over the head, I think we can find that God’s word does still come to us today in a graceful, inclusive, and hopeful manner.

Today, God’s word comes to us in the story of the annunciation and Mary’s Magnificat. The annunciation is the Angel Gabriel’s announcement to Mary that she will bear a son and name him Jesus. You heard Ron read that part of the story. The Magnificat, which I read, is Mary’s song that praises God for being faithful and good.

Now, I’m going to guess that most of us have a picture in our mind of Mary that matches up nicely with the paintings and statues we’ve seen of her. Mary is often looking adoringly at the newborn baby Jesus she cradles in her arms. She’s almost always dressed in a long, flowing, blue gown of some sort. Her hair is combed smooth and her baby is clean. Just like the carols say, Mary is gentle, and the baby’s head is sweet.

The songs, the paintings, and the statues have all given us this image of Mary as being perfect and someone who has earned God’s favor because she has been good. But I’m not sure the art tells the whole truth. I think behind the paintings and statues there was a scared young woman who knew that being an unwed, teenage mother was less than ideal. Her response to the Angel Gabriel is cautious at best. Her pregnancy put her in a very dangerous situation. Joseph had every legal right to stone her for getting pregnant out of wedlock. Added to this is the fact that the child she was to bear put her in direct conflict with King Herod and the Roman Empire. King Herod had already killed two of his own children and a wife because he thought they were out to claim his throne, so killing Mary would have been nothing for him.

And what about the angel’s words, “Greeting, favored one!” Are we to interpret this to mean that she was sinless and extraordinary? Well, Catholic theologians do. But

Protestant theologians don't. In Protestant theology the extraordinary thing about Mary is that she was ordinary, a peasant girl, someone who was sinful just like the rest of us but was integrally included in God's work despite that. John Calvin taught that Mary received the underserved love of God, just like the rest of us do. And that, indeed, Mary's story shows us that all of us receive God's undeserved love whether we've been naughty or nice.

We would do ourselves a favor to remember that Mary's life was far from perfect. Things were messy. God chose to come into the world in the middle of a mess, not a perfect family that is well pressed and perfectly groomed, not a perfect scene where everyone is sitting nicely for the pictures, but a mess. And I don't know about you, but that brings me a lot more comfort than thinking about Mary being extraordinary, sinless, or perfectly in sync with God, because I can't relate to those ideals. But I can relate to imperfect lives, imperfect people and messy situations. That I get. That I can relate to, and I can take great comfort in that.

Because that means that God is in the mess, in our messy lives, with you and me, in this world, this beautiful, amazing world that is also far too messy and violent. It also means that God can and will show up again in the middle of more messes, those messes being family fights, illnesses, moving, job loss, caring for elderly parents, caring for babies and children, attending funerals, mourning the senseless loss of lives taken by a gunman, asking why things like this happen, where is God, and how do we make sense of it? What do we say at times like these?

Well, when we turn to the scriptures, we find the smart people chose to stand in solidarity with people are in deep need rather than offering them an explanation. And Elizabeth is one of those people. After the Angel Gabriel announced to Mary she was going to have a baby, she went with haste to Elizabeth's house. I can picture her running to Elizabeth's house to receive some words of encouragement and comfort. After all, Elizabeth was older, probably wiser, and, given that she was the wife of priest, had no doubt offered counsel to plenty of young women. No doubt Zechariah was always receiving visitors of some sort or another who needed encouragement and solace, and no doubt some of them received it from Elizabeth while Zechariah was busy attending to someone else.

So I imagine Mary ran to Elizabeth to hear the older woman offer her some comfort. And that's exactly what Elizabeth did. She didn't scold Mary for getting pregnant, tell her she was awful for getting into that mess therefore God must have been out to get her. No, instead, she offered Mary comfort and the reassurance that God is good, and God is faithful.

Friends, our response to tragedy is not one of explanation, but one of witness. Our job is not to make what has happened rational or understandable, but is to witness to a God who loves us so abundantly that God would come down into a messy world to meet us just where we are, and loves us for who we are, messes and all, naughty or nice.

This is the wonderful, good news of Advent and Christmas which, especially now, people need to hear.

Let us pray . . .

*God of compassion, please watch over the people of Newtown, CT and weave out of this terrible event wonders of goodness and grace. Surround those who have been affected by tragedy with a sense of your abiding love, and hold them in faith. Though they are lost in grief, may they find you and be comforted; guide us as a church to find ways of providing assistance that heals wounds and gives hope. Help us to remember that when one of your children suffers we all suffer. Through Jesus Christ who was dead, but lives and rules this world with you. Amen.*