

2020 Christmas Eve Sermon

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Draft 7 of Wednesday, December 23, 2020

You're probably watching or listening to this on Christmas Eve, which will make tomorrow Christmas Day, and after that we're almost to the end of 2020. Back in March, I never dreamed that we would still be masking and social distancing and worshiping online at Christmas.

Normally, we would be holding multiple services in a packed sanctuary, greeting one another with enthusiasm, reading well-known scriptures, celebrating Holy Communion, and then lighting candles while we sang Silent Night in unison. Instead we're recording this on the 23rd in an empty sanctuary and you'll watch it over the internet or listen to it on the radio.

It's all right in line with 2020 as a whole—a difficult, disappointing year that we've slogged through together.

But as I think about it, the First Christmas wasn't so great either. At least for Mary and Joseph. (Jesus was a newborn baby, I don't think it made much of a difference to him.)

Let's take a look at what actually happened.

Mary and Joseph were pushed together by the dual scandals of Mary's pregnancy and the fact that Joseph did not repudiate her. Both of them would have been looked down upon, ostracized and avoided.

And then there was the census, a census completed not with mailings and census officials going door to door, but rather a census accomplished by moving people around the empire under the threat of brute force.

And so Mary and Joseph left their familiar home in Nazareth and went to Bethlehem. A place that may have been completely new to them, and was, at the least, less familiar.

Mary was pregnant with her first child. So she's experiencing something new and awkward and uncomfortable every day. Joseph was a carpenter, familiar with wood and stone but inexperienced in the art of helping a woman through the trials and tribulations of pregnancy.

And when they get to Bethlehem there is no room at the Inn. No room at the Marriott or the Super 8 either. So they are left with a stable as their best option. Now I hope that stable was clean and well kept—but I have my doubts. And I know that no matter how clean and well kept a stable is, no one wants to bring their child into the world in a stable. And no one places their child in a manger, a food trough for animals, unless there are no other options.

But in that place for livestock, there Jesus is born. Mary without the older, wiser, more experienced women of the family who would have surrounded her and offered helpful advice and practical aid if they had been able to remain at home in Galilee.

Instead there is only Joseph, who I expect was somewhat less than useful, and maybe a bored sheep or an indifferent donkey or a mildly interested cow.

I don't think that was the way Mary envisioned her child coming into the world. I don't think those are the ideal circumstances that Joseph wanted to provide for his new family.

I don't think that things were going according to plan for anyone . . . except God Almighty.

As you know, I'm reluctant to attribute events, especially unfortunate events, to "God's plan." While there are reasons bad things happen, those reasons can usually be traced to human folly and sin or to the general condition of our fallen world.

But this, the birth of the Messiah, was a key point in salvation history. Hundreds and thousands of years had been leading up to this point.

If God had wanted Jesus born in a palace, God could have made that happen. If God had wanted Jesus born in a spotless modern hospital, God could have delayed things a couple thousand years.

But God didn't change the location, nor did God push back the due date. And so Jesus the Messiah, the Word made flesh, was born in a stable and laid in a manger. And God made it this way for the sake of love.

Because it wasn't just on the cross that God's love for humanity shone through Jesus, it was through his entire life, everything he was, everything he did. He came to show us the way, the truth, and the life. And he called us to follow his example.

The conditions that Mary and Joseph found themselves in were less than ideal. But the circumstances of the human race as a whole were no better . . . and things haven't really improved since then.

One of the ways we can show people that we love them is by walking with them through the most difficult parts of their lives. God revealed the depth of Love Divine by coming into this world under some of the most difficult conditions. God came into the world in the midst of difficulty, pain, and suffering because God loves us.

The Gospel of Luke gives us the most complete account we have of Jesus' birth, the Gospel of John provides the cosmic backdrop. John makes explicit what is implicit in Luke: God so loved the world that he gave the only begotten son.

God loved us so much that God kept loving us when we had fallen into sin. When we had turned against God and wounded and wearied ourselves. When we had wandered away from the light and gotten lost in the darkness, God loved us still.

God loved us so much that even after all that, God came down and walked among us. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. God pitched a tent and took up residence with us. God loved us enough to put aside the divine glory and suffer with us and eventually die by our hands.

Love Divine didn't seek its own gratification or its own aggrandizement. It wasn't a love that shirked away from pain and suffering. It wasn't a love that counted the cost and balked when the price rose so extremely high.

It was a love that saw us in the mud and the muck and waded in to rescue us. A love that bore the steep cost of saving us from ourselves. That's the love God has for us.

Tonight we celebrate that love and remember that we are called to show that same kind of self-giving love for one another.

Let us be not afraid, for we have received good news of great joy for all the people. Amen.