

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**December 24, 2010 (Christmas Eve)**  
**“Alternate Arrangements”**  
**Luke 2:1-26**

Hypothesis: Life unfolds in a steady, pleasant, and predictable manner. How does our hypothesis stack up against reality? Life does unfold in a steady manner. Winter follows fall. Children grow up; all of us get older; and like sands through the hour glass, so are (say it with me) the days of our lives. Yes, in general, there is a steadiness to the way life unfolds. But is life always pleasant? That’s harder to affirm. There are certainly moments of joy and happiness in our daily lives. But there is also a wide range of negative emotions that we experience: Sadness from the loss of loved ones or the loss of a job. Discomfort from aching joints and broken hearts; anxiety from past scars and present worries. Life can be hard, with as many times of shadows as bright sunny days.

And just because life unfolds in a steady manner is not the same as saying that life is predictable. Read back through the newspaper headlines for 2010 and honestly tell me how many of them you could have predicted last New Year’s Eve. Would you have predicted the April 20<sup>th</sup> disaster in the Gulf, which led to months of oil spills, failed containment efforts, and more horrifying evidence of why our current addiction to fossil fuels threatens all creatures great and small? Would you have predicted the January earthquake in Haiti, the October rescue of the 33 Chilean miners, or the November Wikileaks release of classified information? Would you have predicted that an estimated 25 million Americans now own Snuggles?

The secular message of Christmas is that it is a steady, pleasant, and predictable holiday that is annually unwrapped during the last two months of the year. We do things at Christmas time because it is traditional: We sing certain songs; we put up trees, remembering the stories behind the ornaments that have been in our family for years. We tell how Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem and the baby Jesus was born in a stable, because there was no room for them in the inn – re-telling the story in unison with Linus from “A Charlie Brown Christmas” as he stands in the spotlight reminding us over and over again that the real meaning of Christmas is not about consumption, capitalism and credit-card debt. But what if the real meaning of Christmas is not about doing things over and over again, how ever comfortable and comforting and consistent they are from year to year?

Here’s a different hypothesis: Life unfolds in a regular yet unpredictable and at times unpleasant manner. Yes, the days of our lives follow one after another, but things are far from predictable. As they say, the only thing that doesn’t change is change itself. But if life is constantly changing and is therefore unpredictable, does that automatically make it bad?

Look again at the Christmas story. As traditional and well-rehearsed as the details are, it is not a story of a smooth, steady unfolding of expected events. Mary didn't expect an angel visitation, just as Joseph didn't expect to hear of Mary's surprising pregnancy. The couple had family right there in Nazareth, but Emperor Augustus decreed they must travel to Bethlehem. Births happens all the time, but you don't expect to welcome your firstborn in a stable bed. In the same way, shepherds watch their flocks by night all the time, but angel visits are less expected. In this traditional story, little unfolds that is steady and predictable. But then, that's how it was at Christmas, the real Christmas.

A former neighbor had two daughters about our kids' ages. Late one December night, one of the girls hugged her mother and said, "Mommy, I love you more than God." Then she panicked and whispered, "I hope Santa didn't hear that." Santa to Mom to God. The secular hypothesis is quite pervasive. We're told that life and Christmas and everything in-between is steady, pleasant and predictable – and if we hold to that hypothesis, then we've no need for God on top of the equation, nor any need for the real story of Christmas. But the secular hypothesis doesn't match reality. Life is steady, but not predictable and certainly not organized solely around our wishes, our wants and needs.

In the days of our lives, change happens. There are accidents and oil spills, lottery wins, job losses, moments of joy and moments of pain. That is why in life, we constantly make alternate arrangements. We make adjustments; we recalculate our routes; we reassess our priorities; we switch to Plan B. That's precisely what happened in the Christmas story if we really listen to it. That first Christmas was not a straight line from heaven to earth; it was a zigzag path of people doubling back, changing course, and making haste to move from their old lives to follow angels and stars and arrive at new places altogether.

And there's something more. God also makes alternate arrangements. Life created for Eden was adjusted for human life outside Eden. When things went bad, commandments were given and covenants were made with this people God called God's own. And when things went really bad, the people were not left alone. To bring us to God, God came to us.

Christmas is the ultimate in alternate arrangements. In place of a world without God, God became incarnate so that all history, all life would now be seen as intimately linked to God. These alternate arrangements go by many names. Mostly we call it faith. But providence is now part of the equation. Grace is something offered to all. And hope is now our steadfast companion, greeting us every morning when we open our eyes like an impatient seven-year-old child shaking the bed to tell us that today is Christmas Day.

For us, alternate arrangements have been made. For unto us is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And he shall be called, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

No hypothesis. No guesswork. Christmas tells us that God has come to us on our zigzag courses, our world of shifting sands and troubled waters, to offer us what we could never find on our own. That is the good news that doesn't change. Thanks be to God.