Telling Our Story
By the Rev. Denise Schiavone

This time of year, many of us enjoy watching classic holiday movies. My family has a half dozen or so in the lineup, including *Miracle on 34th Street, It's a Wonderful Life*, and of course, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, which has aired every year since 1956.

A Charlie Brown Christmas is not only a long-running favorite, it's also possibly the only one with overtly Christian messages. Think about the infamous scene in the midst of the bickering among the rag-tag cast of the Christmas pageant, where Linus stands center stage and calmly recites the nativity story from the Gospel of Luke.

The show's creator, Charles Schulz, was a life-long Lutheran. But his message has resonated for decades for Christians and non-Christians alike—a message of comfort and hope, amid the chaos and commercialization of the season.

Indeed, Charlie Brown laments this commercialization as he sets out to acquire a Christmas tree to add spirit to the pageant. As he leaves the theater, Lucy requests a *big, shiny* tree.

Now, if you've seen the show, you know Charlie Brown does not return with a big or a shiny tree. No, instead he returns with a small, sad-looking miscast in tow, a far cry from the other majestic firs on the lot. It stands no higher than Charlie Brown himself. Its bare branches carry just a few sparse pine needles drooping pitifully toward the ground. It is not at all what the gang hoped for or expected—and they are not at all pleased with Charlie Brown's selection.

Eventually, though, everyone ends up gathering around that tree, voices raised in joyful song. And in their chorus, the tree is transformed—into something

utterly beautiful. Through that sad little Christmas tree, Schultz tells the story of hope in a way Christians have been experiencing hope for ages: in the unaccepted, the undervalued, and the unexpected.

Our scripture today delivers hope in much the same way, with John's Gospel bringing us the unexpected gift of the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, the true light that enlightens everyone, the messenger who announces salvation.
It's a story people have been telling since ancient times—first orally and then later in writing by more than 40 authors across 66 books, ultimately bound together in our one Holy Bible.

This is a story we know well. Or do we?

Remember that childhood game known as The Whispering Game? It's that game where you gather in a circle, and one person comes up with something to say, and they whisper it in the ear of the next person. That person then turns and whispers it to the next person. And so on, and so forth. Until the last person hears the message, and finally announces it to the group.

Often times, the final proclamation is nowhere close to the original statement. Sometimes, it is hilariously different, leaving the players to wonder how one statement can get conveyed in such radically different ways. Somehow, in the hearing and the retelling, the message takes different shape and form, morphing into something altogether new.

The fact is, though we may know the Christmas story well, we experience it differently and we tell it differently, depending on our cultures and contexts and unique life histories. And with all these variations, how we tell the personal tale

of what Jesus means in our lives—particularly to a world that does not know him—matters tremendously.

Think about your own favorite stories. How certain details bring a scene to life. How specific words might evoke the senses and emotions. This time of year, that might be things like the tickle of pine needles, the scents of cocoa and peppermint and cinnamon, the glow of lights strung on trees, the ringing of bells and the crinkling of wrapping paper. It matters how we tell the story.

As a community, Christ Church tells our own version of the Christmas story. We tell this story as we care for those on the margins of society: refugees resettling in a strange land and underserved children in our community who can't afford school supplies. We tell the story as we tend to those suffering within our own flock: praying and cooking and knitting for those ill and grieving, those who've lost jobs or homes or loved ones. We tell this story in the beautiful voices ringing out from our choir loft at worship every week. In these and many other ways, Christ Church tells a powerful Christmas story.

As individuals, we too have our personal stories of the Christ child within us. And all of this may look nothing like the Hallmark version that society espouses, with its serene images of Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and angels, all gazing upon the sweet baby Jesus.

The disparity should not concern us. For despite these idyllic Christmas card images, the story of Jesus entering our world is truly a messy one. A teenage girl and her fiancé forced to travel on foot for days. An inn with no available rooms. A helpless baby born into poverty, far away from home.

Within this mess, God gives us the Word made flesh, revealing his love for humanity. A deeply flawed and sinful humanity, which God loves all the same. And the stories of God at work in our lives—through all our disorder and dysfunction—are all part of the overarching story of God reconciling a broken world, through the chosen people of Israel and a messiah emerged from the Davidic line, the blessed Prince of Peace, who dwells within each and every one of us—all God's beloved children.

Despite the darkness of a world that does not know him, Jesus as the true light frees us to move past the mess and open ourselves moment by moment: to being surprised by something, delighted by something, overjoyed by something—and live God's story anew each day.

Like the psalmist, we are free to sing a new song to the Lord. We can join our voices with the noise of the sea and the clapping of the river and the ringing of the hills, that the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth.

As we linger before the manger tonight, may we take time to reflect upon our part in this great love story, to recognize the moments of rebirth and redemption in our lives, and to think about how we can give powerful witness to God's grace.

As Christ is born again within us, let's find ways to tell our best, most-authentic version of this story. To whisper it, to shout it from the rooftops, to cherish it in our hearts—and to share this Good News with the world.