

“Christmas Fails”

Matthew 1:18-25

A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

December 12, 2021

University Baptist Church

Minneapolis, MN

We are at the third in a series of sermons exploring feasting. It happens this time of year. We’ve already looked at abundance and feasts. Next week we’ll look at Christmas sweets. But sometimes things that tend to fall apart at this time of year. Best laid plans turn south and we are left to pick up the pieces. Hopes of family get togethers carry the unresolved baggage from years past. Then there’s COVID and the thought of gathering with people in differing levels of vaccination.

Christmas plans were put on hold or thwarted by a rare 227 mile tornado that ripped through five states, hitting Kentucky the hardest. Hundreds dead, towns and livelihoods destroyed. Remnants of this storm hit Rochester New York yesterday with 89mph winds and some are still without power and heat. What does Christmas look like for these communities?

And then for me, this Sunday is smack dab in between what would have been my nephew Lewis’ 21st birthday and the five-year anniversary of his suicide. Merry Christmas. Even the joyful expectation of Christmas couldn’t save him. Was it the fault of Christmas? Probably not. But there is and was an expectation that we not talk about hard things for fear that it will ruin the holiday. Maybe not talking about the hard stuff is the real Christmas fail.

What difficult things do you avoid dealing with at this time of year?

What traumas exist below the surface?

Sometimes we’re not aware of them and they get triggered when we hear some mundane comment. Like flint, it collides with some ever-present stone in our subconscious, igniting some uncontrollable fire of sarcasm, anger or self-imposed shame. I think it’s the time of year that we need to hold each other tenderly, especially that child within us who desperately longs for safety and comfort.

How can we transform our Christmas fails of the past into Christmas survivals?

Hold that thought.

When Mary found out she was pregnant, it was not a triumph. While Mary was told by Gabriel that this child would be great, that was years off. She needed to deal with her current state. She was unwed. Well, she was betrothed, meaning she probably didn’t live with Joseph. And she needed to convince him that he should become the father of a child that was not biologically his. Joseph, being righteous (so says the scripture) considered ending their relationship. Such was the shame surrounding the illegitimacy of Jesus. It was something that impacted the whole family. They would all be seen as illegitimate, less than, unclean, and suspect in the eyes of their communities. So, Mary and Joseph ended up raising Jesus not only far from home, but in a different country altogether. A migrant, a refugee, maybe even an evacuee.

Let’s look at Joseph’s dilemma. Interestingly, Matthew focuses on Joseph while Luke focuses on Mary. The why of that is a topic for another sermon. Mary is pregnant as today’s scripture opens. And Joseph is faced with a choice. At least he has a choice. But the choice is his, not hers.

Matthew 1:19 says, “Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.” Was it her disgrace or his?

Deuteronomy gives the betrothed the right to declare what’s called an honor-divorce. He gets to get out of the marriage contract signed by the family and go off and find a better, more suitable spouse. This is a legal form of patriarchy where the husband has the say. He might have seen the pregnancy that he had nothing to do with, and declared that the marriage was a fail. Cut and run. What if Jesus didn’t look like Joseph? After all, he would be a laughingstock—a wimp, a man who did not protect or satisfy his wife. Or worse a man who did not honor the ways of the world.

What’s in between the lines of scripture is that the punishment for adultery for the woman is death by stoning. So, Joseph had to choose whether to do the traditional thing, which was to do this so-called honor-divorce which would likely result in Mary’s death, or find a different path.

An angel visits him and tells him to take Mary as his wife. The angel even reminds him that he is a son of David, the lineage that is to lead Israel. Just to prove it, Matthew adds a genealogical prelude to prove his point.

So Joseph made a choice. A brave choice. Joseph looked at his failed image of his life, but realized, I think that it was just that. An image. A mirage. A hope. A dream. Now given his current circumstances, he would have to forge a new path. A new identity. A new way of looking at the world and its people. Joseph needed to change, just as Mary was changing before his eyes. He would become a stealth father. An earthly father. A good father. An adoptive father, although that was hidden from most. Maybe even a better father than anyone could imagine.

Maybe it was the angel whispering in his dream-ear.

Maybe it was his conscience.

Maybe it was Mary’s defiant stance that this child would be different because we would teach him a better way to encounter this sin-sick world.

Maybe he was fed up with the ways of the world.

I like to think that Mary sang him a song that was so liberating and hopeful and holy that she woke Joseph and said, imagine what we can become, our little misfit family.

Joseph could have turned tail and run. But he was drawn to this woman, and her child. He was drawn to the story, however preposterous. He was drawn to the way that he might pass on what he could to Jesus.

My friends, Joseph is the one who stands by the one who has been hurt. His first impulse is not his final impulse. He risks everything to save the life of his family. Another angel, or was it the same one, would later tell Joseph to take his young family and flee to a foreign land for their very survival.

Like modern refugees he’s a courageous man in the background. Making sure his family is safe. Knowing that leaving your home country is sometimes safer than staying.

The Scripture ends with the promise of Immanuel. God with us—all of us. But maybe especially with those of us who are a bit brokenhearted this time of year. Jesus came to bind up the brokenhearted. Maybe that includes us, too.

But Christmas doesn’t fail. It’s the light at the end of the tunnel. The border across the river, under the barbed wire. It might seem far off, but it’s there. It never says it’s going to be all right. In fact, the story says it’s going to be hard. The story is that we are not alone. Immanuel is there, God with us. Even in the dark cold nights of the soul, God is with us.

I know because I’ve seen it, experienced it.

When Lewis died, people came out of the woodwork offering food, companionship, cards, plants. And the people who were the best were the ones who didn't have answers. They didn't say that this was part of God's plan. They didn't look to blame or try to say why. They gave presence when we needed it and space when we needed it. Christmas that year was a bit of a blur for me, but you held us all tight. You were forgiving of this preacher who didn't have many words to say. You modeled the message of the season. God is with us. You practiced love and support and patiently held a light to lead us through the wilderness. You also held up a mirror and let us know that grief is a messy, holy journey that one need not travel alone.

Immanuel God with us.

I know this might just sound like empty words. But I have to believe that we are not alone. I've seen it in the ways people have surrounded our family over these years. I see it in how we hold each other close at this time of year.

I see it in how we give of ourselves in this season of giving.

I see it in how we support people who have lost everything in Friday's tornados.

I see it in how we welcome strangers in our midst—those needing sanctuary from a world and a people bent on destroying them.

Jesus came into the world in a family just like that one. What a subversive and hopeful message. We need these birth narratives, if for no other reason than to show us that God is with us in our struggles and challenges.

It can be downright exhausting to make it through the holiday season. How do you make it through? I think it helps to remember the stories. It helps to not shy away from the challenge that the holidays bring to many people. It helps to say the names of the loved ones that are on our hearts. It helps to have a methodical Advent that really prepares us for Christmas. It helps to be with a church family that tries its doggone best to model the unconditional love of God.

Maybe it's the celebration for all of those misfit families. Because that's how God came. That's to whom God came at Christmas. Maybe the best Christmas feasts happened on the run, befriended by strangers who offered a kindness that their families could or would not?

We need the birth narratives to ground us in the fact that even when all hell is breaking loose, God is with us.

For unto us a child is born. Unto us.

Unto a world and a people challenged and struggling.

Unto us, a people that are trying to find our way.

Unto us, a family that doesn't quite feel the Christmas spirit.

Unto us, even when we are feeling lost and alone.

Unto us, who are burning with questions in our hearts.

Unto us, who wonder whether this is all there is.

Unto us, who are hanging on by our bleeding and cracked fingernails.

Unto us, who long for something better.

Unto us, ravaged by disease, in hospitals—cordoned off from loved ones.

Unto us, the joyful and the sorrowful.

Unto us the content and the lonely.

Unto us, the shepherds and the magi alike.

Unto us, who long for and await the revelation of God and the new opportunities that it may accompany.

We need the birth narratives to remind us that God can get smuggled in to even the most hopeless places and the most desperate and clueless families. And God can work miracles in all of us.

For unto us a child is born. And the government shall be upon his shoulders—hallelujah. And his name shall be called wonderful counselor the prince of peace.

Unto us who feel like we have failed. God is not done with us. God is still here. You can hear God's still small voice, if you just listen. The voice is not saying everything is going to be all right. The voice is not saying, there's no danger ahead. The voice is saying, you're not alone. I'm here even unto the end of time. I'm here in the darkest night of your soul. I'm here when they laugh at you or dismiss you or scandalize your name. I'm here. I see your best self and I'm here to accompany you as you move in the direction of love. For that's what it's all about.

For unto us misfits who long for something better, a child is born. Maybe it's what's reborn in us. I can't wait to see what will emerge. Can you? Christmas fails are not the final word. Love is the word. The best word.

O come o come Emanuel and ransom captive Israel, who mourns in lowly exile here, until the sun of God appear. Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee o Israel.