



SERMONS THAT WORK

1 Christmas

The Season

[RCL] Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 147 or 147:13-21; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18

“Tis the season to be jolly!” we sing at parties and at church events.

Then, on Christmas, we read: *“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”*

It is a message to Christians in every age, from the very beginning until now.

It is also a message to those who dwell in winter in the northern hemisphere each year at Christmas.

Wherever in the world that Christmas falls on us, whether at the darkest or the brightest season of the year, we have either *been* in or *are* in deep darkness, as the world continues to turn. Darkness always finds us, as does Christmas, a season of light.

For those in the northern hemisphere who find ourselves in winter, it is, perhaps, one of the times of year that we feel our bodies the most. We shiver in the cold. Our hands feel like ice when we come inside. The darkness outside often manages to make its way in, weighing down our bones and making us feel like going to bed at 6 p.m. Stack on top of that the lifetime of grief that we all experience, and this time of year can be one of the most difficult for many of us. We miss loved ones that we have lost, we miss times gone by, and even as children, we dread the day when this joyful season will pass us by, and we will be left with the dark days of the remainder of January.

“Tis the season to be jolly”?

Christmas is also a time of high expectation. We expect our trees perfectly trimmed, gifts wrapped in beautiful paper, and lights hung just so. We expect our family members to all get along, for the food to be perfect, for the snow to fall just enough to be pretty but not enough to cancel our travel plans.

If you, dear Christian, are much older than four years old, you know by now that Christmas never works out perfectly. You don't always get what you want — in gifts or in seasonal perfection.

And maybe Christmas night didn't work out perfectly.

Maybe the turkey or the pies got burned. Maybe you didn't get what you wanted under the tree. Maybe Uncle Sam brought up something offensively political at the dinner table. Something might have even caught on fire. Our perfect holidays are never... quite... perfect.

Christmas is the season when we find our Savior wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a feeding trough, in a stable.

If it is not a perfect holiday for you, just keep in mind that the first Christmas was far from perfect. The reality of that night long ago was quite likely far from the story that the Christmas carols tell us, of a silent, serene night with angels singing. Were there angels singing, according to the Scriptures? Yes. Was the night serene? Maybe.

There was also animal dung. That didn't make it into the songs.

There was scratchy hay and two exhausted parents who had traveled a long way, including a mother who had just given birth *after* a long trip. There were shepherds who had likely spent many days in a row working. There was dirt and blood and hay.

And yet. In the midst of that holy mess, there was a Savior. The God of heaven took on human form – not as a prince born in a palace of privilege – but as the son of a poor carpenter and his young fiancé in an occupied land. He was born not in Jerusalem, the holy city, but in Bethlehem, a small village whose name means “house of bread.”

So, if your Christmas is not perfect — if it is *far* from perfect — remember that the first Christmas was quite a literal mess, too, and God was there. If God was in that stable, and we believe God was, then surely, God is with you in your mess, too.

If you are missing someone that you have lost, if your family is full of conflict or not present at all, or if the turkey burns or the lights go out, or if seasonal depression just has you down more than usual this year, you are not alone. If your Christmas feels like an absolute disaster, remember that Mary probably thought the birth of her first child was quite an exhausting ordeal, too.

You are not the first to have a difficult Christmas, if that is what you are having, and you are not the only one here who is enduring one. You are not alone.

It is in the midst of disaster that the Savior appeared and is appearing. The message of Christmas is simple: *“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”*

Here is what those who are most responsible for “making Christmas happen,” and for making it perfect, if we’ve been doing it for long enough, know: even if everything goes wrong, went wrong, is going wrong, Christ is born among us, still.

Ever since the Church settled on celebrating the birth of Christ in December, there hasn’t been one Christmas where the baby Jesus didn’t appear, where we all decided collectively that it just wasn’t going to happen this year. Not even in 2020. It was still Christmas. And here in 2021, it is still Christmas, again.

Through every dark time, every war, every horror that humanity could imagine, it’s always still been Christmas. The Twelve Days have found us, every year. Christ has always been born among us. A Savior has been born, even in the midst of a mess — *especially* in the midst of a mess.

God was born in a barn and laid in a feeding trough. It wasn’t clean or shiny or neat or serene or probably really all that joyful at the time. But still, a Savior was born among us. Still, God is with us.

Christmas has come to us again. Love and light have come to us, have shined on us, again. And the darkness will not overcome it.

“Tis the season to be jolly,” indeed.

“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

Today, family of God, regardless of anything that we do or have done or will do or will experience, Christ is born among us again. And that is all the perfection, or jolliness, or light that we could ever need. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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