

HELD BY WHAT WE HOLD

From Rev. John R. White – The First Congregational Church of Dudley, MA – United Church of Christ
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You are held by what you hold. Do you believe that? Think about it. If you're holding onto stress, that stress is holding you. Or did you fall in love in 2017 with someone who fell in love with you? You hold them. They hold you. We are held by what we hold.

When I was a boy my mother and father set the Christmas creche scene on the top of our piano. In my mind baby Jesus always lay in the manger, just so, with his mother and father and shepherds and wise men near him, in very specific places, on a piano. Likely this isn't literally how it happened yet holding those figurines helped the meaning of this season hold me.

We've done a lot of thinking about truth in reporting this year. Let me simply say when thinking about the events of Christmas that the truth of this story guides all the loving actions of my life, even if every detail of the story isn't literally true as recorded. I also believe in what is literally true yet not recorded.

Think about it. Mary is about to give birth to her first child under less than perfect conditions. She is likely not looking like she does in pictures and statues. She's likely disheveled, sweaty and exhausted, yet her face glows with joy and love as she holds tiny baby Jesus so close. She wants to hold him closer. Have you ever had that feeling? You want to hold something you love closer yet you're already as close as is possible. Maybe Mary gazed reverently at the Christ child...perhaps. More likely, I believe, she just beamed with love.

As a new parent she's busy counting all his fingers and toes, noticing the hair he did or didn't have, smelling his skin and hair as he is covered in that wonderful smell only new babies have. I imagine her giving him a raspberry, and not the fruit, yet making a motorboat sound against his neck to make him laugh.

This miracle of Christmas and scenes like it are playing out all over the world right now, even as you read this, in well run hospitals with great health care, and in dangerous conditions in war torn countries. Somehow love keeps working its way into the world, in the best and the worst of conditions.

It was tough for Mary and Joseph, yet we are grateful they nurtured the Savior of the world, One born in nowhere Bethlehem, birthed by unknown and uneducated teenagers who believed and would not stop believing in the hope they held. As they held this hope, this peace, this love, this joy which is Jesus, he held them.

Here's a classic story. I can only guess at the year. The message is timeless.

“A soldier was concluding sentry duty on Christmas morning. It had been his custom in other years to attend worship in his home church on Christmas Day, but here in the outlying areas of London, it was not possible. And so, with some of his buddies, the soldier walked down the road that led into the city just as dawn was breaking. Soon the soldiers came upon an old graystone building over whose main entrance were carved the words, ‘Queen Anne's Orphanage.’ They decided to knock and see what kind of celebration was taking place inside. In response to their knock, a matron came and explained that the children were war orphans whose parents had been killed in the bombings.

“The soldiers went inside just as the children were tumbling out of their beds. There was no Christmas tree in the corner and no presents. The soldiers moved around the room, wishing the children a Merry Christmas and giving as gifts whatever they had in their pockets: a stick of chewing gum, a Life Saver, a nickel or a dime, a pencil, a knife, a good luck charm. One soldier noticed a little fellow standing alone in the corner. He looked a lot like his own nephew back home, so he approached and asked, ‘And you, little guy, what do you want for Christmas?’ The lad replied, ‘Will you hold me?’ The soldier, with tears brimming his eyes, picked up the boy, nestled him in his arms, and held him close.”¹

At the end of 2017 and start of 2018 I believe each of us yearns to be held. God's love holds you, yet you are held by more, held by what you hold. Perhaps you are held by concern, resentment, fear of facing another day or fear of the other. Whatever it is, I urge you to consider how you are holding the Christ child and all the children of the world. As I recently shared on Twitter @PJsPeace, open your eyes. Open your mind. Open your heart. Be true. As you await a savior of the world, work towards some Christmas peace by saving the world in which you live. Hold it. Love it. As you do, you will gain a sense of being held and loved.

You are held by what you hold. What do you hold?

You hold hope. You hold joy. You hold peace. You hold perfect love. Be held by what you hold.

Merry Christmas! Happy New Year! Peace...Pastor John

¹ Used with permission of Homiletics (a preaching resource) – December 24, 2017