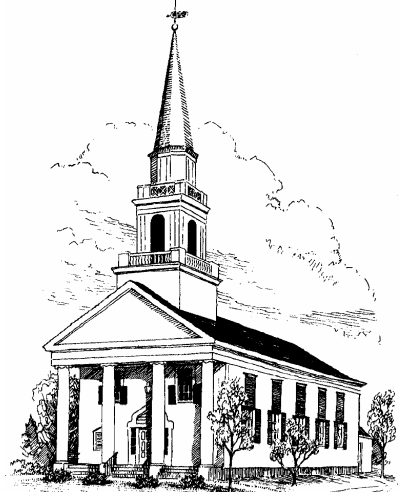


Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from December 24, 2009
Rev. Ann M. Aaberg
“Hallelujah Antonyms”



School vacation began yesterday and students and teachers are off now until January 4. Some of our college students have an even longer semester break. In their time away from their studies, we don't want them to get rusty, do we? So we're going to warm up tonight with a little English grammar quiz. And that certainly can't hurt the rest of us either. Our subject tonight then is homonyms, synonyms and antonyms. Does that sound familiar to anyone?

Who would like to try the definition and give us an example of a homonym? That's the one that sounds the same as another word but has a different meaning. Sound alike, different meaning. Like deer and dear: *deer*, the animal in the woods; and *dear*, like my dear Aunt Bertha.

How about synonym? Synonyms have the same meaning but do not necessarily sound alike. Like: test and exam.

Now, the third group, antonyms, I always remember as the easy ones. What are antonyms? Right, opposites! Words that mean the opposite. Let's try a few of those:

Hot/cold, soft/hard, difficult/easy, dark/light, night/day, long/short (what you're wondering about the sermon tonight ...), black/white, strong/weak, high/low, happy/sad, win/lose.

Antonyms—words that mean the opposite. Our Christmas story is full of them. No, not at first glance, and not word for word, but if you begin to consider the unlikely, unexpected, counterintuitive way that God entered the world, we can see why many say “Jesus came and turned the world upside down.”

Try—king of kings, lord of lords, savior of the world. Opposite: helpless newborn baby. How about palace, castle? Opposite: stable. Try king's court, cabinet, royal attendants. Opposite: barnyard animals.

And who is the first to hear the news that will change the world forever? Not the well-connected, the people in power, the ones with the money—opposite: a bunch of shepherds on a

hillside. And everything about the announcement would normally make you run and hide: it's dark, middle of the night, angels appear in the sky and the shepherds were undoubtedly terrified. But instead of running in the opposite direction, they run *toward* Bethlehem.

And the baby grows up and hits the road, bringing the world an upside-down message that we still have trouble accepting. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Opposites. Blessed are the peacemakers. Put down your sword. Turn the other cheek. Sell all you have and give the money to the poor. Love your enemies. Love your enemies!

And then the ultimate opposite: by his dying, he gave us eternal life. Death/life. Bodily death could not, does not, will not, will never put a stop to the love of God.

A few weeks ago, a couple of us here offered a Christmas prayer service at a local assisted-living community—Academy Point right up the hill from here. At the time we were in the midst of Advent, waiting for Christmas. It was a small gathering, intimate enough to discuss individual Christmas memories and, for some, to lament the commercialization of Christmas, how we've gotten away from the holiness of the season as we prepare for Christmas. A wise woman in the group offered this faith-filled response: "We'll get back to it eventually. We'll get back to Christmas. It'll still be there. Christmas is waiting for us."

Christmas is waiting for us. I offer her response to all of you tonight. An Hallelujah antonym. Self-centered as we humans tend to be, all wrapped up in our own busy lives and concerns, we think we've been waiting for Christmas. Turns out the opposite can be true at the same time, maybe even more true. Christmas is waiting for us.

The love, the joy, the hope, the peace, Jesus the Christ himself—waiting for us. Waiting for us to take Jesus' upside-down message into our hearts and make it our own, to run to the stable instead of in the opposite direction in fear, to treasure the poor and the disenfranchised among us because they are blessed in God's eyes, to become peacemakers in our homes, in our families, in our communities, in our world. As Jesus said, to lose our lives to save them. To focus on giving instead of receiving. To love somebody else, to love *somebody else* as we would love ourselves.

Funny, they say opposites attract. Might it be that the more we employ our Hallelujah antonyms, lifting up the lowly, giving away instead of piling up and surrendering our lives to God, the more we will attract the love that is waiting for us. "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made know to us." Hallelujah and thanks be to God! Christmas is waiting for us. Amen.