

Nov. 30, 2014  
Romans 1:1-6  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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## *Child of Hope*

### INTRO to SCRIPTURE

Today is the beginning of Advent, our time of preparation for Christmas. We know what happens - a baby is born. We proclaim that God's love is revealed in the Christ Child. In saying "Christ Child" we remind ourselves that there is no Christmas without Easter.

Although Christmas has become a significant season in the life of the church, in the very early church Jesus' birth did not receive much attention. The gospel of Mark, which most scholars believe was written first (probably about 60 AD), doesn't even have a Christmas story.

The New Testament writings from before Mark come from the Apostle Paul. Like Mark, Paul doesn't include a Christmas story. Paul is pretty much an Easter guy.

However, in the letter to the Romans - Paul's magnum opus you might say - he makes a brief reference tying together Jesus' birth and death. It's Paul's Christmas-Easter story all in one sentence. He says that Jesus is descended from David according to the flesh and declared Son of God through

the resurrection. We could read this to say that Jesus is the child of Mary and Joseph and claimed as God's own through the resurrection.

### SERMON

You've probably heard the statement, "Abraham Lincoln was such a self-made man that he built the log cabin in which he was born." It's like saying, "Jesus built the manger in which he lay." Oh course, that's historically and scientifically absurd. But as poetic expressions, these statements hold some truth.

A parent recently spoke to me about how her elementary school age son is increasingly skeptical about biblical stories. He finds them to be historically and/or scientifically suspect. I told her I think it's wonderful that he is raising those questions. Yet, he's missing that these stories also have a poetic quality.

Our lives are so shaped by the scientific mindset these days that we sometimes miss the reality that a story doesn't have to be historically or scientifically accurate to hold Truth. Sometimes the Mystery is

so deep and so complex that only poetic story can express it, especially when the Mystery is about Love.

Jennifer Michael Hecht, a contemporary philosopher, historian, and poet, who has a PhD in the history of science, makes this observation about the importance of poetry, "If you look at a testimony of love from 2,000 years ago it can still exactly speak to you, whereas medical advice from only 100 years ago is ridiculous."

We do have a testimony of love from 2,000 years ago – Christmas. Although the early church wasn't focused on Jesus' birth, over time there was curiosity, ridicule, and a need to find ways to give witness to people's experience of God's presence in Jesus of Nazareth. So the church developed stories about the birth of this Child of Hope.

Although Mark didn't include a Christmas story, each of the other three gospels writers - Matthew, Luke, and John - tells a unique Christmas story. Each conveys in their own way, God's love for the world and God's hope that people would live more just and peaceful lives.

In telling their stories they speak of Jesus as Lord, Son of God, and King of the Jews. However, when Jesus of Nazareth was born there was someone else who was already known as Lord, Son of God, King of the Jews and that someone was the Roman emperor. It was a radical and dangerous thing for the church to claim those titles for Jesus.

The Christmas stories are not only poetic proclamation about love they are also political protest against injustice.

One of the ways we give voice to the poetry and the protest is in Christmas carols. Music can do that for us. So, today I've selected three of the less well known carols for us to sing.

#### 1. Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming (16th century)

This carol connects us to the deep longing in the Jewish community for a savior, one who would deliver the Jews from the bondage of oppressors. Typically the hope was connected to the glory days of the great warrior king David, who was a son of Jesse. We'll hear that allusion in this carol. Yet, the carol also gives voice to God's surprising choice of a peaceful messiah. The rose, a prominent 16<sup>th</sup> century symbol for Mary and for Christ, is used to represent this.

#### 2. *What Child is This?* (1865)

I chose this carol because it weaves together the stories of Matthew, Luke and John, as we so often do in Christmas pageants.

The first verse references Luke, who tells the story through the lens of Mary and ordinary people like shepherds, who are visited by extraordinary messengers.

The second verse includes the Word (the Logos), which is John's philosophical

way of speaking about the holy becoming flesh.

The third verse turns to Matthew's story, which is told through the lens of Joseph, who goes to Bethlehem because he is of the house and lineage of David. In this verse there are references to kings of all kinds.

3. *Who Would Think that What was Needed (1990)*

This is the newest of our hymns and comes from the Iona community in Scotland.

This carol engages the political tensions of that day and of our day, reminding us of God's surprise in not sending a military hero but rather a Child of Hope and Peace. As this child grows he will stand firm, centered in God's Spirit.  
Emmanuel - God with us.