

Greet God's Favored One!  
A sermon for Christmas Day  
Preached by David Roquemore  
First Presbyterian Church, Newton, NC  
December 25, 2022

Luke 1: 26-38

Once upon a time in a large forest there lived a very furry bunny. He had one lop ear, a tiny black nose and unusually shiny eyes. His name was Barrington.

Barrington was not really a very handsome bunny. He was brown and speckled and his ears didn't stand up right. But he could hop, and he was, as I have said, very furry.

In a way, winter is fun for bunnies. After all, it gives them an opportunity to hop in the snow and then turn around to see where they have hopped. So in a way winter was fun for Barrington.

But in another way winter made Barrington sad. For, you see, winter marked the time when all of the animal families got together in their cozy homes to celebrate Christmas. He would hop and he was very furry. But as far as Barrington knew, he was he only bunny in the forest.

When Christmas Eve finally came, Barrington did not feel like going home all by himself. So he decided that he would hop for a while in the clearing in the center of the forest.

Hop. Hop. Hippity-hop. Barrington made tracks in the fresh snow.

Hop. Hop. Hippity-hop. Then he cocked his head and looked back at the wonderful designs he had made.

"Bunnies," he thought to himself, "can hop. And they are very warm too, because of how furry they are."

(But Barrington didn't really know whether or not this was true of all bunnies, since he had never met another bunny.)

When it got too dark to see the tracks he was making, Barrington made up his mind to go home.

On his way, however, he passed a large oak tree. High in the branches there was a great deal of excited chattering going on. Barrington looked up. It was a squirrel family! What a marvelous time they seemed to be having.

"Hello, up there," called Barrington.

"Hello, down there," came the reply.

"Having a Christmas party?" asked Barrington.

"Oh, yes!" answered the squirrels. "It's Christmas Eve. Everybody is having a Christmas party!"

"May I come to your party?" said Barrington softly.

"Are you a squirrel?"

"No."

"What are you then?"

"A bunny."

"A bunny?"

"Yes."

"Well, how can you come to the party if you're a bunny? Bunnies can't climb trees."

“That’s true.” Said Barrington thoughtfully. “But I can hop and I’m very furry and warm.”

“We’re sorry,” called the squirrels. “We don’t know anything about hopping and being furry, but we do know that in order to come to our house you have to be able to climb trees.”

“Oh, well,” said Barrington. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” chattered the squirrels.

And the unfortunate bunny hopped off toward his tiny house.

It was beginning to snow when Barrington reached the river. Near the riverbank was a wonderfully constructed house of sticks and mud. Inside there was singing.

“It’s the beavers,” thought Barrington. “Maybe they will let me come to their party.”

And so he knocked on the door.

“Who’s out there?” called a voice.

“Barrington Bunny,” he replied.

There was a long pause and then a shiny beaver head broke the water.

“Hello, Barrington,” said the beaver.

“May I come to your Christmas party?” asked Barrington.

The beaver thought for a while and then he said. I suppose so. Do you know how to swim?”

“No,” said Barrington, “but I can hop and I am very furry and warm.”

“Sorry,” said the beaver. “I don’t know anything about hopping and being furry, but I do know that in order to come to our house you have to be able to swim.”

“Oh, well,” Barrington, muttered, his eyes filling with tears. “I suppose that’s true – Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” called the beaver. And he disappeared beneath the surface of the water.

Even being as furry as he was, Barrington was beginning to get cold. And the snow was falling so hard that his tiny, bunny eyes could scarcely see what was ahead of him.

He was almost home, however, when he heard the excited squeaking of field mice beneath the ground.

It’s a party, thought Barrington. And suddenly he blurted out through his tears, “Hello, field mice. This is Barrington Bunny. May I come to your party?”

But the wind was howling so loudly and Barrington was sobbing so much that no one heard him.

And when there was no response at all. Barrington just sat down in the snow and began to cry with all his might.

Bunnies he thought aren’t any good to anyone. “What good is it to be furry and to be able to hop if you don’t have an family on Christmas Eve?”

Barrington cried and cried. When he stopped crying he began to bite on his bunny foot, but he did not move from where he was sitting in the snow.

Suddenly, Barrington was aware that he was not alone. He looked up and strained his shiny eyes to see who was there.

To his surprise he saw a great silver wolf. The wolf was large and strong and his eyes flashed fire. He was the most beautiful animal Barrington had ever seen.

For a long time the silver wolf didn’t say anything at all. He just stood there and looked at Barrington with those terrible eyes.

Then slowly and deliberately the wolf spoke. "Barrington," he asked in a gentle voice, "Why are you sitting in the snow?"

"Because it's Christmas Eve," said Barrington, and I don't have any family, and bunnies aren't any good to anyone."

Bunnies are, too, good, said the wolf. "Bunnies can hop and they are very warm."

"What good is that?" Barrington sniffled.

"It's is very good indeed," the wolf went on, "because it is a gift that bunnies are given, a free gift with no strings attached. And every gift that is given to anyone is given for a reason. Someday you will see why it is good to hop and to be warm and furry."

"But it's Christmas," moaned Barrington, "and I'm all alone, I don't have any family at all."

"Of course you do," replied the great silver wolf. "All of the animals in the forest are your family."

And then the wolf disappeared. He simply wasn't there. Barrington had only blinked his eyes and when he looked the wolf was gone.

"All of the animals in the forest are my family," thought Barrington. "It's good to be a bunny. Bunnies can hop. That's a gift," and then he said it again. "A gift. A free gift." On into the night Barrington worked. First he found the best stick that he could. (And that was difficult because of the snow.)

The hop. Hop. Hippy-hop. To beaver's house. He left the stick just outside the door. With a note on it that read: "Here is a good stick for your house. It's a gift. A free gift. No strings attached. Signed, a member of your family."

It is a good thing that I can hop, he said, "because the snow is very deep."

Then Barrington dug and dug. Soon he had gathered together enough dead leaves and grass to make the squirrels nest warmer. Hop. Hop Hippy-hop!

He laid the grass and leaves just under the large oak tree and attached this message. "A gift. A free gift. From a member of you family."

It was late when Barrington finally started home. And what made things worse was that he knew a blizzard was beginning.

Hop. Hop. Hippy-hop.

Soon poor Barrington was lost. The wind howled furiously, and it was very, very cold. "It certainly is cold," he said out loud. "It's a good thing I am so furry. But if I don't find my way home pretty soon even I might freeze!"

Squeak. Squeak...

And then he saw it – a baby field mouse lost in the snow. And the little mouse was crying. "Hello little mouse," Barrington called.

"Don't cry I'll be right there." Hippy-hop and Barrington was beside the tiny mouse.

"I'm lost," sobbed the little fellow. "I'll never find my way home and I know I'm going to freeze."

"You won't freeze," said Barrington. "I'm a bunny and bunnies are very furry and warm. You stay right where you are and I'll cover you up."

Barrington lay on top of the little mouse and hugged him tight. The tiny fellow felt himself surrounded by warm fur. He cried for a while, but soon, snug and warm, he fell asleep.

Barrington had only two thoughts that long cold night. First he thought. It's good to be a bunny. Bunnies are very furry and warm. And then, when he felt the heart of the tiny

mouse beneath him beating regularly, he thought, "All of the animals in the forest are my family."

Next morning, the field mice found their little boy asleep in the snow, warm and snug beneath the furry carcass of a dead bunny. Their relief and excitement was so great that they didn't even think to question where the bunny had come from.

And as for the beavers and the squirrels, they still wonder which member of their family left the little gifts for them that Christmas Eve.

After the field mice had left, Barrington's frozen body simply lay in the snow. There was no sound except that of the howling wind. And so no one anywhere in the forest noticed the great silver wolf who came to stand beside that brown, lop-eared carcass.

But the wolf did come.

And he stood there.

Without moving or saying a word.

All Christmas Day.

Until it was night.

And then he disappeared into the forest. (Martin Bell, The Way of the Wolf, 1970)

I can hop and I'm furry and warm.

In order to come to our house you have to be able to climb trees.

Bunnies aren't any good to anyone

A free gift with no strings attached.

I don't have any family at all.

All the animals in the forest are my family.

But the wolf did come.

Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!

And with that greeting the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she had found favor with God, and would bear a son, whose name would be Jesus.

And this Jesus would be God's gift to all of humanity with no strings attached. Oh, there would be times when, like Mary, God's greeting causes dismay and discomfort. After all, Gabriel completely disoriented Mary's life. She was engaged but still a virgin. Her life would never be the same again; neither would Joseph's. But that should not come as a surprise to us.

God has a way of disorienting and re-orienting our lives. Yet, God does this in such a way that God makes the best use of the gifts God has given us. So many people go through life fighting God's will. It is as though they are bent on forging their own future, carving out a place for themselves, self-determined and self-sufficient. When the truth of the matter is that God has chosen them as God's own people, and God has determined a task for them to do. God endows them with a means to accomplish their task, if they will only listen. That is what the wolf told Barrington; that is what Gabriel told Mary. Both had found favor in God's sight, and so have each one of us! Jesus is God's gift with no strings attached, so that all of us may use the talents endowed by God to accomplish his will for us. Ah, but sometimes it causes rejection and it hurts. How many times have we been rejected or unable to join the party because we can't climb trees or swim? Barrington was lonely, and the harder he tried, the worse it got. Doors kept getting

slammed in his face. Finally, it reached the point where bunnies just aren't any good to anyone.

Not to mention how Jesus felt after all the fanfare of his birth was left with a jeering mob that wanted to hang him! Life is often a series of slammed doors; Christians are by no means immune! The nature of our calling and the discipline required of us seems to set us up for rejection. It's very easy, especially at this time of year to have those feelings of closed doors, just as Barrington did.

But think how many people out there are lost and cold! Now's not the time for self-pity. Now we can take stock of what makes us unique, to consider that all the animals in the forest are our family, and commit ourselves anew to order our lives so that they may live.

Wasn't that what the angel told Mary that Jesus would do? "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, ... and of his kingdom there will be no end." Was it not Jesus, as Paul reminds us, who broke down the dividing walls of hostility? And are we not to become ambassadors for Christ, proclaiming good news to all who are held captive?

Now is the time to find the best stick we can and leave it just outside the door of someone's house, someone who has told his we can't come to the party because we can't swim. Just take whatever the stick means to you and attach a note, "It is a free gift, with no strings attached." Sign it, "A member of your family." They, like the squirrels and beavers will wonder which member of their family left the little gifts. Don't worry. You'll know you did as part of that great kingdom that has no end.

And you know, the day came when that baby Jesus, about whom all this was forecast lay down his life so that all of us could live. In one huge, universal, awe-inspiring, faith-producing, confidence-inspiring act of love, God hugged the creation tight and kept it warm through the night, so that when the morning came it was found warm and snug.

It's not over, is it? What would the wolf think today as he stands beside the brown, lop-eared carcass? Have people just gone home to resume the parties? Have people forgotten Barrington's sacrifice? Is their faith just some foregone fantasy that believes in nothing but a dead carcass? Or are the days remembered and rehearsed when an angel of the Lord came and greeted God's favored servant?

Jesus came that might have life, and abundantly. It was a gift, a free gift, with no strings attached. "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" Well, since Mary heard those words all of us have become god's favored servant. With that status come responsibility. This Christmas let us take that responsibility seriously and each one commit ourselves to use our particular gifts to keep someone from perishing. For then too, like Mary, we will have responded, "Let it be to me according to your word."  
Thanks be to God! Amen.