**December 25, 2022 Luke 2:1-20**

 ***The Perfect Christmas***

**Scripture:** *Luke 2:1-20 NRSV*

*(1)In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. (2)This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. (3)All went to their own towns to be registered. (4)Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. (5)He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. (6)While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. (7)And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (8)In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. (9)Then an angel of the Lord stood before 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; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: (11)to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. (12)This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." (13)And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, (14)"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" (15)When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." (16)So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. (17)When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; (18)and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. (19)But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. (20)The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

**Notes:**

1. How to have the ***perfect*** Christmas.
	1. We all have our ***expectations*** of this holiday season.
	2. Fantasy of a perfect Christmas, leads many to ***disappointment***.
2. The original Christmas was far from ***perfect***.
	1. Once Jesus is born, surely Mary realized her desire for ***sleep***.
	2. Slumber is interrupted by the arrival of ***Shepherds***.
	3. ***Falling*** to their knees they ask to see the child.
	4. As quickly as they arrive, they are on their way, singing songs of ***praise*** and ***worship*** to this newborn king.
3. This first Christmas in the barn is very ***real***.
	1. This small barn becomes large enough to encompass the ***world***;
	2. There’s room at the manger all of us, as ***imperfect*** as we are.
4. We ***dream*** and ***strive*** for the perfect Christmas.
	1. We ***imagine*** we can attain this dream.
	2. We try to live up to the ***standard*** found in hallmark movies.
	3. We strive to live up to our own ***imaginations***, and we end up deeply ***disappointed***.
5. The gospel comes to us, as an ***awkward*** ***surprise***.
	1. God in the person of Jesus Christ ***accepts*** each of us.
	2. Jesus relates to our little ***imperfect*** selves.
	3. God knows our ***shortcomings***, and the good news is that he ***loves*** us as we are.
6. What we need to do is so very ***simple***:
	1. accept the ***freedom*** of the real Christmas.
	2. We are all ***sinners*** ***saved*** by the ***grace*** of a child, born in a stable and sleeping in a trough.
	3. Let us ***rejoice*** with the angels, ***come*** to the manger, and ***worship*** Jesus.

**Script:**

Crossing the mind of nearly every person on this day, is how to have the perfect Christmas. The fantasy we often look to is the proverbial cabin in the woods, with a fire in the fireplace and a warm cozy feeling about the house, and if you look out the window there is snow gently falling on the snow-covered ground. For many the perfect Christmas will find family gathered together; it consists of parents, their children, their grandchildren, their parents and siblings along with spouses and children as well. Occasionally an in-law or friend is included. The table is spread from end to end with a decadent feast turkey, ham, mashed potatoes, candied yams, green bean casserole, corn, stuffing, gravy, fresh baked rolls, noodles, deviled eggs as well as pickled eggs, and if you are at the Crawford household some of Lisa’s coveted cauliflower/broccoli salad. It makes my mouth water just thinking about it. And then there are the events of the day, kids running around as they play with their newest and favoritist gifts. After dinner we exchange any gifts that remain to be given and the rest of the evening is spent talking, laughing, and playing games. Despite so many being gathered in such close proximity, there are no simmering hostilities boiling to the surface; no grudges revived, no harsh words are spoken or even muttered. Smiles cover every face, laughter fills the air, and conversations reminisce of celebrated memories and exciting new stories.

We all have our own expectations of this holiday season and many have similar expectations as I. But there is a problem with this wonderful fantasy. Christmas rarely happens this way. I remember some Christmas days when freezing rain was falling outside, while others were sunny and bright. I remember some Christmas’s when a beloved family member was missing due to work, due to the extreme distance they would need to travel, and other’s due to their passing. Occasionally there is somebody there who rubs us the wrong way, no matter what they do it provokes anger in your heart. And as we look around the room there are no perfect smiles, no perfect bodies; we are all flawed in some way. Then there are the family arguments, brothers who do not speak to each other adding tension into the air, resentment between sisters because one received more presents. Or maybe there is the relative who had a little too much to drink and is stumbling every place they go.

Of course, these things do not happen every year, but in the back of our mind, we are quietly waiting for the levy to break and the rushing emotions to overtake the room and turn the blessed event into utter turmoil and chaos. Add to this the amount of effort, planning and organization, not to mention the preparation in advance and the cleanup that follows. Our fantasy of Christmas; our pursuit of the perfect Christmas, leads many to frustration and disappointment. When all is said and done; the leftovers distributed and stored; the tree is taken down and decorations put away; the trash is at the curbside; we may find ourselves wondering whether Christmas is for us. Perhaps Christmas is for the perfect people, those who live in the perfect subdivision, the perfect house, with the perfect family. When the fantasy and disappointment of the perfect Christmas fills our heads, do yourself a favor and go back to the very first Christmas. We can look at the original Christmas and recognize that it wasn’t perfect, in fact it was far from perfect. Turn with me to Luke 2 verses 1-20 and stand with me as we share in the reading of Christ’s birth.

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Forced by the government’s bureaucracy, Joseph loads his pregnant wife on donkey, and proceeds to Bethlehem, all for the sake of registering for the census. When they arrive, Mary is ready to give birth to this child she carries in her womb. There is not a relative living in town with a spare room to offer this couple. There are no motels or hotels in this village of maybe 600 people. So, they find lodging in a stable, most likely the area in a home used for housing the domesticated animals, their sheep and goats, for the family. When the time does come for the birth of her child, scripture doesn’t say this but there is a pretty good chance some local women came to help bring this child into the world. And when it is all done, they get a chuckle at this beautiful little baby boy, covered with strips of cloth strips intended to wrap the Passover Lambs when they were born, to protect them from blemish.

In the meantime, Joseph is trying to get his wits about him. It has been months since finding out about this unexpected and in some ways very disturbing pregnancy, a pregnancy that could have ended the relationship between Mary and himself. I am certain these past few months have not been easy for Joseph or for Mary as people assume the worst and whispers follow them throughout their hometown of Nazareth. And let us not forget the dream in which an angel of the Lord encourages Joseph to accept Mary and her child as his own. But now they are in Bethlehem, and perhaps some of the whispers have followed them, but few know of the circumstances of this young family. And now there is this sleepless night in a barn.

It wasn’t perfect for Mary either. The discomfort of being pregnant; the uneasiness of travel giving way to labor pains. Once the baby was delivered, I am sure Mary realized her exhaustion and desire for sleep. But this sleep is not to last long if it is received at all. The slumber is interrupted by the arrival of Shepherds from the countryside. These ruffians enter into the stable with their caps in their dirty hands, They share fantastical stories of angels illuminating the sky and telling them of this child born in a stable, lying in a manger, wrapped in the bands of cloth set aside for the Passover lambs. Such a wild story would be very hard to believe, except for the fact that they too had a supernatural encounter with angels themselves. Falling to their knees they ask to see the child. They faun over this little one, destined to be king of all, and lord of our lives. Then as quickly as they arrive, they are on their way, singing songs of praise and worship to this newborn king. Their hearts overflowing with heavens joy.

We can sugar coat this story as much as we would like but this first Christmas in the barn is far from perfect. The circle around the manger is made up of imperfect people in an imperfect world. They each had their fair share of problems. But this Christmas in the barn is real. The baby is born, wet upon the blankets. Hard living shepherds hurried to meet him. This small shelter becomes large enough to encompass the world; a world of imperfect people like you and me. Scripture makes it clear that there is room at the manger for each of us, as imperfect as we are.

We dream and strive for the perfect Christmas, but this is something we attempt on our own. We sometimes strive to attain this fantasy in our strength and power. We think if we bake the perfect turkey, roast the ham just the right amount of time; if we make the perfect cookies, give more presents, smile that big cheeky grin,

We believe we can attain this dream or so we imagine. But we become frustrated time and time again; we try to live up to the standard found in hallmark movies where everything always ends with a happily ever after Where the girl gets the boy of her dreams And the boy always comes out looking like a hero Where Santa Claus comes through and gets the gifts all delivered in a nick of time

We strive to live up to our own imaginations, and we end up deeply disappointed, because we do not always receive the desires of our hearts; we do not always find our checking account with a surplus of funds; we do not always get to eat festive meals; we cannot always find a miracle cure for the disease or ailment that is robbing us of the precious time we have with a loved one; and we do not have the power to bring back the Christmases of our past, where everything seemed so innocent and pure, where our gifts were always perfect

The gospel comes to us, as an awkward surprise, the Christmas gift we did not foresee. God in the person of Jesus Christ accepts each of us as incomplete and imperfect as we are. He came to us in the most unimaginable way as imperfect as it was; with all of the disruptions of a baby born in a stable and put to bed in an animal trough. Jesus relates to our little imperfect selves by becoming smaller, less powerful, and more dependent than any of us who are old enough to walk and talk. God knows our shortcomings, and the good news is that he loves us as we are. God does not require us to be perfect; He only asks that we become real, as real as the events in that Bethlehem stable, as real as divine love.

What we need to do is so very simple: put down the burden of a perfect Christmas and accept the freedom of the real Christmas. Gather around the manger in awe and wonder, with people who have problems, like Joseph and Mary, with hard-living people like the Bethlehem shepherds; imperfect people like you and me finding a common bond and a surprising acceptance. We are all sinners saved by the grace of a child, born in a stable and sleeping in a feeding trough.

Today, on this Christmas Day; let us rejoice with the angels who sang the Lord’s praises on that first Christmas eve; let us come to the manger where the Christ Child lies; let us worship Him, The King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Prince of Peace.