

Christmas Eve 2017

Not Ready for Christmas

I don't know about you, but I have to confess that I'm not quite ready for Christmas this year. Here it is 6:00 or so on Christmas Eve, and I'm standing here leading the Christmas Eve service, but somewhere in the back of my mind there's this little pre-Christmas "to do" list with a plenty of unfinished business left on it. Not to mention the list on my desk with all the odds and ends I have to attend to before I can slip out of town for our post-Christmas trip to Western NY. I'm willing to hazard a guess, though, that I'm not alone in this—and that more than a few of us will go home from here tonight to wrap or bake or sew or clean.

But do you know what? Christmas is coming whether we're ready for it or not. Christmas comes regardless of whether our stockings are hung by the chimney with care or fruitcake.com has delivered that gift to Aunt Mabel on time. Christmas comes whether we are ready or not. (fruitcake.com isn't a real thing by the way—so you can put your phones away!)

We can be unready for Christmas in other ways, too, of course. There are years when I feel more spiritually prepared than others to celebrate Christ's birth. Some years, I'm able to immerse myself in some good, thoughtful, devotional reading, and bask in the glories Handel's *Messiah*, and muse for days on the right words to say on Christmas Eve. Other years, not so much—and I'm willing to hazard a guess that I'm not alone in this, either. And to be honest—for me, this has been one of those years on all those fronts. There are moments when I realize how much the long journey Lorri

and I began with her cancer diagnosis eighteen months ago has depleted me. But Christmas comes whether we're ready or not.

All of this may be true of our experience of celebrating the Christmas holiday, but let's also consider for a moment how unready Mary and Joseph and the shepherds were for the first Christmas. I can't imagine how Mary could have possibly been ready for an angel appearing with an announcement that she would conceive a child by the Holy Spirit, and that this child would be the long-awaited Messiah. I don't know how *anyone* could be ready for something like that! And, things couldn't have been much better for Joseph. First he receives word that his fiancée is pregnant, knowing full well that he is not the father of Mary's child. And then he has a disturbing dream and receives his own message from an angel. There's no way to be ready for things like that.

And when, as Luke puts it, "the days were accomplished that she should be delivered," Mary and Joseph were not exactly prepared for that, either—at least not by the standards set by our Lamaze instructor many years ago. The whims of an emperor in faraway Rome had made it necessary for Mary to leave her home in Nazareth much too close to her "due date." When the time came she was in a strange and crowded place—far away from home, far away from the familiar women who should have been there to help her through the birth of her child, forced by circumstances beyond her control to give birth like a homeless person in a place where one is not supposed to give birth unless your name is "Elsie the Cow."

It's not hard to imagine Joseph being at wits' end—second-guessing himself about the mess that he has gotten his wife and her special child into, feeling like a failure as a father before he had even begun.

We might also consider the shepherds. The angels appear to them in the middle of the night when there were sheep to be herded, and everyone knows that you just can't go traipsing off into town and leave your sheep out in the field all by themselves—even when you've just been visited by an angel.

No one was really prepared for the birth of Jesus. God didn't wait for everyone to be ready. God in his providence and infinite wisdom sent his Son in his own time and in his own way. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians, "But when the fullness of time had come"—not by our reckoning, but by his—"God sent his Son." (Galatians 4:5-6)

In the grand sweep of world history God chose that time and place, he chose that propitious moment to intrude into the world's affairs and fulfill his age-old promise to redeem the world. He sent his Son in his time and in his way. He intruded into the world's history—but he intruded gently, for the most part, with great patience and forbearance and mercy.

And that is how he comes to us still. He comes not according to our plans, but his. He doesn't shrink back from butting into our affairs—he doesn't shrink back from stepping in when we're too busy doing things our own way—he doesn't shrink back from intruding into our grief and pain when we would prefer to be left alone—he doesn't shrink back from healing us and forgiving us and correcting us and calling us to take up our crosses to follow him.

But he doesn't overwhelm us or force himself upon us either. He comes like that baby—messing up our expectations and plans and our sense of how things are supposed to be—but offering life and hope and a new beginning to all who will receive him. It doesn't happen because we're ready! And thanks be to God he comes whether we're ready or not.

I'd like to close with a poem written by Madeline L'Engle:

He did not wait until the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. He did not wait

till hearts were pure. In joy he came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh,
the maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

("First Coming," by Madeline L'Engle, in *Miracle on 10th Street*, © 1998 by Harold Shaw Publishers)

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First Presbyterian Church, Dixon
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