

Sermon Christmas Eve 2020

The Unexpected Christmas Joy

Last year at this time the 10 to 15 kg Turkey was roasting in the Oven **(Image)**. Some of you were at home preparing all the delicious side dishes and desserts that compliment the Turkey. Some of you were prepping food for tomorrow's big feast. Some of you were welcoming extended family who had driven or flown here from places outside of Calgary. Some of you were travelling on the roads or in the air heading back to your homestead to see family **(Image)**. Many of you were sitting in our pews packing the church full. Excited to sing Christmas Carols and revisit the first Christmas story. Waiting with anticipation for singing Silent Night with your candle burning bright **(Image)**. Some of you were looking forward to getting back home afterwards to see the look on your loved ones faces when they open up their presents from you.

Fast forward to this year, and everything we love about Christmas is different. Yes, we can still cook a 3 to 5 kg Turkey, I guess. Or maybe we will settle for a small ham or chicken **(Image)**. Yes, we can set up a computer on our dining room table with all our loved ones joining us from their homes on zoom **(Image)**. Yes, we can still sit in front of the television, and watch the service. Yes, we can still light a candle and sing along with Silent Night. Yes, we can still open up the presents that came in the mail from grandma and grandpa **(Image)**. Technology is allowing us to still keep up some connection with those we love during the holidays.

But it isn't the same. This Christmas is like no other we have ever experienced. When I think back to those few Christmas' where I felt down and out, it doesn't compare to our experience this year. Even the year Mom and I celebrated Christmas Eve at a Denny's doesn't fit the bill **(Image)**. There is no beating around the bush here. Many of us feel like we are missing out. We are grieving not being able to take part in our normal Christmas traditions **(Image)**. We are missing our adult children who couldn't come home this year. We are missing seeing our parents. Our grandparents. Our siblings. Our aunts and uncles. Our cousins. Our friends. We are missing reconnecting with those people we went to church with growing up. We are grieving this Christmas Season.

This might be why “It’s a Wonderful Life” is the number one best seller Christmas movie this year. Watching a movie about a person who isn’t feeling the joy of Christmas seems to resonate with so many of us this year. If we didn’t get why Elvis decided to sing a song about a blue Christmas we do now.

As I reflect on what Christmas is looking like this year. As I stand here and preach to a camera. As I miss out on reconnecting with so many of you that I only get to see at this time of year. I feel more connected than ever before to the first Christmas story we hear in our gospel this morning.

Joseph and Mary’s first Christmas experience came with its blue Christmas moments. First, Joseph gets this letter that tells him he needs to travel with Mary who is nine months pregnant across the way to Bethlehem to register for a census. I’m sure this journey came with a lot of anxiety and fear. And let’s not forget how uncomfortable Mary must have felt travelling on a donkey in the final month of her pregnancy.

Second, then as they get close to Bethlehem Mary goes into labour. So, now they are far away from home. Mary doesn’t have her Mother there to be a support for her during this anxious time. Remember Mary is a teenager when she gives birth to Jesus.

Third, they look for a nice place for Mary to give birth, but all someone can offer them is a place where the animals sleep (**Image**). It says nothing to us about whether Mary and Joseph received help as Mary was giving birth. The only living creatures besides themselves were probably the cattle.

We don’t often reflect on this part of the Christmas story or the other Christmas story we hear in Matthew on Epiphany, the last day of Christmas, where they have to run for their lives, because someone is out to kill Jesus. Christmas is supposed to be a time of great joy and celebration. A time to reconnect with loved ones, and enjoy a good meal. A time to share in the giving of presents. So, we gloss over this part of the story, and think of the angels singing (**Image**) or the wise men coming with gifts.

We don’t often focus on the whole picture of Christmas. The joys and the sorrows that come with Christmas. For example, on the one hand we have all these wonderful traditions that we enjoy year after year. On the other

hand, we see that not everyone in our society has a merry Christmas year after year. Some people don't have access to all these wonderful traditions. Some people deal with mental wellness issues during the winter months. Some people deal with grief during the holidays. Maybe, everyone of us has had at least one Christmas in our lifetime where we were feeling blue.

Christmas is a season that comes with joys and sorrows. Most years we focus more so on the joys of the Christmas story. Some years, like this one, we focus more so on all the blue parts of the Christmas story. This year it will be harder for us to hear the angels singing or on Epiphany to see the Wisemen bearing gifts.

But, when we can see the Christmas Story for all it is, we see that in one of the most anxious and scary moments of Joseph and Mary's lives comes unexpected joys. First, the birth of Jesus goes surprisingly well despite the lack of supports they had access to. Second, Jesus is no ordinary baby. Jesus is the hope for a better future. Mary is sitting with Jesus in her arms reflecting on what just happened, and pondering this better future. Going from feeling anxious and afraid to feeling great joy.

Third, let's not forget about the poor shepherds who are trying to earn enough for another day's meal. Risking their lives to keep watch over the sheep of some rich dude. Marginalized by their neighbours. Seen with very little value. Longing to hear some good news. Looking up in the sky, and seeing a multitude of angels shining their light down on them. Sharing with them good news about the birth of Jesus, the saviour, the one who will bring peace to their lives. The one who will welcome them and value them. The Shepherds get to hear probably one of the greatest choir performances ears have ever heard **(Image)**. And then the shepherds get the invite to go to the cradle where their future saviour lies **(Image)**.

Talk about unexpected joys.

Yes, Christmas looks very different this year from last. Many of us are grieving. Many of us are anxious and scared. Like the Shepherds felt day after day working in the fields. Like Mary and Joseph felt on their long trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Like George Bailey felt in "It's a Wonderful life". This is part of our Christmas story this year.

But the Christmas story also invites us to look for where God's unexpected joy is touching our lives in the midst of our grief, anxieties, and fears. Like George Bailey does when he encounters a guardian angel named Clarence Odbody who helps him see this unexpected joy. Like the Shepherds do when they look up in the sky to see what is going on. Like Mary does while holding the baby Jesus. Reflecting on the miracle of life. Like George, like the Shepherds, like Mary, we are invited to see where the angels are singing. To see where their radiance is shining God's light of hope on us. Hope for a better future. Light that helps us see where God is at work in our lives on this night. Hearing the invitation to come to the manger where we see God's promise of deliverance from our suffering coming alive in the baby Jesus. The baby Jesus who will breathe new life on us.

Let us pray, God we grieve that we are unable to gather in the ways we are used to. We are anxious and scared for our lives, our loved ones, and our world. As we walk with Joseph, Mary, the shepherds, George, open our eyes to see your unexpected Christmas joy touching our lives. And give us hope in your promise that we will experience your healing and restoration in our lives and in our world. **Amen.**

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