“Into the World”

Christmas Day
John 1:1-14

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From the Pulpit
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The story is told of a Christmas Eve children’s time at a Presbyterian Church up the road a bit, in Cambridge, Ohio. The pastor constructed a wooden manger, filled it with straw, and brought in a baby doll wrapped up in a blanket. The manger was perched on the top step of the chancel and it angled downward to the next step so that the congregation could see the baby Jesus. That night, he invited the children to join him around the manger.

Then a church member, dressed like a Shepherd, came walking up the center aisle. When the Shepherd got to the manger he joined the pastor and started to share his experience that first Christmas Eve. He told what the angels said to him and the other shepherds about finding a baby in a manger and that he would be the Messiah. As the Shepherd told the story, the children were so engaged they kept leaning in toward the manger, to get as close to the baby Jesus as they could.

It was a beautiful moment, all the children leaning in with wonder. . . . until the right leg of the manger broke. The manger toppled to the ground, and out popped the baby Jesus who tumbled down the chancel steps. Without prompting from the Shepherd or the Pastor and without saying a word, the children quickly got up and went down the steps. Some picked up the now “unswaddled” baby Jesus. Others picked up
the straw. A few others gathered the pieces of the manger and put it back together on the top step. After the manger was reassembled and the baby Jesus gently placed back in the manger, the children all gathered around the Shepherd. As he regained focus and continued the story, the children leaned in again to get close to Jesus.


Things fall apart. Sometimes through no fault of our own. Despite our best intentions. I think of those of you experiencing a different kind of Christmas this year. Because this past year things fell apart. Your parent died. Your marriage ended. Your significant other broke up with you. The person who held things together – who held you together – is gone. Things fall apart.

In the larger world, things fall apart. The wheels come off the bus. Here is William Falk, editor-in-chief of the Magazine The
Week, in that periodical’s year-end issue summarizing this particular moment.

Ours is a country founded on hope. But Americans seem to be increasingly defined by what we fear. Which frightens you more: Islamic terrorism, or anti-Islamic bigotry? Too much surveillance, or too little? Climate change, or intrusive government regulation? Police brutality or lawlessness?

No matter where you place yourself on the political spectrum, things are falling apart. The center is not holding.

So, what do we do when things fall apart? There are lots of options. We can look around and see who or what is to blame. We can get mad. We can withdraw in isolation and inertia. Or we can do what the kids did that Christmas Eve service. We can pick up the pieces and try to put things back together. With glue and duct tape and love and hope and anything else that we can bring to the task.

We try to put things back together. We don’t give up on the world. We choose hope over fear. We choose love over hate. We start over again. We commit our efforts, our gifts, our time and energy toward repairing the world. We do our part – small
or large or miniscule – we make the phone call, show up to the funeral, make time to go to the rally, volunteer for a mission initiative, go caroling at the retirement community.

It’s one of my fond memories this time of year. My service club in high school would go caroling at the local retirement community. Our group went to the health care center. Many of the people who live there aren’t doing all that well. All we did was sing carols – that’s all we did. We didn’t always sing them particularly well. And it didn’t matter. A woman who can’t remember her own name sang every word with us. A man who hadn’t lifted up his head in weeks clapped his hands in joy. All of us who went knew – we had the great privilege of playing this tiny role in repairing the world, mending that which is broken, one carol at a time.

We do our part to put things back together. That’s not all the kids did that night. They also leaned in. They leaned in and tried to get as close to Jesus as they could. And when we do that – when we live a life in which we try to get as close to Jesus as we can – when we try to live a life shaped by his life – by what matters to him – love God and love neighbor – things still fall apart – things also turn out OK. More or less.¹

¹ Sermon referenced from Amy Miracle, Broad Street Presbyterian Church, 2015.
That Christmas night in Cambridge, the Shepherd concluded his words by saying, “[It was a] glorious scene that night in Bethlehem. We all gathered around the baby Jesus. We gave thanks and praised God for the great gift that had come down from Heaven. We all need to lean in to see Jesus, to get close to Jesus, this night and every night.”

I think that is well said, Shepherd.

That baby Jesus couldn’t stay in the manger. His parents couldn’t keep him in that place, the world couldn’t keep him in. Each and every day, Jesus goes out into the world. Into a world that is broken and bruised, hurting and harmed, and Jesus (with us in tow), brings to the world the love and peace and joy and hope that no one else can give. It’s this baby, who we follow out of these doors and into the world.

God loves this world! God loves the world so much God sent Jesus, this day, this very day into the world, into our neighborhoods and into our lives. .....And God will not give up on it...or us. Moreover, God continues to come to love and bless this very world and invites us to do the same.

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2 Story related to me by my mother, Presbyterian Elder, Cynthia Krause, a member of Unity Presbyterian Church, Cambridge, Ohio recalling the children’s message of Christmas, 2011.
Merry Christmas!
Amen.

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