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First Presbyterian Church  
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Luke 2:1-14

### **“Christmas Isn’t Perfect”**

Well, friends, we made it! The big day is here. Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her king!

But it’s not exactly the Christmas we wanted, is it? In fact, it’s not even Christmas. At least not today on the day I’m preaching this. It’s December 13, a Sunday afternoon, and I can count on both hands the number of people there are in the sanctuary. I am preaching to a camera, and you are watching this on a screen somewhere.

We talked about dressing up this production. Hiring a videographer, getting some good B roll. Other churches are doing it, you know. Some even started weeks ago. We did not start weeks ago, because weeks ago we were planning on people being here, so we were preparing for something different. So in some ways we were too late in the game to glitz up the production value. But honestly, a glitzy production wouldn’t change the reality of anything. You’re still there, and we’re still here.

If I can be frank and honest the whole thing stinks. This isn’t the time of year we’re supposed to be apart. We’re supposed to be together celebrating, singing the great hymns and lighting our candles. Not apart.

But we are not alone in our less-than-perfect Christmas. This is one half of the Good News of the Christmas story! Life wasn’t perfect for Mary and Joseph, either. Jesus wasn’t exactly born under perfect conditions.

The story of Christmas is set in a most stressful time when everything felt out of control. Sound familiar?

In the Gospel of Luke, we read that a decree went out from Emperor Augustus demanding all the world be enrolled in a census. Well, everyone’s anxiety goes up when we live under the weight of decrees, whether they come from the government, our jobs or our family. None of us like command performances.

2020 attests to that! We don't want the government telling us what to do. Even if we're willing to go along with stay-at-home orders and mask mandates and limits on how many people can gather, we don't like those decrees. Likewise the people in ancient Palestine. They didn't like them either. And it didn't matter where you lived, if you had an illness or if you were days away from delivering a baby, a decree went out and you had to go. And no liked it. So Mary and Joseph went because if they didn't they could have been arrested or worse.

Censuses back then bore some similarities to the census we took this year. The government wanted to know how many people there were, but not so the people could have adequate representation. Rome wanted to know how much how much power they could exert and how much they could tax their citizens. For Mary and Joseph, the news of a census was catastrophic. They already lived on the edge; they couldn't afford to pay any more in taxes than they already did. And Caesar's tax plan did not include a child tax credit.

Notice, too, the utter arrogance of Caesar. He called for the whole world to be counted. He thought the whole world belonged to him and that he could move people around by simply demanding it. And, well, he could. Mary and Joseph had no choice but to follow the decree. They couldn't protest it or decide the law didn't apply to them! And then when they got to Bethlehem, the inn was full, so the innkeeper sent them out back, where Mary gave birth to Jesus.

Friends, mangers were dirty. They were not the nice idyllic scene we get on Christmas cards. And it's unlikely Mary emerged from childbirth looking like Princess Kate Middleton did outside the hospital wearing a designer dress and high heels, with perfect hair and makeup. Mary didn't have a stylist at her side to fix her face. She only had Joseph. The images of her in the picturesque, peaceful settings are untrue. The hymn "Away in a Manger", while lovely to sing, is a lie. The cattle weren't lowing and the little Lord Jesus was probably not asleep in the hay, not crying. Newborns cry and they don't sleep. And childbirth is messy, and that's all I'll say about that.

Chances are, Mary and Joseph were anxious just like all new parents are. Why, I can remember when Terry and I brought our firstborn home from the hospital. We set Henry down in his car seat in the middle of our little living room in Stevens

Point, Wisconsin, wondering what in the world we were to do now! Even Ikea furniture comes with better instructions than a newborn!

The truth is, the birth of Jesus is profoundly ordinary. Jesus came into the world as we all do, with ordinary first-time parents, and like all babies, he cried when he was hungry, wet, lonely or irritable.

And if any of that offends you, it shouldn't. Why, the ordinariness of it all is exactly what makes it so extraordinary! God chose to become vulnerable and dependent. God chose to become . . . like us, in all our weaknesses and all our messy humanity.

And I don't know about you, but I'd much rather have a God who understands what it's like to be me, or you, than some other type of God. Especially now. This year. In 2020. Sure, an almighty God who can defeat the coronavirus in one fell swoop would be nice, I'm not going to lie. But when the chips are down, I would much rather have a God who knows what it's like to be vulnerable and alone and dependent than all-powerful, because power that's mighty and violent and dictatorial is short-lived. History attests to that. The mighty always perish by some sword or another. But love? A love that knows no boundaries? That withstands the test of time. History attests to that. Anyone who's ever been in love can attest to that.

And that's the second half of the Good News of the Christmas story. That God didn't come in the way everyone expected God to come; didn't come to overwhelm the world with divine power and might. Instead, God came in the least expected way, in a way no one could imagine; God came in the form of a helpless, vulnerable baby. Why? Because there's nothing quite like a newborn baby to grab people's attention and pull on their heartstrings. I've been blessed with 4 babies myself, and at each and every birth there was a moment of instant love, and at that moment I knew with all my being, and continue to know, that there isn't anything I wouldn't do for those babies.

Friends, the Good News is that God came not to a perfect family or a perfect Christmas, where everything is jolly and going according to plan, but a mess. And I don't know about you, but that brings me a lot of comfort, because things don't always go according to our plans, and we don't always get the holiday we wanted.

But we do get what we need at Christmas, which is the assurance that God loves us despite the mess; and comes to be with us in the midst of it. In the midst of all that stress and turmoil, God joined Joseph and Mary. And God joins us, too. One of the names we give to Jesus is “Immanuel”, which means “God with us”. God is not with us only when we are happy, successful, or healthy. The promise of Christ is that God is with us in every time and in every circumstance.

Even though we’re not together, I hope you will still light a candle tonight, because it is a symbol of hope and love in the darkest season, a sign that Christ’s love can break through anything and that nothing is impossible with God. That despite all logic and all signs to the contrary, there is reason to believe and to have hope.

A few years ago, in the weeks before Christmas, a woman named Kathy found herself without hope in the hospital, recovering from her second major surgery of the year. She remembered that a hospital is not a haven of quiet and peace and rest. She had a roommate who smoked in the bathroom and turned the TV on at all hours of the night. Across the hall an elderly woman cried out in pain every three minutes, day and night, night and day. A “code blue” sent emergency personnel and crash carts racing down the halls.

This is Kathy’s story in her own words:

One night as I lay in my hospital bed, hooked up to so many machines I couldn’t even move without help and close to tears from the pain and frustration, I heard a faint sound. Amidst the cries of pain, blaring TVs, and beeping monitors, I swore I heard a different type of sound altogether: a soft, sweet, gentle song. Then it was gone. Was I imagining things?

A few hours later, still awake and trying to block out the sounds of the woman wailing across the hall and the loud, angry voice of my roommate swearing on the telephone, I heard the strange, beautiful sound again. Could it possibly be? No, I must be hearing things.

When the nurse came in to check my vitals, I asked her: was it me? Or was there indeed a very different sound breaking through the harshness of that place?

“Oh,” she said. “It’s tradition here. Every time a baby is born in the nursery, they play Brahms’ lullaby on the loudspeakers.”

A lullaby on the loudspeakers. Floating through the harshness of those halls—a lullaby.

And right then, for the first time since I had come through the emergency room of that hospital, I smiled. I felt hopeful. I felt peace. Lullaby on the loudspeakers: a baby is born!

During the remaining time I spent in the hospital, I listened for the sounds of that lullaby. Amidst the horrible sounds of pain and misery that surrounded me, I strained to hear the sound of hope, of life, of new beginnings. Lullaby on the loudspeakers. A child is born.

And I thought of another lullaby, which broke into the sounds of the night nearly two thousand years ago, and in my heart, I heard the whisper of angels' wings:

Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Do not be afraid, for over the sounds of people weeping and IVs beeping, over the cries of pain and suffering and sorrow, there is a heavenly lullaby: Do not be afraid — I bring you good news, which is for all people. (The Presbyterian Outlook, 20 November 2006)

This Christmas, listen for the lullaby, and remember that God comes to you because God loves you, and God can be trusted to handle all of your unmet expectations, or plans that go awry. So trust God. And while you're at it, share God's love with other people and with the world. Because the world needs God's love, God's beautiful, inclusive, far-reaching, audacious, and outlandish love.

Amen.

Sources:

Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 1, commentary for Christmas Eve

Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, commentary for Luke 2:1-14, Christmas Eve

