

A Christmas Change?

Luke 2:1-20 (NIV)

¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register. ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. ⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." ¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

When you think of Christmas, what words come to mind? You're here at church, so hopefully you're thinking of Jesus, Mary & Joseph, Bethlehem, angels, shepherds. Joy to the World! You're probably also thinking about presents, stockings, Christmas trees, Christmas lights, going to grandma and grandpa's house. Maybe you're dreaming of a white Christmas with a blanket of freshly fallen snow while you hang out around the fireplace in your new pajamas and sip hot chocolate and put on *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer* or *Elf* or *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. I'm guessing that for many of you when you thought of Christmas you thought of your Christmas traditions.

Has it been a hard year to keep up with Christmas traditions? Did you struggle today to keep this tradition and be here for this candlelight service? Did you have to hunt to find a button-down shirt or a nice red and green dress for the kiddos, then actually get them dressed? Are you wondering right now how you're going to keep them from wiggling nonstop through the rest of the service, knowing it's only halfway over and while you feel like all the eyes are turned on you, judging you as a parent? Are you dreading getting them to bed and then the inevitable early morning pouncing on you as they want to get to the presents? Are you frazzled with your to do list, that, yes, you have gotten things marked off but there are also other things that still need to be done. Are you even thinking that you should sneak out of service before the announcements so that you have those couple of extra minutes to check off a few more items?

Then there's the side of Christmas where you are facing the expectations of what you should be doing to be considered a good son or daughter, making sure that you appease your family or the in-laws. But the travel plans were expensive. You couldn't get the gifts you wanted to get for people. In fact, you are still dreading a Christmas with no gifts. On top of that, the calendar is filled with dates of picking up and dropping off. It's not a quiet or peaceful Christmas sipping hot chocolate in front of the fireplace in your pajamas watching the snow fall. Instead, it is full of hustle and bustle and grief that is sweeping you away. Are you overwhelmed with guilt for what isn't going to get done, traditions that won't be kept? Do you feel like a failure this Christmas?

If this is how you feel, you are not the only one. Mary and Joseph probably felt like broken failures when they were staying in Bethlehem. They were forced away from their home in Nazareth to placate that census from that pagan ruler Caesar Augustus. He had completely disrupted their new life together all so that they could pay him more taxes. As they most likely stayed in a cramped room with relatives in Bethlehem, they didn't have their own bedroom, probably didn't even have their own bed. Did Joseph feel like a failure for not providing a home for his pregnant wife, or at least their own guestroom? Did he feel like a failure as he looked at that manger and thought about the design for the crib he wanted to make but didn't have the money to buy the materials or the time to make it? Did Mary feel like a failure for the unsanitary conditions that her newborn son slept in? Where were the traditional comforts that they had come to expect in life?

It doesn't matter how happy and content we all look tonight; we all come with a certain amount of guilt and brokenness – much like Mary and Joseph. We sang, "O Come, All Ye Faithful," but we don't feel like the faithful, especially as we see how unfaithful we were in getting everything together, in keeping traditions. We're not enough, even though we know that we should look like we are.

If you didn't come here tonight feeling like a failure, I'm sure it wouldn't take you long to look at your life to see the unfinished tasks, the relationships that you didn't nurture, the expectations you failed to meet, the missed opportunities to do good, as well as all the things that you and I have done wrong. We all say it: "No one's perfect." We say it more as an excuse, but it's an uncomfortable truth. I'm not perfect. You're not perfect. None of us will provide the perfect Christmas traditions that we have come to expect. In this way, we feel rather broken and burdened and overwhelmed.

Is it time, then, for a Christmas tradition change? It's no easy thing to change traditions. It even seems a bit counterintuitive. You have to have a really compelling reason to change. That's why I am so glad that you are here tonight because, really, Christmas is a time of change. It's a time when God came into the world to change us. As the angels said that night to the shepherds living out in the fields nearby Bethlehem, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." (verses 10-11)

God is fulfilling his prophesied namesake: "Immanuel," which means that God is with us. He didn't come into the world in order to maintain status quo. He didn't come simply to experience what life was like as one of us. He also did not come so that he could give you a plan to follow, as if to add to your already overwhelming and impossible traditional to do list. No, he came to change you. He came to save you. Save you from what? From being a failure. From being broken. From being overwhelmed with guilt.

Jesus came into the world to take our place and do what we could never do. He was, in fact, the perfect child. He did this because we are not. This child, one who is both God and Man, would continue to be perfect, grow up as the perfect man. Later, he would give his perfect life in exchange for our failures. This child took on all the ways that we are broken, burdened, overwhelmed. He paid the price for us, for our failures, removed them from our account, our record. It's as if none of our failures ever happened.

Christ took off of us all the things that weigh us down as a failure and instead repaired us. Even better than that, he made us new. He made us pristine by covering us with his perfection. He didn't come to give you a new to do list, that if you now do what Jesus did, then he will fix you. He has already fixed you by coming into the world and perfectly doing what he has done for. The to do list of perfection was accomplished by Christ. He credits his work to you. You are now made perfect, whole. God has changed us because of Christ. This is our Christmas miracle done for every single one of us. This is the good news that causes great joy for all the people. This is what a Savior does, the Savior born in Bethlehem!

This is the traditional and unchanging message that we get to hear every Christmas. Since the Savior has come, you have been made perfect before God. You are complete. You are free to love and serve. This makes you want to respond like the shepherds who couldn't keep this message to themselves. "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." (verses 17-18)

Who do you know who needs a change this Christmas? Who is overwhelmed with their Christmas traditions, their endless to do lists? Who do you know is burdened thinking that they're never good enough? Who feels like a failure? Knowing that God has already changed you and made you perfect and loved with his unconditional love, who else needs to be changed by God this Christmas? Who else needs this completeness and perfection that you have from the Savior born in Bethlehem?

God has come into our world, and this changes us. He came not to give us a to do list, but to show us that he did it all for us in our place. He has saved us from being a failure, from being overwhelmed by the guilt of failed expectations and what we have not done. He repaired us, changed us so that we are perfect, loved, complete. This is what we get to celebrate year after year on Christmas. Go out and share this good news of how the Savior born in Bethlehem changes you and all people. Amen!