

# Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

## Sermon

Dr. Fred W. Schulz

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church  
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

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### “Once Upon a Christmas!”

Luke 2:1-20

Yes - I know...Christmas is over! But I'm just NOT ready to give it up, yet! However, I'll have to admit, that as far as stories go, the Christmas story is really not much. I mean, it takes up only a half page in most Bibles, in a volume of nearly 1,000 pages. And it is fleshed out, NOT in the polished rhetoric of the university, but in the slang of the streets. And its main characters come off a rather dull 4<sup>th</sup>, when compared to Hamlet, Scarlet O'Hara, or James Bond! And compared to the swash-buckling tales of King Arthur, or the sagas of the American west, well, this story leaves much to be desired.

And yet, of all the stories ever written - of all the stories ever told - NONE has so perennially captured the imaginations of poets and painters, musicians and scholars - and ordinary folks, too - as does this simple tale, told in these few words.

And it's strange, because this story does not even start out like all good stories are supposed to start out - you know: “Once upon a time....” But we could say that it does start out this way: “Once upon a....Christmas!” Yes listen: ‘once upon a Christmas’, an ancient ruler was counting his subjects.....But that is what all rulers do, do they not? Those “in charge” are always counting their people - why?? Well, to see how many troops they will have for their expeditions into Egypt, or Gaul, or Turkey - or Germany, or Japan, or Korea - or Viet Nam, or Iraq, or Afghanistan - or wherever the nation's destiny summons their forces. Yes, those “in charge” are always toting up the butchers, and the bakers, and the candlestick makers.

But there is even more reason for this counting! They also need to determine how much they can extract in taxes from the rest of the body politic in order to PAY for those expeditions. And so it goes - centuries in, and centuries out - this meticulous, efficient, oh-so-necessary accumulation of statistics. And so, “Once upon a Christmas”, an ancient ruler wanted to count his subjects - for war, and for taxes. Remember? “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus, that all the world should be enrolled/taxed.” Nothing too spectacular about that, huh?

But let's go on: also, “once upon a Christmas”, a peasant couple set out to obey that law - that is, the law of having to return to their birth city to be counted. Nothing spectacular about that, either! They were obeying the law! That's what they, and WE, are taught to do. We are a people who obey the laws! Oh yes, there may come times when we may question some laws - for instance, when a tea ship-ment must should be dumped into the Boston Harbor - or when a body becomes tired - just plain tired - of walking to the back of a Jim Crow bus! Still, those times are few, and far between, when the whole sweep of history is considered.

Of course, this obeying of the law weighs more heavily upon some, than upon others - especially if it is in winter, and you are poor, and you must travel a long distance - and your wife is pregnant, and her time is about due, and you have no reservations for a room at any of the inns, and she looks oh-so-weary! But it is the law - go to your home town - be counted - get taxed!....And so they obey the law! Nothing too spectacular about that, either, is there?

And then - “once upon a Christmas” an Innkeeper is busy - exceedingly busy. But what else could he have been with so many other people ALSO obeying that same law, and coming to town? And so the Innkeeper is busy - he has rooms to sweep, meals to cook, provisions to secure, and entertainment to be arranged. Of course, there are those who say that this particular innkeeper COULD have been more humane to this couple - to Mary and Joseph. Because of her advanced condition, they even suggest that he might have hustled one of his other guests out of their room - at least for ONE night. And so, in the eyes of some, the Innkeeper COULD have done many things which would have earned him points in history’s sober light. But he didn’t! And yet, isn’t that just the way it is? As the old hymn puts it: “Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide.” Yet, more often than not, these moments arrive so unexpectedly. How is a person to separate one moment from another, on the spectrum of importance? How is a person to know?

Finally, this story tells us that, “one upon a Christmas” some shepherds were in their fields, guarding their sheep throughout the night. Now, the shepherds are the local people - the common people. If the story was told today, they could just as well be fishermen mending their nets down at Tin City in Naples - or members of the Night Shift, punching out at the North Naples’ Fire House - or even truck drivers swigging their last cup of coffee at the Cracker-barrel, before high-balling their rigs up to Tampa, or Tallahassee - or Toledo! Yes, the shepherds are the ordinary people going about their ordinary jobs, unsung, unheralded, and often unappreciated. Yet, they represent the mass of humanity on whose backs have ridden every civilization from the dawn of history. They are born, they grow to adulthood. They perform their necessary tasks. They grow old, and they die - only to be replaced by the next generation. And so, the part about the shepherds was not too extraordinary, either.

So - as I said at the beginning, there really is nothing too unusual about this story. What occurs here - the eventual birth of a baby - occurs in the real world.

**BUT** - every time we hear this story, and we recall the LIFE of the child that was born there, we hear angels sing. Every time we hear this story, we experience a peace which the world cannot give, and which too often denies. Every time we hear this story, we feel like praising God, and telling one another about it. WHY???

Because, “once upon a Christmas”, God was announcing news - GOOD news - news which was for ALL the people. “ALL the people”, you ask??? Yes, ALL the people! Does that include Joseph? I mean, he was not exactly ecstatic when he found out his fiancé was pregnant! But yes, this “good news” includes Joseph. And does this good news include Herod? I mean, he did not take too kindly to the idea that another “king of the Jews” had been born in Bethlehem. But yes, this “good news” also includes Herod. And what about the shepherds? Were they included? They were terror-stricken at the initial report of the angels. Still, with the passage of time, they, and all the common people have become acquainted with the news, and it brings ALL fresh hope. Yes - for once, the news was good, and it was for ALL the people.

And what IS this news??? Well, it is that “once upon a Christmas”, God dramatically showed that He LOVED the world!!! Now, imagine living in a world that was hated by God! What would THAT be like? Well, we KNOW what that would be like. It would be a world where wrong would go unpunished. It would be a world where might would always triumph over right. It would be a nightmarish world without dreams to inspire the young; or principles to support the weak. It would be a world without love to cheer the lonely, or without forgiveness to lift the fallen.....But WAIT!!! Is that not precisely the KIND of world in which so many of the world’s population is living right now? If there is a God, they only know Him as part of a curse on their lips. If God loves THEIR world - their poverty-grinding world - then many do not know Him. But can they? Can such people know God???

Well of course, they CAN! Because, “once upon a Christmas”, “God so loved the world, that He gave His Son” TO the world. THAT is the essence of “the good news”! God gave His Son TO the world! Do you understand what that means? Do you understand how this story shows us the essence of God’s love?

If you are not sure, let me give you an example. I may hear of my neighbor's need on the Main Street of any city. I may take up a collection for him at Christmas. I may agitate for more liberal welfare laws. I even may visit his neighbor-hood once in awhile, just to see how things are going. Yet, through it all, how can HE be certain that I am not really acting out of selfish interests? - you know, "keep the folks down there contented, and they will not cause any trouble." How can he know?

Ah - but let me send a member of my own family to live down there - to feel the wintry drafts coming up through the floor boards - to fight the nightly battle against hunger - and the RATS! Let my family member run the daily gauntlet of dope-pushers, prostitutes, hustlers, and con-artists. Let me charge my family member to enter into the life of that community, and struggle for its soul. Let me warn him/her not to expect any easy reprieve, should he/she run afoul of the law. Let me even SEE my beloved family member lying in the street, with a knife between his shoulder blades. And perhaps - just perhaps - in time, my down-trodden neighbor will know my love, and God's love for him is real.

Well - that is precisely what happened "once upon a Christmas" as God loved not just one neighborhood, but a whole world of neighborhoods. How? By sending His family member - His loved one - His SON into the world.

Wasn't it Archimedes who once said that if he could somehow find a lever long enough, and a pivot located far enough out in space, that he could - BY HIM-SELF - lift the world? I remember my High School Science teacher saying that theoretically, Archimedes was correct. However, he said, no such lever exists, or ever can exist, in the physical realm.

But that is not true in the spiritual realm. For "once upon a Christmas", GOD lifted the world - NOT by a lever, but by a LOVER - He whom God sent into the world! God lifted some mighty frightened shepherds, and some mighty lonely parents. And later, he lifted the world of a LOT of people - people like you and me - sick people, grieving people, young people, old people, good people, bad people. For, "once upon a Christmas" God loosed forces upon the world which are STILL working to this day! In fact, right now God is lifting, and loving the world. Right now God is sending His Son into the world - and, as the Christmas carol says: "where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in."

My friends, I want to make sure that you understand that this Christmas story is NOT a "once upon a time" fairy tale of long ago. Rather, it is the bed-rock fact of THIS time, and of THIS place.....where presidents and policy makers are still counting noses to send them off to war; where people are still having a hard time getting started; where business people are still busy; and where very few think about the ordinary folk of this world.

And so, did I really begin this sermon suggesting that there wasn't very much to this story? My, my - how wrong could I be? For when you think about it, this story takes your breath away! It is about how God plots to woo and to win a whole world back to Himself. It is about the Eternal Lover of our souls Who expresses His passion for His hard-hearted people. It is how you and I become princes and princesses in the most fabulous of Kingdoms. No wonder that of all the stories ever written, or all the tales ever told, NONE has so perennially captured the imagination of poets and painters, musicians and scholars - and of ordinary folk, too - as does this simple story.

But this morning, just two days after Christmas Day, we should ask our-selves, "but how do WE fit into this story?" "How can we respond to this Lord?", because, as you know, many of us have heard this old, old story of God and His love so many times, that it sometimes begins to lose it's challenge. Christmas has become, for far too many, only an annual orgy of carols, cookies, creches, cards, causes, and Clauses! But we should take time - as we have this morning - we should take time frequently, to re-read the story, and to reflect upon it's deeper meanings - and like Mary, to "treasure these things in our heart". You need to consider what it means to you - that God loves the world and YOU so much, that He came Himself in Jesus Christ. And then, prayerfully

embrace the Lord of the story - not just the helpless little Jesus-baby in the manger, but also embrace the powerful Risen Christ, about Whom we will read later, as the year unfolds.

My friends, Christmas is over - and it can be easy for us to go back to our daily routines, whatever they are - go back with the same old grudges, the same old prejudices, the same old burdens of regret, of grief, and of remorse - to just make it "business as usual." But that is not the way God intends life to be. This story shows us, that God has come to DO something about the world's situation. And so I invite you to find someone who does not understand that, and tell them this simple story - tell them that God loves them, too. Tell them, that like the shepherds, we, too, should not go back to our daily routines as we were before, but we should go back "glorifying and praising God for all that WE have seen and heard."

And then - who knows? Maybe - just MAYBE - 'once upon a Christmas', because of our fidelity to Christ - some heart may be strangely warmed. Maybe - just maybe, 'once upon a Christmas', because of our fidelity to Christ, some dead spirit may spring alive. Maybe - just maybe, 'once upon a Christmas', because of our fidelity to Christ, some crusade may be launched - some home or community blessed - because in this season, and from this church, "once upon a Christmas" WE who have heard His story, and have seen His star, have worshiped Him.

Do you see the possibilities?

My friends, as far as I am concerned, Christmas will never be over. And so I will continue to wish you "A Merry Christmas" - Yes, I will continue to wish you a VERY Merry Christmas!!!

**Amen!**