

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA**

December 24, 2022 – CHRISTMAS EVE – ALL YEARS

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: *"Love Comes to Town"*

Isaiah 9:2-7	(Those who walked in darkness will see light; Messiah will come!)
Psalms 96	(Sing to the Lord a new song; honor, praise, and worship Him)
Titus 2:11-14	(God's grace has brought us salvation)
St. Luke 2:1-18	(Jesus is born in Bethlehem, heralded by angels)

On February 3 of 2021, Sara Pascucci, a resident of Long Island, New York, received a letter in the mail scolding her for still having Christmas decorations up. The anonymous message read: "Take your Christmas lights down! It's Valentine's Day!!!!!" (Six exclamation points.) While the letter would have upset her under normal circumstances, it hit Sara especially hard at that time. She had just lost both her father and her aunt to COVID-19, less than a week apart.

Her father, who lived with her, had put up the Christmas decorations immediately after Thanksgiving—as he did every year. In the weeks following his death on January 15, Sara couldn't bring herself to take them down. Receiving the harsh note, she said, was "a major blow to the heart. No one really knows what's going on inside the house or why we didn't take down the decorations."

She shared the letter on the Long Island Moms' Facebook page, explaining why it was particularly painful, in hopes that the unidentified sender might see her post. She posted: "The family has been preoccupied with funeral arrangements, mortgage and utility payments, and the grieving process of it all. So yes, we haven't gotten around to taking down Dad's Christmas decorations. Be kind to people because you never know what they are going through."

The community was outraged on her behalf. Within minutes of her sharing the post, dozens of messages flooded Sara's inbox on Facebook. Neighbors sent the Pascucci family heartfelt cards, flowers, and meals. Moreover, a GoFundMe page was created to help cover their mounting mortgage payments and funeral costs.

Beyond these private acts of kindness, what struck Sara the most, she said, is that many neighbors started to put their own holiday decorations back up so she wouldn't feel alone. Bethpage residents climbed up to their attics and down to their basements to retrieve the tinsel and lights they had already stored away for the season. In early February, they redecorated their homes for Christmas. Although the holiday season was long past, colorfully lit trees, snowmen, festive ornaments, and Nativity scenes reappeared up and down the streets of Bethpage, in a show of support for a grieving neighbor.¹

In the words of David Byrne, lead singer of The Talking Heads, "Uh-oh. Love comes to town."² Indeed, in the kindness and compassion of Sara Pascucci's neighbors, love came to town in Bethpage, New York. And, long ago, in a stable in Bethlehem, Palestine, love came to town in the person of Jesus Christ, God in the flesh.

We know from hearing tonight's Gospel that the newborn Baby Jesus was laid in a manger. As animal feeding troughs in ancient Israel, they were made of stone—not what we see in contemporary Christmas cards and Nativity scenes. They weren't comfortable, but they were designed for protection. Protection of the newborn lambs that the priests would place in them. And not just any lamb, but only the unblemished, perfect lambs that would be sacrificed for the people's sins.

Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, was renowned for its unblemished lambs used for sacrifice. Because these lambs had to be perfect, they would be wrapped tightly in cloth and laid in the manger to keep them safe. This is exactly why the only time a manger is mentioned in the story of Jesus' birth, it is being told to shepherds.

St. Luke relates how the Angel of the Lord said to those men keeping watch over their flocks by night, "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." The shepherds would have understood this powerful symbolism! They knew what a swaddled lamb in a manger meant.³

This baby would be the perfect Lamb of God, the Messiah who would sacrifice His life for the sins of the whole world. He wasn't simply a baby wrapped in tight bands of cloth lying in an animal's feeding trough. He was God Himself, perfect, sinless and holy. God who humbled Himself to become the perfect offering for our sins. But *why?* Why on earth would such love come to town? Our God came to be one of us out of His boundless compassion for the human race, so that we could be reconciled with Him in order to enjoy life with God both now *and* in eternity.

And that is why we celebrate Christmas!

Because the Bible tells us (1 Jn. 4:16b) that God *is* love—perfect, unconditional, universal, love—wherever we see compassionate love at work in this world, Jesus comes again. And it's Christmas, all over again, just as Sara Pascucci experienced in the town of Bethpage, Long Island. When Sara's neighbors stood by her with such a huge outpouring of solidarity and kindness, of fellowship and caring, the spirit of Christ was present. It was Christmas all over again—even though the calendar read "February."

And if we continuously practice mercy, understanding, encouragement, and self-denial for the sake of loving others, we can say along with the reformed Ebenezer Scrooge of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, "I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year."⁴

Indeed, may it be so. *Amen!*

¹ Adapt. Sydney Page, SeattleTimes.com, 11 February 2021 <www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/she-was-shamed-for-still-having-christmas-lights-up-neighbors-are-now-putting-theirs-back-up-in-solidarity/> 17 December 2022.

² Source: [Musixmatch](https://www.musixmatch.com), songwriter: David Byrne, "Uh-Oh, Love Comes to Town lyrics" 1977 © Wb Music Corp., Index Music, Inc.

³ Adapt. Ed Davidson, [LinkedIn.com](https://www.linkedin.com) n.d. <https://gh.linkedin.com/posts/ed-davidson-744b016_eddavidson-safedy-thereyhaveit-activity-6999865332798558208-Derb> 17 December 2022.

⁴ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, 1843.