

These Holy Days: *Giving Up On Perfect*

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Dec. 5, 2021 - Week 2

How would you describe the “perfect” Christmas, what does it look like to you? Is it a Victorian Christmas or sorta Norman Rockwell? Are there certain decorations and certain foods? Christmas dinner or Christmas brunch? Is it opening gifts on Christmas Eve or actually waiting until Christmas morning? Always controversial, I know.

In our house my sister would always try to create new traditions each year, which sorta became a tradition in itself, though most of the time the new ideas didn’t turn into annual traditions.

The one I always loathed though was when someone says: everyone needs to watch while one person opens one gift and we rotate. That takes forever! Why not a big pile of gifts, presorted, so we can all dig into our own piles at the same time?

I know, I know. Not very Christmasy. Someone has to be the gift distributor, someone has to give the commentary, someone has to run the video camera, we all need to hear your thank you, and surely someone falls asleep waiting. So for me and probably for everyone, Christmas ends up being a mix of perfect dreams and imperfect realities.

What circumstances will you face this year that may challenge your ability to celebrate Christmas fully? Maybe it’s that you have different expectations for Christmas than your family.

Consider the ideal Christmas. Everyone in your family goes to a cabin in Colorado for a week in the snow to try out the new SUV you bought and it’s paid for. That would be a good Christmas.

But really how much money, time, and energy goes into chasing this unattainable ideal set for us by Norman Rockwell? Was Christmas invented to make us feel disappointed and lacking? No, and truly the first Christmas would have probably depressed us. To consider it, it makes us feel like we're lacking in nothing. As you know, the first Christmas was pretty messy affair in which God showed up to bring us a message of hope. Christmas was never about perfection.

I like that God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus, when she didn't feel ready and says what any of us would have said. Basically, "*How can you do this God, it's impossible given my circumstances?*" Mary said to the angel, "**How can this be...?**"

Is Christmas this year impossible given our circumstances? No, not at all. Consider Mary's circumstances that first Christmas. She was a descendant of the House of David, which in Roman times would have been like saying you're from the line of a defeated people. An unexpected people. It's like saying your family once owned the land grant of California from Mexico, but now you live in an apartment. Israel was occupied territory. And Nazareth, where Jesus is from, was an agrarian town, not a place of political power. It's not the place a king would come from.

So Jesus comes to a people who had lost their land, into a family line that had lost its power, and into a town of farmers, not kings. But like God does so often, God likes to show His grace to unexpected people in unexpected times. That hope arrives at Christmas.

Where can your "**How can this be?**" uniquely equip you to be the answer to someone else's prayer? Think about it... God overcomes struggles. God's grace evident through you might be what someone else needs this Christmas.

You know one of the highest callings in life is to be a champion of God. A unique phrase. It's to take God at God's Word, even in our struggles, and to be a champion of God who promises to be with us in the struggles. To champion God and tell of God's love and grace. Your circumstances can allow you to champion God to others who may be struggling.

There are always going to be some years when we don't feel very Christmasy, when we want to avoid parties or family. Our struggles can be a bit overwhelming in those times and I've found that what happens to me is if I get depressed I start losing touch of God with me in those moments. Oh, God doesn't leave me, but I don't see where God is in my problems.

How can we still be a champions of God, when the truth is, He never leaves us during difficult times?

I love the book by Max Lucado, *Grace: More Than We Expect, Greater than We Imagine*. In it he writes, “[God] dispenses his goodness not with an eyedropper but a fire hydrant. Your heart is a Dixie cup, and his grace is the Mediterranean Sea. You simply can't contain it all. So let it bubble over. Spill out. Pour fourth. ‘Freely you have received, freely give.’” (Matt. 10:8).

Let it bubble over, pour fourth. Consider what Mary would have thought, if she heard of God's grace during her situation, her time of weakness. “How can this be God?” “How can you do something good through me? Do you know me? Do you know my family?” But she believed God and became a messenger of hope.

How can we, like Mary, be a messenger of hope in these difficult times, even as we give up on perfect as the requirement for our involvement? How has God shown up for you in difficult times in the past so now you can share God's grace with others in this difficult time?

Even in the midst of the unexpected, the messy, and the painful things, we can still fully expect God's goodness to show up. This is truly what Christmas is about.

Think of all the prophecies that have come true from the Old Testament to the New Testament, all the people God has been faithful to in the Bible, they are part of our story. By faith the people of God in the Bible are examples of God's faithfulness, not only to them, but to us.

When life gets messy, *God is with us.*
When life isn't perfect, *God is with us.*

I don't know why life isn't just perfect, because God can do that, but I know that so often God does something better than make those moments perfect. God makes us perfect.

The word in theological terms is sanctification. God is making us perfect, so that we can enjoy full life, eternal life, with God. That's why Jesus was born into an imperfect world at a difficult time for his family and his people. In Jesus, God showed up in a big way.

At Christmas we're reminded that God is in the world today and in us. In our attempts to create the perfect Christmas, let's remember that Christmas, every Christmas, even the first Christmas, is a reminder that amidst the uncertainties of life, God shows up to bring peace and wholeness.

The Christmas story, the Bethlehem story, is a reminder that God is always with us. God never intended for us to handle life's hardships alone, so share that hope with others this Christmas. How has God uniquely gifted you to share this hope with others in difficult times?

I'd like to close with prayer.

Lord, we confess to you that our visions of a “perfect” holiday often have little to do with truly walking in the way of Your Son, Jesus.

Help us remember that the first Christmas was not the neat, tidy event pictured in our nativity scenes.

Just as the first Christmas was messy and uncertain, give us eyes to see your grace and presence in the midst of our own messy and uncertain lives.

Heal our deafness and empower us to hear the cries of the poor and suffering in our midst.

This Christmas, show us how to speak and act grace into every situation in our world, so that the hope born at the first Christmas may live on through us. We pray these things in the name of your incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, who with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, forever and ever.

Amen.