

When We're Not Ready for Christmas

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Luke 2:1-20 ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: In the birth of Jesus God offers us the perfect gift of unconditional love and immeasurable forgiveness.

When I was studying for the ministry in Chicago, my wife Mary and I were friends with a couple who worked for the seminary. Deborah was a professor. Her husband Tony was the seminary's treasurer. Unbeknownst to everyone in the seminary community, for quite some time Tony and Deborah had been seeking to adopt. One day they received a phone call. A baby was available, but they had only about two hours to get to the agency and claim their baby. Miraculously, Chicago's traffic that afternoon somehow allowed them to make that deadline.

As I said, Tony and Deborah had been working on adoption for quite some time, but they had not been given any indication

that a firm arrangement was in the offing. Consequently they had not made the “nuts-and-bolts” preparations to receive a baby.

Once the three of them were safely home, the new father went to the Walgreens near the seminary. That is where some of my classmates happened to notice that Tony was buying diapers, and bottles, and formula and a whole cart full of other baby paraphernalia. Knowing that he and his wife had no children and that Deborah wasn't even pregnant, my classmates worried that they were witnessing evidence that the mild-mannered seminary treasurer had another “secret” family somewhere.

But the next day, Tony and Deborah's good news came out, bringing great joy to the seminary community (and a sigh of relief to my classmates who had seen Tony at Walgreens). Tony and Deborah later told us that when they brought their son home, there was no crib for a bed, so the baby spent his first few days sleeping in a dresser drawer which they had removed and placed

on the dining room table. The parents weren't ready; they simply had to make do when their blessing came to them.

Why does that sound familiar?

Think of those expectant first-time parents we remember tonight. We can imagine that Mary and Joseph were trying to stay calm, but they must have been nervous wrecks. Of all the times for a mandatory census! Having to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem now? Mary having to travel 70 miles so close to Mary's due date? They probably had planned on a trip to Bethlehem later, to visit Joseph's family once the baby was a few months old... but not now. *Then* they probably would have been able to stay with one of Joseph's cousins, but now, with the census bringing a flood of people into town, Joseph couldn't be sure. Whenever it was that they were going to be blessed by the appearance of this baby, Joseph and Mary simply would have to make do.

Whether or not you're ready for Christmas, Christmas is here. You've known it was coming. This is not your first go at it. You own a calendar. You've seen the signs. To prepare for Christmas you've tackled hefty to-do lists involving gifts and foods and guests, involving chores and schedules and logistics. You've had an idea of how you wanted Christmas to be, what it would look like and taste like, smell like and feel like. And yet tonight, even though you may have a task or two or three still to tackle, Christmas is standing on the porch, knocking on your door. You'll just have to make do and welcome it as you are.

There's a Bible verse familiar to many people, maybe from Sunday school or from seeing fans display it at televised sporting events. In the Gospel of John, Chapter 3, verse 16 declares, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

The God of Heaven and Earth, the God who made black holes and black widow spiders, the God who made hummingbirds and human beings breathed into us the breath of life and the spirit of awareness. We know of God, and we have this longing to know God. God could have chosen to reveal God's own self to humankind in an infinite number of ways:

But God came to our world just as you and I came to this world: by being born into it through the strength of a woman. Like you and me, the Son of God was born in vulnerability, weakness. And just as babies are dependent on the loving care of parents, we realize that each of us is dependent on the love of our caring God.

Tonight we are presented with God's priceless gift: belonging. The birth of Jesus is God's declaration that we belong to God. God's love welcomes us, embraces us, comforts and strengthens us. God's love is offered freely, without condition or prerequisite. Through love God forgives and encourages us,

redeems us despite the stains of our mistakes and saves us for God's eternal purpose. "God so loved the world that God gave the only Son...."

We don't have to worry about making Christmas "perfect." We can welcome Jesus into our imperfect lives, because in the birth of Jesus God offers us the perfect gift of unconditional love and immeasurable forgiveness. Jesus will "make do," welcoming each of us right now, just as we are.