
Unprepared for Christmas

Well, here we are in church on Christmas eve. Gathered together to hear once again this most precious story, about a most precious baby, whose birth and life—and later, whose death and resurrection—reveal to us the preciousness of all life.

That we are here in church on Christmas Eve—stopping to hear the story, to sing favourite carols, and to share in the wonder of this night with friends and family, loved ones, neighbours, and strangers—that we are able to do this might suggest that we are more or less prepared for Christmas. We are not running around trying to achieve last minute tasks, checking a few more items off of our seasonal to do lists. We have chosen to come and rest a while.

Am I right in my assumption, that you are ready for Christmas? Put up your hand if you feel you are ready for Christmas. All right, now put up your hand if you are not ready.

All right: you, you who are *not* ready, you are my people! We're not ready, but we're still here.

Part of the reason I don't feel ready this year is that my spouse and I moved house just last week. Yes, some of you are aware that moving house in the middle of December is not the most

sensible plan for a member of the clergy! But this is just the way it worked out, and we are very happy in our new home.

The result is that many things in my life feel only half-done and unfinished right now, including this sermon! No: I can assure you that this sermon does have an ending, and it will come soon. But this year I just have to accept that there is no way that everything will be ready in our house for Christmas.

We will have Christmas, with a tree and a few presents, and family gathered around the table for turkey and all the trimmings; well, most of the trimmings. It will probably be a simpler dinner, and the dining room walls won't have any pictures hung on them yet.

Yet, I think it is the very incompleteness of our Christmas preparations that will help us to discover, to recover, the true meaning of Christmas. Let me explain.

I've been a minister for just about ten years now, and every year at this time a big part of my life, and my time, and my energy, goes into preparing services like this one. Every year I've put hours and hours of work into this, and hours of worry, hoping

that we are able to craft a worship experience that is a gift to you, that enables you to have a magical, wonderful, experience when you come to church on Christmas Eve.

And every year, when the services are over, I've always felt a little disappointed in how things went. The services have never lived up to my imagined ideal of how they should be. Each year I have resolved to try to make next year's services better, closer to this ideal, perfect Christmas service that lives somewhere in my mind.

What this year is teaching me is that I have been going about it all wrong.

This year of incompleteness, of unpreparedness, of imperfection is teaching me that Christmas isn't about my efforts as a minister, a worship leader, or a preacher. The Christmas story isn't measurably improved by my particular choice of carols or prayers. These things aren't going to make or break your Christmas worship experience.

It's the story—the story that we've read tonight, a story that has been told and retold for two thousand years, by countless millions of people—it's this story, it's what happened on that first Christmas night: that is what Christmas is all about, not all our efforts to embellish it with all the trimmings.

I realize that not many of you are ministers, but I'd wager that this is your story, too. Those of you who try to think of the perfect gift to ask Santa for;

those of you who strive to make your Christmas decorating look like what you saw in a decorating magazine, or your holiday table look just like the picture in the recipe book; those of you who simply long for a family gathering free from dysfunction and pain. But maybe Christmas isn't meant to be perfect after all.

The story is full of imperfection, inconvenience, unpreparedness. The uncomfortable trek far from home for a very pregnant Mary; the sudden need to give birth in a stable, amongst the animals, because there was no place for them; shepherds in the fields, working their ordinary night shift when they were surprised by a burst of angel song.

None of these people were prepared for Christmas; none of them were ready. They hadn't sent off all their cards, done all their shopping; none of them had cooked a perfect turkey. Christmas came to them anyway.

Christmas came to those who were unprepared, half-ready; to those uncomfortably managing heavy burdens; to those who were poor, and those left out in the cold. Christmas came especially to them. Christmas came anyway because Christmas isn't about our efforts. It's about God's love for us.

If we were able to make a perfect Christmas on our own, we wouldn't need God. If we were able to make a perfect world, or if we were able to

make perfect families, we wouldn't need God.

Christmas is God coming to us, whether we are ready or not. God's not waiting on us to get it right, to get everything just perfect before he shows up. God comes to us as we are. Whatever the state of our homes, or hearts, or tables, or trees. Whatever our lives are like, or our families are like.

God comes to us in our need, to pour love into our lives, to help us to see that really, that gift, the simple gift of love is the most precious and most important thing in all the world.

Perhaps it is a gift we are most able to receive when we haven't got everything perfectly in order, if only we will stop, and rest awhile, and listen for the song of the angels to waft its way into our lives. So, whatever your state of preparedness this year, whether you are ready or not, I pray that you'll receive God's gift of love this Christmas. Amen.

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