



# THE UNITED CHURCH of Rockville Centre



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## Pastor's Christmas Message

### *He is Our Peace*

How is it possible for us to experience the wonder and miracle of Christmas any more? Of course, when I say “any more,” I imply that there was a time when I/we did experience wonder-filled and miraculous Christmases, and my plaint begins to sound like the whimpering of a sentimental old codger, who simply cannot relate to contemporary life. So I search my memory banks (since age makes long term memories more available than recent ones), and ask myself honestly, “what was Christmas like for you when you were a kid?”

The earliest Christmas I recall was outside a railroad shantytown in Illinois where my father worked as a switchman. The first gift from Santa Claus I received was a white ambulance car with a terrific siren. If you revved it up by spinning the wheels, the siren would wail wonderfully and the car would race across the floor of our one-room house, much to my delight. It was my brother's first Christmas, and I had the dawning awareness that he was different, because he couldn't stand or walk, so I would play with him on the floor with my new white siren screaming ambulance. He could play with that, too, because it was on the floor. Then one day I was told to stop playing with it because my father had worked the night shift and needed to sleep. And that's the last memory I have of the ambulance.

I remember Christmas at ten other houses we lived in by the time I was thirteen. Like most children then and now, I suppose, Christmas always seemed focused for me on what I wanted and hoped I would get and how it felt not to get it.

For years I wanted a Jerry Mahoney ventriloquist doll—part of my urge to put into words what others could not—especially, of course, my brother. How long it is between Christmases! And how long the weeks before Christmas Eve when Santa would come!

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After about five years, I finally got a ventriloquist doll, but it was someone I never heard of, and so I tried to seem happy because I knew my parents had tried, and we lived far from St. Louis where the really big stores were whose catalogs I had read. But something inside me slipped, and a capacity to hope and dream irrespective of practical constraints faded—a kind of sadness—and I don't think I ever asked for anything important again. In retrospect, wanting the ventriloquist doll was not the same as wanting something everyone else had; it was about a deep desire inside of me, a desire that later gave birth to preaching and psychotherapy and writing. I mention this to say that not all children's Christmas wishes are superficial; some come from deep places that need recognition and validation.

Christmas was rescued for me during those years by my mother, who always sympathized with my wants, but pointed to the really important things—our family and our love. Later, in little and big ways, she pointed beyond ourselves to the needs of others, extending the meaning of love to people we didn't perhaps even like or know.

That remains, of course, the most important lesson of Christmas. How do we convey that to our children and grandchildren and great grandchildren? How do we teach them not to be fooled by the barrage of consumerist Christmases, how not to want what all the media and peers condition us into wanting, turning it into a need as if who we are and what we have is not enough? What stories will our children and grandchildren tell about Christmas after we're gone?

How important it is to keep the birth of Jesus central to Christmas: he who was born in a barn with animals for companions (they should have mentioned dogs and cats!), and the stars for a tent, he whose birth people came from foreign nations to acknowledge, bringing gifts and bowing to the universal truth of love.

May God bless you in exactly the way you need for this year!

May the peace of Christ fill your hearts and minds and bodies into an ever-deepening faith and trust!

Pastor Bob

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