

“Don’t miss Christmas again”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 2:1-5 and Matthew 24:36-44

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Every year, Jenna and I have such hopes for Christmas. Even more so, now that we have Emerson. We plan to deck the house in colorful lights, hang garland and ribbon, send out Christmas cards personalized for each friend and neighbor, cook family meals over which we laugh and share stories, go to all the parties and special events, and worship more deeply.

We remember how it felt when we were children—the excitement ready to explode, the joy at all the colors and presents, the unwavering faith (no, certainty!) that God was here in this babe called Jesus. Do you remember? Do you remember how everything sparkled, all was magic and exhilaration... and love?

That’s the dream.

Now here’s our reality: meager decorations that go up way too late, bunches of tangled lights that end up thrown on the ground with me screaming “I swear by God I will cut you!”, Emerson tearing down the garland and eating it (true story), us waiting in the drive-through line at McDonalds for an hour, stress (so much stress) about money and work, everybody’s sick, no more family outings because we’ve died inside, and our prayers to God, far from communing with the divine, are pleas for sleep and survival. Oh and no Christmas cards get sent, and the ones we receive get put into the pile of unopened Christmas cards from last year.

This happens every year (with some variations of course pre-Emerson), and yet somehow we keep expecting it to be different this year. But it’s not going to be different. Because we’re not children anymore; now we’re the ones who are supposed to create that perfect Christmas for others. And the two key ingredients in this mayhem—us and life—aren’t going to change.

For a lot of us, the meaning of Christmas gets lost in the flurry of parties, shopping, and chores; grief and loneliness become sharper. And each year, when it’s all said and done, we think once again we’ve missed Christmas.

I’ll let you in on a little secret, though. There has never been a perfect Christmas. Commercials, stores, movies, even Pinterest, try to sell us on the idea of a perfect Christmas because it breeds dissatisfaction, and there’s a lot of money to be made in dissatisfaction. The Bible tells a different story. If any Christmas was going to be perfect, it surely would have been that very first one—when Jesus was born.

The actual Christmas story, however, didn’t go as planned. Don’t you think there was a moment when Mary and Joseph looked around and thought: it’s all wrong? An unwed teenage pregnancy, the risk of ostracism from her community, Joseph finding out that his fiancée was pregnant with

another's child, a census uprooting people from home and work to fulfill the wishes of an oppressive empire, the Son of God born in a stinky barn, surrounded by animals and strangers, no midwife, no soothing bath, no family, no decorations, no money for presents—only to have to flee their own country as refugees under Herod's threat of violence.

Maybe our Christmas mayhem isn't so far off, after all.

I have this book titled *Loving My Actual Christmas* by Alexandra Kuykendall. I don't know where it came from. It has your name on it, Audrey. I don't know if you gave it to me, or if I stole it, or how it came to be in my possession. But in it, Alexandra asks: What would happen if we started loving our actual Christmas—not our vision of how Christmas should be, but our reality of how Christmas is? It's busy, and exhausting, and sometimes painful, because life's all those things, and life doesn't take a break just because it's a holiday. What if we accepted that Christmas will be hectic, and rather than trying to make it something that it's not, instead devoted our energy to being mindful of the little gifts that take place throughout the season: a hug, a meal shared, a quiet moment, a song that lifts our soul? What if we loved it just as it is?

Today, in the Gospel of Matthew, a grown Jesus tells us we are not in control. We don't have the power to make life perfect. We certainly aren't in charge of the time or manner of God's arrival—no more than Mary or Joseph were. We can't possibly predict when or how God is going to come into our lives this season. So maybe the first thing we do—if we really want that Christmas spirit again—is let go of our expectations.

Nothing went as planned on that first Christmas night. And thank God! Because into all of that unexpected mess came an even more unexpected joy, the greatest love of Mary and Joseph's life—and of ours too. Angels sang, shepherds adored, strangers rallied to their aid, animals provided warmth, and among them a baby was born. A baby meant to save the world, to teach it love, to show it forgiveness, to be a light—not for the perfect, but precisely for the imperfect, for the messy and the hurting.

Christ will show up—Jesus promises it. It is a guarantee. The Spirit of Christmas will come to you. Your name will be spoken. Your hope will be answered. Your life will be made to shine. God will sing to you this season, in a word of Scripture or a song or a person you meet. You don't have to plan it, or make it, or stress over it. But you do have to be ready. You do have to be paying attention, or you'll miss it.

We haven't been missing out on Christmas all these years because it's so crazy and hectic. We've been missing out because we've been allowing our false expectations, our frenzy, our disappointments, to distract us from the grace that was right in front of us all along.

Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Matthew that when God comes, many people won't even notice. That's hard, at first, to imagine. I mean, it's God. But all it takes is looking in the wrong places.

Jesus says: keep watch, pay attention. Our role isn't to make Christmas. God does that. Christmas is a gift, just like Jesus Christ himself, just like God's love, just like those presents under the tree. Our role is to notice when Christmas arrives. It might arrive at the soup kitchen,

or here in worship, or late at night hunched over a book, or even in a house full of screaming children. Every person we meet, every moment of every day, there's a chance that might be it—the moment when Christ enters our life. But if we're too angry, or too tired, or too cynical, or too consumed with our own plans and expectations, we won't notice. We'll be like all the other people on the night when Jesus was born, who walked right past that barn, having no idea that everything they ever desired was right there.

I think this intentionality requires saying yes more—saying yes to every opportunity to love each other better and love God better. More volunteering. More worship. More prayer. More vulnerable conversations. More meals together. More noticing of the people around us.

I think it also means saying no more—saying no to some things that just aren't going to deepen our human or divine relationships. Saying no to some of those parties you don't want to go to anyway. Maybe only the essential decorations go up this year. Maybe you don't send Christmas cards. Maybe there are fewer presents, and more time together. Maybe you say no to that extra project at work.

I think it means taking time to create mental space to notice God. We read the Christmas story and Scripture every day, or every week. We build open spaces into our schedules. We pause in between obligations—even if it's just five minutes hidden away in the bathroom. We plan unplanned days—days without any agenda except being together. We take time to sleep and dream. Every night, we review our day and name what we're grateful for in prayer.

This month, Jesus is going to walk into your life. Christmas will happen. I just hope we don't miss it. **Amen.**