

**Meadowbrook Congregational Church**  
**December 24, 2010**  
**Our Part in the Play**  
**Reverend Art Ritter**

Last Sunday, the children and youth of our church presented their annual Sunday School Christmas program. This year we had thirty-five actors, an all-time high at least for my time here at Meadowbrook and an all-time high for my ministry anywhere. Most of the participants wanted speaking parts. It was a wonderful surprise although it offers some creative issues with the author of the play, yours truly. Sometimes I have to keep adding parts to the play and this is hard to do when you must remain true to the original narrative. You can't have four wise men, you know! No matter what they do, the children always do a great job of telling the story. It is one of my favorite parts of the entire Christmas season.

There's a story perhaps we've all heard about a Sunday School Christmas program. A boy named Wally was excited about his participation in the program. He wanted to be a wise man, and if he couldn't be a wise man then he wanted to be a shepherd who played the flute. Alas, the director of this particular play had another part in mind for Wally. He wanted the young man to play the innkeeper. Wally did not want to be the innkeeper. He was very disappointed. He let this disappointment show through in all the rehearsals, refusing to memorize his lines and then stumbling over the parts he was able to learn by accident. His heart just wasn't in it!

When the night of the program arrived, Wally the reluctant Innkeeper found himself on stage, face to face with Joseph and Mary. Despite his lack of interest in the part, he managed to pull himself together and deliver his familiar lines. "We don't have any rooms at the inn. You'll have to go somewhere else." Finally he closed, with a flourish, his own original lines, "I told you we don't have any more rooms. Now please just leave me alone!" With that Mary and Joseph sadly turned away. And it was then that Wally suddenly forgot that he was in a play and he became something more than an innkeeper. Breaking from the script he quickly ran after Mary and Joseph shouting, "Wait, come back! You can have my room!"

Garrison Keillor fondly described all of the activity that occurred in his mythical town of Lake Wobegon during the Christmas season. He spoke about the concerts, the festivals, and especially of the pageants to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Keillor said that some of the Christmas pageants and nativity plays got a bit silly, even bordering on the ridiculous. He asked the question, "Why would ordinary people, who have no acting or directing training, and not much acting singing or directing ability, join in these Christmas theatricals?" But he also had an answer. He said, "Because Christmas is a great story and we just want to be a part of the story."

It is a wonderful story that we hear and celebrate tonight. It is a sentimental tale that makes everything seem rather peaceful and sweet. It is a narrative that takes us away from the troubles and worries of our own time and our own life. Mary and Joseph. Angels. Shepherds. Wise men. We all want a part in it. We might dream of which role we might have played that night long ago and how we might have responded to the good news of Jesus' birth and God's arrival into the world.

But if the truth were to be known, we probably would find ourselves not on the stage of the nativity story. We would have been with the rest of the world that first Christmas. We would have been with the majority of people who were focused on human plans and activity. We would have been living with the sense of hopelessness, resigned to the fact that our world was out of control and there was nothing we could do about it. We would have been listening to the nightly news of innocents slaughtered, of wickedness apparently flourishing, and of kings and princes building and using their armies and weapons. We would have been working our jobs to feed our families. We would have been sitting in our palaces, watching our football games on

big-screen television. We would have been out finding pleasure and making ourselves feel good.

We might have been so caught up in ourselves and in our existence that we wouldn't have been Mary, trusting the word of God that spoke of possibilities that included our risky participation. We wouldn't have been Joseph, acting by faith upon God's intention. We wouldn't have heard the songs of the angels. We wouldn't have looked for a star, much less follow one of them. We would have been more prone to listen to the reality of a Herod rather than the foolishness of our dreams. We would have thought it too crazy to risk a time consuming and perilous journey to Bethlehem and see the Christ Child for ourselves. We would have stayed home and watched it on CNN, Fox News or later on YouTube.

But the real story of Christmas is not just the nostalgic tale that we love to read and see reenacted. It is not a comforting fable that lets us rest in heavenly peace. It is not an escape from the reality of our world and our times. Christmas really came long ago. And Christmas really comes tonight. And we have a part to play. We are cast as hopeful human beings, allowing the gift of love to move us, to change us, to actually disturb our existence. God enters our world tonight, not to confirm the established order. God comes to shake things up, to point out the weaknesses in our so-called strengths and to give us strength when we are humble enough to seek it.

"Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people." What part do we play? We really don't want to be the Caesar or the Herod or the census takers or any of those who refused to be changed that first Christmas. Tonight we want to acknowledge our need for God and be ready to listen to our dreams. Tonight we want a part in the play God directs which brings hope to us and to the entire world.