

Troubles at Christmas

Here we are at last. It's Christmas Eve. For the past several weeks we've been putting up the tree, hanging the lights, shopping for what we hope is a gift that he or she will like, trying to find the toy that every child has been told that they want – and every store seems sold out of. There are all of the decisions about Christmas cards: Do I send a religious card to someone that's a business acquaintance? Should I send one to the Finklesteins? Did we get one from the Jones last year? Did I get everything on the list? Did I remember to put everything on the list? There was the year that I started to fix Christmas dinner and realized I didn't have a browning bag for the turkey – or the year that I forgot to get butter.

The snow last weekend was pretty, but that may have been when you had planned to go to Hanes Mall to get some things you can't find in Thomasville. You may be trying to add up in your head just how much was added to the credit card balance – or perhaps you're trying not to think about it. Perhaps your Christmas season included a nasty head cold, an unplanned doctor visit, or a dead battery in the mall parking lot. It's hard to squeeze all of the rest of life in with the stuff that makes up the Christmas season. Cathy and I find ourselves surprised by family birthdays and even our own anniversary during December.

But here we are at last. We come to a screeching halt, change clothes, and come to Christmas Eve worship with great expectations. For this moment in time we turn to familiar scripture. We can almost say it by heart. The wonderful familiar words calm us and we take a deep breath and sigh. This time seems a bit magical. It's like the membrane between heaven and earth is so thin that you can almost see through it. Up until tonight, it was a time before Jesus came. Tomorrow will be time after he has come. But tonight we wait for a baby's cry. Our hearts are expectant and waiting. We wait for other things as well – to find out what is in the big box with the red bow, to wake up with all of the beds in the house full one more time, to hold the youngest child in the family. This is also a time of sad memories for many of us. There's an empty chair at the table or an empty crib.

At Christmas we remember the Christmases of years past. Many of us have good warm memories of family feasts; the smell of peppermint, watching Dad put together the train set that was supposedly a gift for us. But for some, Christmas is a time to look through the window at someone else's Christmas, the kind we never had. You can't go home for Christmas if there's no home to go to. For some of us, Christmas was never like the Currier and Ives print or the Norman Rockwell painting. We have built such huge expectations about Christmas: The house will look great, the tree will smell wonderful, the family will all come, there won't be any bickering, the turkey will be golden brown on the outside and moist on the inside, and we will still be joyous and laughing at the end of the day. And when all of that doesn't come to pass, we feel a bit cheated, a little depressed, and sometimes we wonder if maybe Scrooge wasn't right after all - maybe Christmas is a humbug. More often than not, life is more messy than perfect.

Through the years, we've saddled Christmas with a tremendous load. There has only been one perfect Christmas. Now, this evening, while the membrane between heaven and earth is especially thin, let's try to get a clearer picture of the original Christmas, the perfect Christmas. We're told that Joseph has to go back to his ancestral village to satisfy some governmental regulations. It's an inconvenient time, but you know how uncaring regulations can be. The Christmas cards always show Mary on a donkey, but the donkey is supposition or wishful thinking on our part. It may be that Mary had to walk the whole way, swollen belly before her, swollen ankles below her, aching back behind her, as she did the late trimester waddle mile after mile. The accommodations were rudimentary. They were in out of the weather and had a bit of privacy - if you didn't count the constant brown-eyed stare of the cow or the chickens poking around under foot. There's no mention of a midwife to help this young girl through the hard work of her first childbirth. Certainly her mother wasn't there, or an older sister or aunt or some other woman from her family. Joseph was there, but men can be pretty useless at a time like this. Maybe a kinswoman of Joseph was there, a relative, but still, a stranger.

The labor pains began. The pain increased. This is uncharted territory for Mary. How much pain will there be? How long will this take? She's been told that the baby is special and will live - but

will she survive childbirth? Women die doing this! Finally, exhausted, she delivers the child. It's a messy process. Painters in centuries to come will never portray him as a red and wrinkled newborn. Finally, after cleaning this baby boy child and wrapping him in strips of cloth, she lays him in the feed trough. It's no cradle. Just one more indignity in a consistently below par experience. You know, when an angel tells you that you're pregnant, you might expect the experience to be a little more heavenly than this.

Meanwhile, out in the countryside, some shepherds are tending their flock. We've romanticized the shepherds. It was the job you got when you drew the short straw. It's a lonely, demanding, smelly, job. Everybody else is inside, you're out in the weather. You don't have ready access to facilities for ritual cleanliness. The sheep smell, and before long, you do, too.

Suddenly, the heavens open, and you see and hear this startling news, wonderful news of the birth of a savior. If only one shepherd had witnessed all of this, he'd probably chalk it all up to bad mushrooms in the stew, but they all saw and heard the same thing, so off they went into town, looking for a baby lying in a feed trough.

It's a little difficult to picture much joy on Mary's part when they show up. After all that she's been through, it hardly seems like the best time to receive visitors, especially when they're strangers, uninvited, even lower on the social pecking order than you are, and they take the odor in the stable up a couple of notches. I mean, if a priest had come from Jerusalem to worship the newborn Messiah it would be inconvenient, but it would be a high honor. But, shepherds? And then the shepherds tell their story. Well, that puts the icing on the cake. Mary gets the pain and the mess and the exhaustion - and the shepherds get an angel messenger and the celestial choir. Someone else heard the Christmas concert while Mary labored away in childbirth.

And there you have it. The original Christmas. The perfect Christmas. How is your Christmas stacking up against this perfection? At this point, you may have lost your Currier and Ives vision of Christmas. But where, then, is the perfection? Life is messy. Life was messy and hard and scary for Mary and Joseph. Life is messy and scuffed and difficult for us sometimes, too. But I assure you, Mary and Joseph had a perfect Christmas. So do we, if we but recognize it. The point of Christmas isn't about a heavenly glow on pious faces hovering over a clean baby with a halo. The perfection in Christmas is that in the middle of all of life's troubles and disappointments, Emmanuel arrived. Emmanuel. God with us. In the middle of government regulations, harsh travel conditions, substandard living accommodations, poverty, filth, and unknown dangers, God came to live among us. God said, "I'm going to show you that I care, that I love you, that I'm beside you in the midst of all of life's pain and troubles. I'm putting a face on my presence so that you'll understand. You are not alone. I am here with you and for you." That's the message of Christmas. That's all you need to have a perfect Christmas in Bethlehem or in Thomasville. Merry Christmas! Amen.