

Nativity of Our Lord
December 24, 2020, 9 p.m.
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The biggest celebrity of Christmas 2020 has to be Rockefeller, the saucer-eyed saw-whet baby owl that stowed away in the towering evergreen cut down to become the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree. You may recall there wasn't a lot of feel-good news going 'round at the end of November, but the photo of the little owl snuggled in what looked like his own cowl-neck sweater would have melted even the Grinch's heart.

Sometimes we're so intent on the assigned task-at-hand that we lose our peripheral vision, right? We're in a big rush driving to the store and we miss the glorious sunset in the rearview mirror. We're so focused on writing Christmas cards or baking Christmas cookies that we miss the first snow flurries of the season a glimpse away right outside the window. A phone call interrupts us at work and we're so anxious to end the call and return to our job that we mentally dismiss the person at the other end of the line. Missed opportunities, overlooked blessings, tunnel vision, sometimes leading to little or large regrets.

No such regret, though, for one of the workers who helped transport the Rockefeller Center tree from Oneonta in upstate NY to Manhattan. He must be blessed with an eagle eye and the gift of mindfulness, the ability to be fully present in the given moment, because in the midst of the **many** branches on that towering tree he spied that tiny bird. It's not like he was a birdwatcher descending on Cape May with binoculars to witness the spring migration of warblers. He was a guy lashing down and transporting a tree for delivery downstate. But he had eyes to see.... even surrounded by the distractions of a busy city... eyes to see a pair of large golden eyes peering out at him through the foliage. Saw-whet

owls are the smallest owls in the Northeast, and this was just a baby, an unusual fact because owlets are usually born in the spring.

The tender-hearted worker carefully extracted the owl, tucked it away in a box, then called his wife, asking her to find a place for him to take the little guy. She hit pay dirt with the Ravensbeard Wildlife Center in Saugerties, NY, located somewhere between Oneonta and Manhattan. The Ravensbeard folks welcomed the hungry, dehydrated owl, named him Rockefeller (for obvious reasons), gave him plenty of fluids and as many mice as he wanted. When he was strong enough, a week or so later, they released him and saw him fly away.

In Bethlehem on that first Christmas, would **we** have been eagle-eyed for signs of the amazing things God was doing? ‘Would’ve been pretty **hard** to miss the heavenly host arrayed in the heavens, singing “Glory to God in the highest!” Not so hard to miss an out-of-town couple in that crush of humanity gathered in Bethlehem for the census, though. Who knows, maybe all those visitors rivaled the crowd in Times Square on a “normal” New Year’s Eve. Easy enough to overlook the sight of one very pregnant teenager, then understandable to miss the kitten-cry of a newborn coming from such an unexpected place, a stable.

Maybe a gift of this 2020 COVID Christmas season has been **less** frantic activity, **less** mall music, **less** scurrying-around, **more** leisure for us to be mindful of the Lord, **more** room for the Holy Spirit to roost in our hearts, **more** of an opening for the Breath of God to “inspire” us again. The Christmas story of our Lord’s birth in Bethlehem is a classic, so deep that there are new treasures to mine every year. With a year’s worth of new experiences under our belt, and hopefully 12 months’ growth in wisdom, let’s show up

prepared to be overwhelmed by the beauty of this Good News first broadcast to the shepherds: *“To **you** is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”*

God’s love for us in sending His Son, our Savior, is **startling**. In the language of the Exultet sung at the Easter Vigil, “The slave [I] hath sinned and the Son hath suffered.” Our Lord Jesus, the Babe of Bethlehem, is born to die. *“Nails and spear shall pierce Him through, the cross be borne, for me, for you.”* If the shepherds had brought baby gifts, including balloons, when they visited the newborn Child, the balloon wouldn’t have said, “It’s a boy!” It would have said, “It’s a Savior!” But in that teeming town of Bethlehem, it is only the grubby, kinda-looked-down-upon shepherds who notice the miracle of this Birth. Yes, they’ve had the advantage of the angel’s Special Delivery message. But **we** have the advantage of hindsight, the Word of God connecting the dots between the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures and the birth of our Messiah. We have the head knowledge down pat. But is Christmas a matter of the **heart** for us, too?

I’ve been walking our pups, Bear and Deb, very early in the morning. An unusual sight these past few weeks has been U.S. mail vans and Amazon trucks delivering packages to doorsteps before dawn. Another unusual, almost mystical sight, has been what I call fairy lights flickering in a tall tree I pass, and also appearing to cascade down from the Manasquan water tower. I don’t know what they’re really called, but these fairy lights look like blue fireflies flitting over every branch of this one magnificent tree. It’s not an evergreen, like the one Rockefeller stowed away in. It’s deciduous, so the branches are quite bare of leaves but oh-so-beautiful flecked with living light. On the Manasquan water tower the multi-colored fairy lights appear to stream down. The first time I saw them I wondered how anyone could line every branch of a tall tree with such tiny lights, even with

a cherry picker. And I pictured utility workers climbing the ladder to the top of the water tower and dropping long strings of light down. But as I talked about this later, my family pointed out that these fairy lights must be projected from below. Wow. 'Makes sense, but could've fooled me! The morning I first noticed the light display I wondered how many days I'd walked by all that beauty without noticing it because I was cold and hurrying or busy cleaning up or just plain preoccupied....

This Christmas, let's pray the Lord answers our Advent prayer to be **awakened** to His presence, increasingly **aware** of His goodness, totally **awed** by His love. Let's pray for the gift of God-sight to notice the small miracles like little Rockefeller nestled among the branches, a Baby's cry emerging from a stable, mystical light falling from a water tower. Let's pray for the grace to reflect Christ-light and point those who see it toward the cosmic Source, the Light of the World. It is He who said, "**You** are the light of the world." (Matthew 5:14) "Let **your** light so shine before others that they will see **your** good works and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16) The good work may be rescuing a baby owl, sitting quietly with a grieving friend, feeding the hungry, or sharing your faith in the loving God who sent to **us** a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord. It all comes under the umbrella of faith-active-in-love. There is no other kind, in any season. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

