

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
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The Stations of the Nativity Pilgrimage

We have some wonderful art here in the sanctuary today. But different religions and even different denominations in Christianity believe different things about art. Our Muslim and Jewish brothers and sisters do not believe in having images of people in the art where they worship. On the other hand, our Hindu brothers and sisters have many beautiful statues in their temples.

Our Roman Catholic Christian brothers and sisters have statues of Mary and Jesus and other saints in their churches. They, and our Orthodox Christian brothers and sisters have icons, and some of our Protestant brothers and sisters have stained glass windows, to tell the stories of the Bible. John August Swanson's pictures have some similarities. He shows us people of the Bible and their stories.

The art is beautiful but it is not intended to be just decoration. A long time ago, very few people could read and all the Bibles were in Latin. In addition, the service of worship was in Latin and only the priests read and spoke Latin. So most people could not read the Bible or understand what the priest said when they told the Bible stories. That's where some of the art helped the people. They could look at the icons, the stained glass windows, and the statues and understand the stories.

Another way that the art helps people get closer to God is through the way they look at it. Today we are going to engage in this different way of looking at art- looking through it. We use the art that shows us the stories of the Bible, like a window. Do you remember the movie Mary Poppins? Remember when she, Jane and Michael Banks and Bert jump into the chalk drawing picture? It is like that. We do not worship the art. We look at it to put ourselves into the story, to try to feel what it was like to be there with the people when they experienced God.

But today we also have the art placed in the sanctuary on the aisle for a particular reason. In most religions, there is a tradition to go on a trip to a holy place, to see it and be there to pray and worship. Muslims go to Mecca, Jews go to Jerusalem, and I actually got to go on a trip to Bethlehem to see where Jesus was born. When we go on a trip to a holy place it is called a pilgrimage and we are called pilgrims. It is a special journey. But not everyone has the time or money to travel.

There are two ways that we can make a special journey like this without going on a long trip. One is to walk a labyrinth. A labyrinth looks like this pattern. It looks a little like a maze or puzzle, but there are no dead ends. Instead, as you walk the pattern starting from the outside you imagine you are on your journey to a holy place. When you get to the center, it represents reaching the holy place. Then the journey back out is like the trip home.

A second way we can make a special journey is to imagine we are on a train that has stops at many stations. Each station is an important place where we can stop and imagine the story and pray. On Good Friday there is a tradition called the Stations of the Cross. Each station represents a place where Jesus went. Each place is part of the story of Easter.

Today we are going to use the art to go on our own pilgrimage. As pilgrims, we will walk the stations of the nativity. At each station we can look through the art into the part of the story of Jesus' birth and childhood. The insert in our bulletin has the scripture verses that tell the story, and we have the art to help us imagine what it felt like and to imagine we are there.

Let's try it together shall we?