



## **Sermons from Northwood United Church**

**“Finding our way home: the elephant in the room”**

**Zephaniah 3:14-20 Luke 3:7-18**

**Will Sparks**

**December 16, 2012**

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

This is the season of candle glow and mistletoe, of sleigh bells and nutmeg smells, of children, wide-eyed and wonder filled, of animals at the manger: we have the sheep that came with the shepherds, the oxen- I guess it's their stable, the donkey of course. Oh yes and there are camels. Any others? Oh yes and the rhino. You didn't know about the rhino?

You mustn't have seen the ad in the paper about the Christmas ballet show in Zimbabwe featuring not only members of the national ballet but a live rhino. There's a picture for you, sweet little ballet dancers floating around the stage with grace and lightness of foot, with a lumbering rhino tromping alongside. Just the perfect Christmas show right? No?

Well if the association of a great big lumbering beast in the manger scene seems to be adding a bizarre and unsettling twist to your otherwise tranquil joyous celebration, well, I am sorry but that won't be the last unsettling thing we have to deal with as we try to find our way home to joy this morning.

Because the scriptures for this Sunday are a little unsettling too: “Brood of vipers?” Really John? Do you have to come barging into our friendly little Christmas mood stinking of poorly tanned leathers and setting fire to an otherwise peaceful time. What do you mean, “the wrath to come?” The last thing we need right now is talk of axes laid to roots of our beloved traditions and stuff like that. The part about “whoever has two coats, and lots of food, let them share. Now that fits, but this other stuff feels a lot like a wild intrusion onto our lovely Christmas tranquility.

These scriptures are jarring, like a rhino in the manger. They don't fit with our Christmas- or at least they don't fit with what we have made of Christmas.

I probably don't experience a representative slice of life, but it continues to strike me every year how aware I become that losing a job or losing a loved one or dealing with an alcoholic family member or other kinds of family conflict can be hellish at any time of the year, but it snaps into a particularly painful focus in the season of joy, nostalgia, and warmth- like a rhino in the manger. And just like viper talk on joy Sunday, it is tempting to push the pain and struggle to the side and say, not here, not now.

And this week, of course, the rhino in the manger scene is the pain and struggle of the 26 families in Connecticut, struggling to keep their heads above water because their child or parent was killed by a gunman on a rampage through an elementary school. That devastating reality comes crashing in to this time of celebration, and our hearts break for those families, and for the senseless loss of innocent life. The loss is unimaginable, the grief feels unbearable. What do you do when the bad news rips its way in to the good news of Christmas so jarringly and so painfully?

Well of course, we gather, and we name the experience of shock and sorrow and vulnerability. Gatherings have happened here in Surrey and all over. We do what we can to reach out and to be in solidarity with those who have lost their little ones so tragically. And we pray for them. This is a time to be a good neighbor to our friends to the south, and simply hold the Christ light in the nighttime of their grief. And as it would happen, tonight we are holding our Quiet

Christmas Service in which we do exactly that- and not only for those in Connecticut, but those in the Philippines devastated by tornado, and closer neighbors and friends who are going through their own personal struggles, with their own rhinos in the manger scene this year. We gather, we pray, and we hold the light of Christ for one another, because these experiences do come crashing in to our hoped for tranquility.

I was reading of another church with a similar tradition of an evening of Quiet and prayer in the midst of this season, but in their church the pastoral care team (that's what they call it) would be particularly attentive to struggling people in their community as Christmas approached. And this comment about pastoral care team being attentive got me thinking. How can we, as a Northwood Community, make a significant difference in this season that is so beautiful and joyful, and so hard when tragedy strikes or when the hard realities of life come crashing in as they so often do?

And then the words of Paul struck me. "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice!" Ya, easy for you to say Paul. Well actually it was not so easy for him to say. Paul wrote those words to his friends in Philippi from a prison cell in Ephesus. A first century prison cell- no easy place to spend Christmas. He writes to the pastoral care team in Philippi, "Rejoice in God!" You see, in the early church, the whole community was the pastoral care team. He wrote asking the whole community to unite in prayer for those who were experiencing the dark night of the soul in their lives. And folks, we are all part of a pastoral care team here. We are all called to hold the Christ light for one another and into the community on Joy Sunday when grief and struggle and pain come crashing in.

You know, I have no idea what it must be like in Newtown Connecticut this morning. The only way in to that experience is through the love I hold for my own children, and my own people. But knowing that gives me something to start with, and I can begin to imagine what they must be going through. The thread of love takes me there. The heartbreak begins to take shape for me. And we are also followers of a God who enters into that heartbreak, who follows God's own thread of love in, who is able and willing to get involved in this world, to be born into this painful time. The joy that Paul talks about, and the joy of this season is not some kind of cheap happiness that anesthetizes the pain. It is not even optimism. It makes no attempts to whitewash the pain away or give it a rosy glow. But the joy that is real comes from a deep sense of the relentlessness of God's desire to join us in our prisons and our pain, to join us on our long nights-out of love, and in hope. Some, in the dark night of the soul, may question even the existence of God at a time like this, and I understand that, but the God we follow in Jesus Christ does not manipulate the world to wipe some pain away, but rather enters it, bearing the pain in love and hope.

And so, pastoral care team of Northwood United Church, and that means all of us, here is our challenge. You know the love with which you are held by God. You know the love that courses through your own heart towards your own children and families and people. That is the thread of love that will make it possible for you to be attentive in compassion and in prayer to the people of Connecticut, or the Philippines, or the neighbor next door. That is the thread of love that will draw you to light a candle, to make a phone call, to send a message, to gather later, to do whatever you can to share the burden with strength and confidence and hope. That is the thread of love that will allow you to find your way back to joy when the struggles and pain come crashing in like a rhino in the manger. That is the thread of love we follow to find our way home. Amen