

Not Your Usual Christmas! **(Rev. Julie, 2020)**

This was the first time in over 30 years that Rev. Julie Woodson was watching someone preach on Christmas Eve!

It was also the first time Rev. Julie had watched a Christmas Eve sermon while seated at her dining room table.

It was also the first time she had been watching herself preach a Christmas Eve sermon!

'Welcome to Christmas Eve 2020', she thought.

Rev. Julie was looking at herself on the screen of her open laptop. She was watching a YouTube video she had posted earlier that day.

Mid-March was the last time that the congregation had worshipped in the sanctuary. That was when the 'first wave' of COVID-19 had curtailed large social gatherings.

That was when 2020 became a year of stress and economic hardship for many and became a year of masks and physical distancing.

That was when worship services moved from the sanctuary to the laptop.

And how amazing that had been!

Rev. Julie felt blessed to be in ministry with talented musicians who had embraced the challenge of using online technology to create inspiring and beautiful musical videos.

Members of the faith community had also embraced the challenges of learning how to Zoom and had used the technology to continue to be a caring community of hope and friendship.

And Messy Church had gone 'online' and found creative ways to still be a vibrant and fun and worshipful community.

The telephone had become Rev. Julie's primary means of pastoral visiting. She was daily phoning members of the faith community, asking them how they and their families were doing, listening to their stories and concerns and experiences...

and their wisdom...

A few weeks ago, Rev. Julie had phoned Darlene Partridge. Darlene said this Christmas would be different, because the family would not be able to be together – she would not be spending the day with her daughter and son-in-law and granddaughter.

But then Darlene shared her wisdom, “We won’t be together on Christmas day, but we can celebrate Christmas anytime.”

Darlene probably meant that the family could gather for a ‘Christmas dinner’ at some later date, but to Rev. Julie, the comment was a profound faith statement.

‘We CAN celebrate Christmas anytime.’

This Christmas Eve, Rev. Julie read, as she did every Christmas Eve, the story in Luke’s gospel –

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

'We can celebrate that birth anytime,' thought Rev. Julie. 'We can celebrate God's presence in our midst anytime; can celebrate God's love anytime; can discover the holiness of every day and night – anytime.'

'We not only can, but maybe we should,' she thought. 'We can celebrate the Christmas story in a world in which too many people are treated like datum on a stats sheet. We can celebrate that God knows each of us by name, that each of us precious child of God; that God is birthing something new and wonderful and life-giving in our world.'

'Maybe next year we will celebrate this story more than on just Christmas Eve,' Rev. Julie thought. 'Maybe, if the vaccines have done their work, we will be able to worship again by next September, and maybe we'll put up the Advent banners in September, and the Christmas tree in September, and the creche and the Advent candles in September. Certainly, people will be in an Advent mood by then, eagerly anticipating Christmas after this 'not your usual Christmas'.

We can celebrate Christmas anytime.

Rev. Julie closed her laptop, looked at the lights of her living room Christmas tree, and quietly thanked God that, even though this was not your usual Christmas, she could celebrate Christmas anytime ...and all times.