

WGUMC Christmas Eve 2017 "Coffey Park Christmas"

Where is Charlie Brown when you need him? I knew it was going to be a different kind of Christmas even before the city moved in to shut down the cannabis church on Meridian. In oh so many ways this year has been indescribably strange and stressful, so it shouldn't surprise us that the chaos we have been experiencing would be visited upon Christmas 2017. If you do a little Google search, you'll see what I mean. It would appear that some Grinch has stolen Christmas, because so many things are in short supply this season.

First, I heard about a shortage of Christmas trees. Ten years ago, the Great Recession put a dent in tree sales, so farmers planted fewer trees. Those trees struggled to grow through years of drought and are just getting cut this year. But they had a hard time getting to tree lots because there was a shortage of trucks, too. Many of the truckers and shipping containers are in Texas and Louisiana delivering hurricane relief.

It wasn't enough for people to lose their homes and possessions. The residents of Winter Park, Florida, lost their community Christmas tree, too. For three decades, a 30-foot Southern red cedar had been the focal point of that town's holiday fun. But Hurricane Irma blew their tradition away. The tree's branches are no longer strong enough to support thousands of lights and ornaments. So this year's tree-lighting celebration featured an animated digital tree.

Then there's Puerto Rico. Three months after two separate hurricanes hit the island, power has only been restored to about 65% of the population. But even if you are lucky enough to have electricity, there are still shortages of food and clean drinking water, internet access, and passable roads and bridges. The storms caused over 1,000 deaths and 200,000 refugees are celebrating Christmas in Florida.

Silicon Valley is a long way from hurricane country, but we are experiencing shortages, too. With the economy at full

employment, the Salvation Army can't get enough people to ring bells and fill buckets. The annual holiday drive accounts for a third of their budget so they don't know what they are going to do next year.

There is uncertainty in the air everywhere, even at Christmas HQ in Manger Square. When the president declared Jerusalem the capital of the state of Israel recently, it put Palestine on high alert at the peak of the tourist season. The only luxury hotel in Bethlehem, which had been fully booked for Christmas, had to close its doors because of frequent violent protests in the area. Food vendors and trinket sellers are losing money, too.

With the holiday struggling to survive in so many places, it's high time to remember what Christmas is all about. Which is why I was thinking of Charlie Brown and his creator Charles Schulz. You may know that "Sparky," as Schulz was known, became a Christian after WWII when his father introduced him

to a pastor and he began to make a serious study of the Bible, marking up the pages of both testaments. But did you know that for ten years he taught Sunday School at a Methodist Church in his adopted hometown of Santa Rosa?

A couple of months ago, when the Tubbs fire roared through town, Schulz's widow had to flee. More than 4600 homes burned, including the Schulz home and also the homes of at least twenty families at Santa Rosa First UMC. Their November newsletter told the story.

At 2:30 in the morning on October 9th, one couple escaping the fire bypassed the city shelter and came instead to their home church, Santa Rosa First. Then another family arrived. Soon, someone with a key came to unlock the doors and turn on all the lights. At 3:30 am, someone called the radio station to announce that the Methodist Church was open for anyone needing a place to stay. By 6 am volunteers were cooking breakfast for 75 people. All that day and for the next

ten days, the church sheltered over 100 residents, cared for displaced pets, checked on church members, collected and distributed donations, set up a fire relief fund and established a communications network.

Something similar took place at my former church in Novato. A few hours after the fires broke out, church members were setting up evacuation shelter signs on the street. The manager of a nearby Mexican restaurant offered to provide food. He told them that people were gathering at Target, so they took their signs there and evacuees began to fill the church. One family of 35 people came. One woman with her 10 pets came. The Novato Mother's Club brought food. So did the Greek Orthodox Church and the Humane Society.

Somewhere I think Charlie Brown is smiling and Linus is probably sucking his thumb and quoting Scripture. In the Coffey Park neighborhood that was totally wiped out by the fire, a lot of the trees are looking like that scraggly Christmas

twig that Charlie Brown picked out for the school play. But in this Charlie Brown town they know how to wrap a Linus blanket of love around something that looks pretty sad and make it look better and, more importantly, make everyone feel better.

Ronnie Duvall got it started with 30 strands of battery-powered lights. Now hundreds and hundreds of strands are lighting up the neighborhood and last week people who had lost everything except the spirit of Christmas gathered together for a party. Someone even carted in some snow. For Cliff Hollenbeck, it was a good sign. "I see a new community being rebuilt again. They have hope and their faith is still here."

If recessions, droughts, hurricanes, and wildfires can't keep Christmas from coming, what makes you think you can? Nothing that is going on in your life right now, nothing that is going on in our country or world right now, can keep God's love from coming in the flesh. Christmas comes even when we don't have any money or any energy and when we feel like we are

losing our sanity. Even if the worst happens and we have to cancel the celebration, God's not going to cancel the incarnation.

So while I wouldn't wish a wildfire or any other natural or man-made disaster on anyone, I wish everyone a Coffey Park Christmas, a time to think about why we have hope, a time to celebrate what gives us faith, a time to reach out and to rebuild the community that holds us together, a time to welcome and to honor the Christ in each other.

I invite you to take the spirit of Christmas home with you tonight, no matter how scrawny or scraggly it may seem. Wrap a blanket of love around it. Decorate it with your praise and thanks for the year just ending and your hopes and prayers for the year about to begin. There may be a shortage of Christmas this year, but there is no shortage of Christ. Christ has come into our world, full of grace and truth, and is ready to come

into your life. And, as Linus tells Charlie Brown, "That's what Christmas is all about."