

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife,

Harvey Prendgast was tired. So many things to do to get ready for the holiest night of the year. He was in his 10th year as the pastor of the Immanuel United Methodist Church, and he absolutely loved Christmas. That was not the issue. The issue was, as usual, getting it all done.

And this year, for the first time, in his fifty-four years, he was struggling with the scripture itself. It was that 22nd verse of the first chapter of Matthew: *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³ “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us).*

Really? No, it wasn't the “virgin birth” thing that bothered him. He had wrestled, and found peace, with that years ago. It was the whole *predestination* thing. Did Joseph not have a choice? Did Mary not have a choice? How many decades or centuries had gone by until the circumstances were just right?

He liked the “Immanuel – God is with us.” It was one of the things he liked about this church, Immanuel UMC. Good message. Good DNA to witness to the world.

Well, he needed to just let go of this theological debate until another day. It was December 22nd and he still had a Christmas Eve sermon to write. And, on top of that, his son's family was due to arrive to spend Christmas with them ... due to arrive any minute now.

DING DONG, the front bell rang. The “any minute” just arrived!

After all of the hugging and carrying in of luggage and gifts to put under the tree, Harvey went up to his study for a few minutes before his wife, Erma, had dinner ready. His 10 year old granddaughter Megan followed him. They sat down together on the little couch in his study.

“How you doing, Papaw?” she asked. **“Do you have your sermon all ready?”**

“Well, it still needs a little tweaking,” he told a white lie to her. He hadn’t gotten the first paragraph written.

“Want me to help you” she offered. **“I’ve decided I’m going to be a preacher when I grow up.”**

Ten years old, and she thinks she’s called to ministry. Hmmm. That might have been about the age when he first got the nudging.

“I really can, you know. We had a project in school, to write a little essay about what we wanted to be when we grow up. So I wrote my first sermon. My teacher asked me to read it to the whole class. She said that it was really good. Want me to read it to you, Papaw?”

“Do you have it with you?” Harvey asked, although he knew the answer before he asked.

“Sure do, Papaw.” And she pulled out some paper that had been folded and unfolded a number of times. Harvey knew that this was going to be one of those special life moments.

“I’d love to hear it.”

Megan unfolded and began to read, although she didn’t have to look down at the paper very often. She had started to internalize it to memory. And this is what she said:

The first time she had been on a trip was not very good and she was not sure what she was going to say about it.

The only problem with the Christmas list I will do is not to cancel my service for Christmas.

The Christmas game was just cancelled because it wasn't even a question of what was going to happen. This morning was just a wonderful day for me and today we were all blessed to see our wonderful family.

When we did have the Christmas dinner we all had to reschedule our homeless neighbors to the Christmas dinner. But we are still going to have a great time and today we will certainly do our best for the rest of the world. Thanks for asking me to check out the first thing on the list for the homeless man who came to our best friend's for Christmas dinner.

All my prayers go out to the Family of our wonderful father and pastor for the wonderful life that we have. Thanks so very much.

What is the difference that we could have been on a trip today with a great Christmas tree! The only thing that I can say about it is that I can't get over how much money I have spent.

I am so very blessed with the wonderful Christmas spirit.

“Well!” Harvey said, not really sure of what else to say.

“Teacher said that I hit all the right buttons – family, decorating, football games, homeless people, church, blessing, and the balancing of the real Christmas with the pull of commercialism.”

“Did she really?” Harvey replied.

“Oh yeah. And she said that I was smart enough to leave room in it for everyone to find their own place, to ... uh ... to dance with the Christmas story of yesterday and today. Yep, she said all of that.

“And want to know the best part, Papaw?”

“What’s that, sweetie??”

“It only took four minutes to write it.”

“What?!” he said incredulously.

“Sure did. I used my iPhone. I began to type it as a text message. I didn’t have to type a single letter. Before each word is typed, the spell checker offers me three options for the next word to be typed. All I did was pick one of the three words, and it gave me three options for the next word. It just wrote itself – really FOUR MINUTES!

“What a great job, Papaw. I don’t have to spend all that time writing sermons. I can do it in just four minutes. Pretty cool, huh?”

And then without asking, Megan pulled out her iPhone and demonstrated to Harvey just how she was able to write a sermon without typing a single letter – just choosing between the three words she was offered as choices, and adding the punctuation.

And the three words that kept going through his brain over and over, as she showed him her accomplishment were **ONE THOUSAND MONKEYS...**

Those were the same three words that he used to describe it when Harvey tried to explain the whole thing to his wife, Erma: **ONE THOUSAND MONKEYS...**

“What do you mean, Harvey, when you say “ONE THOUSAND MONKEYS?”

“There was an old axiom we learned in college that said if you put 1,000 monkeys in a room with 1,000 typewriters, they could, within an unlimited amount of time, manage to write the entire works of William Shakespeare. I don’t remember it exactly – it was something about probability theory.”

“How would you have 1,000 monkeys in one room,” Erma asked.

“Well, as I remember it, monkeys are metaphorical. It has to do with randomness. And all the words in the works of Shakespeare would not be connected in sentences – it’s just that the words comprising the works of Shakespeare would eventually all appear.” Then Harvey interrupted himself. **“That’s not the point. The theory is about something preposterous – even though they’ve come up with some computer monkeys which have actually produced close to one volume of Shakespeare’s works, but the words are not in order. To put them in order, they say would take more years than the universe will exist. And in the first experiment, the monkeys broke the computer and used the keyboard for a lavatory.ⁱ**

And then Harvey interrupted himself, again: **“That’s not the point! Don’t you see? It’s a theory about something ridiculous and yet our 10 year old granddaughter is doing something the equivalent of a monkey and her teacher is telling her that it’s a good sermon! Don’t you see? We are going backwards on the whole Darwinian evolution thing. We are becoming as asinine as monkeys, and our school teachers are complimenting her on her good work! Where is this world going?”**

“Are you afraid that you will be replaced in your ministry here by a monkey or a ten-year old?” Erma asked, somewhat tongue in cheek.

“Oh, hardy-har-har! You don’t get it. I deal with issues touching on eternity and the existential angst of humanity. Being the vicar (stand-in) for Christ is not silly stuff – even if some people think so.”

“It’s late, honey. Why don’t you go to bed and get up early in the morning and finish your Christmas Eve sermon then – before anyone else awakens. You might do better on a full night of rest. You always say that sometimes God speaks best while you are sleeping or taking a shower.”

“Geez!” was all Harvey could say, frustrated that no one seemed to understand how important this is. And it’s all just going to get worse. But he could not argue with Erma’s analysis on the value of sleep and of a fresh start before the morning sun peeked over the horizon.

As Harvey Prendergast went to sleep that night, instead of the proverbial sugar plums dancing in his head, his brain was full of images of Monkeys and Typewriters. And then – he couldn’t be sure if he were dreaming or actually involved in a conversation with someone – a voice came to him clear as a bell:

“You know, Harvey, it’s been monkeys all along.”

“What are you talking about?”

“People making their own decisions about their lives, which affect the lives of so many others in ways that they can’t begin to even imagine. From where I sit, it easily looks like 7 billion monkeys in a room with 7 billion typewriters – pecking away at the script of the course of the history of the world.

“HOWEVER,” the Voice continued, cutting off Harvey’s attempt to interrupt, **“I am not bound by what those monkeys think. They may think that they are the ones in charge. And they DO have the free will to do what they choose. But all along, I am still, in ways that they don’t quite understand – all along, I am keeping my eye and my hand on Destiny.**

“Shakespeare, after all, DID come along in the fullness of time.

“And – before you interrupt – so did Joseph and Mary and yes, Jesus. THAT was the time when I became one of the monkeys, myself.”

“Is this God?” Harvey finally interjected.

“Well, you were having some trouble with that wee homily for Christma Eve, weren’t you? And so I was happy to let that darling Megan come along and get you agitated enough to be open to understanding the scripture.

“Am I God? Harvey, Harvey, Harvey. All this time and you don’t know the sound of my voice. How about this ... when you read the scripture to the flock at Christmas Eve, you may say, ‘The word of God for the people of God’ or you may say ‘The word of the Monkey Manager for the Monkeys.’ Do whatever you think is best. After all, you’ve got freedom of choice.”

When Harvey awoke on December 23rd, he had a fuzzy notion that his sleep had been interrupted with something important. He just couldn’t dredge up all the details. But he did go straight to the keyboard of his computer, and type away, with hardly a spare moment for reflection. It all just seemed to flow from -- or [perhaps] “through” -- him.

This year, he was going to tell his flock how even though it sometimes seems like our lives are filled with barely anything more than hopping from

one task to another task, we can have the assurance that God really is in charge.

The words from the Gospel **“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet”** assure us that, even in the midst of all of the apparent chaos, God really is in charge. We think we know what we are doing, but sometimes it might appear to a visitor from another planet that we are flopping around like 1,000 monkeys in a room with typewriters. But, not to worry: God IS in charge. And in the fullness of time – like right now -- THIS Christmas Eve – God is doing something really spectacular.

Don't think that this Christmas will be just like all the ones before. Be open to the very, very real possibility that God is about to do something really different and really good. Tonight. Tonight. Rest in that assurance. Look for it in the days to come. Be ready; it's already been born.

Well, that's what went on down the street at the Prendergast home, as they got ready to celebrate Christmas Eve 2016.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ... **and of the Monkey Manager.** AMEN.

ⁱ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/8789894/Monkeys-at-typewriters-close-to-reproducing-Shakespeare.html>”