

# Do You Hear What I Hear?

July 21, 2024

## Christmas in July

Merry Christmas!

As I wrote in my column in our This Week at Union email, when the Generosity Team came up with the idea to have a celebration of Christmas in July, they really had the original intent of this “holiday,” (if you can even call it that) in mind. The idea of Christmas in July started as a thinly veiled excuse to celebrate and have fun, and Union’s Generosity Team was trying to think of a fun, clever way to thank all of you for the many ways that you support the work and ministry that Union does – both financially as well as with your time and talents. We enlisted Deb Rose, who always has great ideas for throwing a party, and Haley and I had great fun pulling together some hymns that both have powerful Christmas messages, and which we don’t get to sing in worship very often because our Christmas Eve service includes so many beloved classics.

So, in keeping with this initial inspiration of gratitude, generosity, and fun, my original intent was to keep my remarks today light, to put something together that at once celebrated God’s gift to us while at the same time inspiring our continued support of this truly remarkable congregation. As I prayed about today’s message, there were a few themes that kept rolling around in my brain, but none of them were rising to the top. When David popped his head in my office ten days ago to ask about what kind of tone I was going for so that he could find a direction to take our service music, I told him I wanted to explore the themes and background of “Do You Hear What I Hear?” a beloved carol that we often don’t sing in church, but that I was having trouble getting it to weave together with the overall tone of thanks and generosity intended for our Christmas in July celebration.

Then I left for vacation. When I say “vacation,” I mean that I officiated two weddings, planned two funerals, and in the midst of all of that, read the news as hundreds are dead as military personnel clash with students in Bangladesh, the International Court of Justice has unanimously ruled that Israel’s presence in the Palestinian territory is unlawful, and there was an assassination attempt on a presidential candidate. I continued to struggle with how to integrate the tone of generosity and gratitude that was the intent of our Christmas in July celebration with where the Spirit was leading my preaching and the events of the world, when it hit me: a substantial part of MY gratitude for this congregation is that I am able to preach about what is really going on in the world, what really matters. And not only is this a substantial part of my gratitude, I hear regularly from so many of you that you’re grateful to be part of a congregation where we don’t shy away from hard topics, where our worship and education and outreach are relevant.

THAT, my friends, is the nexus of the Generosity Team’s inaugural celebration of Christmas in July, the events of the world, and “Do You Hear What I Hear?” We’re celebrating today that what we do here matters, that we don’t merely tell sweet little stories or lean on the way things have always been. We’re celebrating that when the chips are down and it’s hard to make sense of life Union actually has something to say that can help our members and guests make meaning and find a way to once again better align ourselves with Jesus and his ways.

With that in hand, let’s explore the story of “Do You Hear What I Hear?” Do you know it? A husband and wife team created this modern classic. It was the fall of 1962, and Noël Regney and Gloria Shayne Baker had been tasked with writing a Christmas song. Regney tells the story of

being in the studio, trying to put something together, and their producer stepping out periodically to listen to the radio to check whether the U.S. had been obliterated because what else was going on in the fall of 1962? The Cuban Missile Crisis. Regney talked about walking the streets of Manhattan, seeing the existential dread on people's faces, and wondering how in the world he was going to be able to write a Christmas song.

Then he saw two little babies cooing at each other from their carriages and it came to him that the message of Christmas is passed on individual to individual. Many of you may know that back story, as it's often told by D.J.'s amidst the radio chatter of December. They'll point out that in his poetic lyrics, Regney's "star dancing in the night with a tail as big as a kite" is meant to evoke both the Christmas star and a nuclear missile.

What you may not know is Regney's own back story. Born in France and studying music there, Regney was conscripted into the Nazi Army amidst World War II as the Germans occupied France. He hated the Nazis who occupied the land where he was born. So, while still in the German army, Regney became a member of the French underground. His assignments required him to remain in a German uniform. He collected information and, when possible, warned French resistance fighters of attacks the Germans were planning against them.

One mission would continue to haunt him: He was assigned the task of leading a group of German soldiers into a trap where the French fighters could catch them in a crossfire. Although Regney was shot that day, he survived and the French suffered only minor injuries. The memory of the enemy soldiers falling to the ground at his lead, however, most of them dead, was forever etched in Noel Regney's mind (Mary Jo Dangle, "The Story Behind the Song").

Knowing this, we come to realize that not only was "Do You Hear What I Hear?" written amidst the fear of the human potential to destroy all life on earth, it was written by someone who knew, intimately, the horror of war.

### **The Scriptures**

Today I read the version of Jesus' birth story in the Gospel of Matthew, the one in which Joseph learns of Mary's pregnancy and decides to divorce her quietly, ostensibly so that she won't be stoned to death, but then he has a dream in which an angel of the Lord tells him not to divorce her and that her child has been conceived of the Holy Spirit. What I hear as the core message in this passage hasn't changed since the last time I preached on it: Joseph, out of his righteousness, is planning to do what is expected of him. He's planning to do what is socially accepted.

But God draws him into being more loving, more compassionate, more generous. Law and society said he had every right to protect himself from Mary and to punish her for her wayward deeds, but God inspired Joseph to be expansive rather than narrow, generous rather than grudging.

And that's the core message of Christmas, too. In fact, it's a core message of Easter and all of following Jesus. While the ways of society may draw you toward looking out for number one, the ways of God are always expansive, always drawing us toward goodness and healing and generosity and compassion and mercy.

## Conclusion

While “Do You Hear What I Hear?” takes images from both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke, it carries some powerful theology. We start with the night wind talking to a little lamb – salvation comes to us from the cosmos and is conveyed to us through the creaturely world. Then the lamb passes on the Good News to the shepherd boy – often what God is calling us to comes through our everyday tasks, in our work and our homes and those we are in the closest relationships with. In the most powerful renditions of this song, each verse crescendos, so that by the time we get to the third and final verse, the verse in which the shepherd boy speaks to the mighty king, this lullaby has become bombastic.

Whereas in the first two verses, the message seems to be being passed on with excitement and wonder and joy and hope, in verse three, the message becomes a critique, juxtaposing the mighty king’s warm palace with the child shivering in the cold who deserves our real homage. The Christmas miracle here is that the mighty king hears the shepherd boy’s message and chooses to use his power to spread it to people everywhere, commanding us all to pray for peace.

Friends, our world is a mess, but you don’t need me to tell you that. And in the midst of this mess, I’m so deeply grateful for all of the ways that Union enables us and even challenges us, to put flesh on God’s ways. From addiction to divorce to racism to poverty to war to assassination attempts, it’s tempting to give up or to align ourselves with the ways of selfishness and greed and violence and fear. This is the darkness that our first reading begins with.

But the Good News of Christmas, the Good News of our God, is that another way is possible, that goodness and light and joy and hope are real and can be ours. The challenge is committing ourselves to God’s ways of mercy and compassion and healing and then drawing others to that light. It’s big work, but it’s our only hope.

When I was growing up, I had a “Snoopy’s Christmas” album that included a song, “Santa Claus for President.” Don’t worry, I’m not advocating that the Jolly Old Elf be added to the ballot. But the vision of the song is that if Santa were president, we’d have Christmas all year long. As your pastor, that’s why I was willing to extend our Christmas in July celebration beyond coffee hour and into worship. Because our world needs a little Christmas. We the angels’ message of peace and good will toward all. We need the subversive message of God toppling the mighty from their thrones and sending the rich away empty handed. We need the message that this good news is for all the people.

As we head outside in a few minutes to decorate Christmas cookies and share a cup of cheer, I hope you’ll join me in offering a prayer of gratitude for this church and all of the people who support it, a prayer of gratitude for this little band of followers of Jesus who seek to make the Christ Spirit dominant in our lives and in all human relations.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels  
Union Congregational United Church of Christ  
Green Bay, Wisconsin  
**Isaiah 9:2-7, Matthew 1:18-25**  
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