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Luke 2: 1-20  
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Rocky River Presbyterian Church

### “Christmas Light”

Eight years ago, when I was the Associate Pastor at Fairmount Presbyterian Church, I had the opportunity to marry Joseph and Mary. It was Christmas Eve, and we just finished our 4 o'clock family worship service. I was walking around cleaning up after the impromptu pageant, when I noticed a couple in our chapel. I have learned through the years to never ask a woman if she is pregnant, but this woman looked incredibly pregnant. It looked as if she was going to deliver at any moment. He was looking at her nervously. At first, I thought they were just looking around the chapel because the space was beautiful with unique artistic features, but they lingered for a long time. I didn't remember seeing them in the sanctuary for the family service, so I went in to introduce myself and let them know that the next worship service would not start until 7 p.m. They were both so apologetic about being there, worried that I was going to ask them to leave. They were shocked when they discovered that quite the opposite was true.

I learned they were Mary and John, a couple who were on their way to John's family's house for Christmas eve worship and dinner. Apparently, John's family were not particularly supportive of their relationship or this baby because they were not married. They really did not want to go to his parent's church for worship, because they have never felt welcome there and they just knew the whole church was going to be gossip about them and their relationship. They had stopped at Fairmount because they saw the lights on and she had friends growing up who had been members. They just wanted a place to feel some peace and closeness with God in that moment before enduring “the onslaught of misery” they were sure to experience that night.

I invited them to stay as long as they wanted and even offered to bring them some chili that the staff and deacons were going to be enjoying between services. While I was running to get her a warm meal, they made a pretty big decision. When I returned with chili in hand, Mary asked if I would consider marrying them. They had their marriage license, they had been planning to get married by a friend after Christmas, but in that moment they both decided that tonight was the night.

I am not usually the type of pastor who will just marry anyone; I usually want to get to know the couple, go through the whole pre-marital counseling process, but that night, on Christmas Eve sitting next to a manger and Mary and John, I could not ignore the parallels. For a couple, who did not feel welcome at church, for a couple who did not feel like the good news was for them, I could not look at them that night and say, “Sorry, there's no room at the inn.”

So, I called everyone up from the kitchen; we handed Mary a small poinsettia as her bouquet, and my former colleagues stood with Mary and John as I asked if they would love and cherish each other from that day onward. On Christmas Eve that gathered community stood with an

incredibly pregnant Mary and John in Fairmount's Chapel and in new ways reflected the love of God in their lives.

And you know what, I think that is how it all started so long ago. A baby was born, a Holy Child came into the world reflecting God's love so powerfully that the radiance continues to manifest throughout the generations.

This was not a normal birth. Mary is not at home, eating as much spicy food as possible to help induce labor. Poor Mary, 9 months pregnant, had to schlep across the countryside with Joseph, not to enjoy time with family, but to participate in the first census so they could be taxed by the Roman Empire. And when the baby was born the Good News could not be confined to a manger behind a random inn in the backwater town of Bethlehem.

This Good News was so powerful that an angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds out in the field, saying *"to you is born this day in the city of David, a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."* The Angel made this announcement and was immediately joined by the Heavenly Host – a display that was believed to be limited to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem – as if the intensity and magnitude of the reflected Glory of the Lord could no longer be confined in a religious structure, but is now alive and loose in the countryside – embodied and carried forward by the likes of shepherds.

In the Gospel of Matthew's account of Jesus' birth, these Wise Men, these outsiders, these pagans, are the very first ones to recognize the Christ Child. It wasn't the Jewish inhabitants of Bethlehem; it was a group of strange travelers from foreign lands who recognized God's love reflected across the night sky and followed it to pay homage to Jesus.

In doing so, Matthew says from the beginning that this baby, this Messiah, this gift from God, is not only for the Jews, but for the WHOLE world. He wasn't only for those who knew the prophecies of old, but for those who were new to recognize him. He wasn't only for those considered acceptable, but for all people everywhere, even us.

We too are wise men. We often feel like awkward outsiders who journey through life in search of Christ in the world; The Good News of this night is that Christ is born anew in our hearts. We have encountered the light that shines in the darkness and we are now called to be bearers of that light, to reflect its glory throughout the world.

Let us joyfully reflect God's Love out into the world; to live and dance as transformed people so that no one else will ever feel like Mary and John did eight years ago, like they do not belong here at the manger.

Amen and Amen.