

The Day Everything Was Just Right
Luke 2:1-12

Do you have a Christmas horror story to tell? Most all of us do, but I also suspect that most accidents and such of Christmas aren't really all that bad; it's just that they are magnified by the hopes and anticipations of the season. A burned roast is nothing in the scheme of things. A burned roast on Christmas, when the in-laws are visiting, is a very big thing.

The tears of a disappointed child are minor. Tears of a disappointed child on Christmas are not minor. And so I recall some Christmas disasters from my childhood. The time when I was five and the forty or fifty foot high tree came crashing down, and broken ornaments were everywhere. I was scared. Now, older siblings remind me that the tree was only eight feet high, for it reached not quite to the ceiling, and at the most one or two ornaments were broken. But in my mind, a disaster of titanic proportions.

But Christmas can bring its fair share of dread. Tensions run high. High expectations can defeat us before we even begin. And reality is still reality. I rather enjoy that Christmas song, *It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas*. It begins so eloquently of a just-right Christmas: silver lanes aglow, toys in every store, and the holly on your own front door. What could be more perfect?

And then the quivering anticipation of children who will cherish their gifts, hopalong boots and a pistol that shoots for Barney and Ben, dolls that talk and walk for Janice and Jen... it's all so just-right. Then the cold glass of reality: *And Mom and Dad can hardly wait for school to start again*.

Parents, how can it be you would want your precious cherubs back at school? Is the special family time becoming, well a bit too much precious family time? *And Mom and Dad can hardly wait for school to start again...* probably two point one seconds after the wonder of Christmas morning toy unwrapping leads to Christmas afternoon complaint: I'm bored. Come to think of it, I could make a fair profit by selling tee shirts which simply read: I survived Christmas.

And the antidote for Christmas angst might be something like this: to read the Christmas story from Luke once again. Because Luke, in his gentle way, reminds us that one day, one even difficult day, when Romans occupied the land and taxes were high and a young mother and her almost husband were far from home, and no housing could be found. . . one day, everything went right.

The story begins with Rome completely in control. Caesar Augustus was emperor, worshiped as a god, Quirinius was governor up in Syria. And completely unbeknownst to the powers that were, God was shaping a new future.

There was a young woman, Mary. Who found herself to be with child in an unexpected way. And far into the pregnancy, Rome strikes again. A census. And so Mary and her intended, Joseph, a day-laborer most probably, or a builder perhaps, maybe even a carpenter, though the Greek is probably best translated “day laborer,” begin the treacherous and arduous journey to a little town called Bethlehem. Joseph was descended from the great King David, but such lineage served more to mock him than to bring him pride. He was impoverished, and in a few days, after the child was born, would give a beggar’s offering of a pair of dove at the temple, instead of the expected offering of a lamb.

Tradition finds Mary riding on a donkey, but there probably was no donkey. Donkeys cost money. They walked. Mary could have fallen, they could have been beset by robbers, but none of that happened.

They find themselves in Bethlehem. No place to stay. That could have been a disaster, but no, Luke placidly reports that Mary delivered the child and placed him in an animal feeding dish, also called a manger. We tell stories about Joseph’s desperate search for lodging, of his encounter with either a mean or kind innkeeper, but Luke tells no such tale.

Just that, well, it all works out. The baby is born. No complications. No crib for a bed, no problem. A feeding trough, so perhaps in a stable, or even a cave. . . many people took refuge in caves around Bethlehem.

No place in the inn. Luke records this neither as comedy nor tragedy. It just happens. But it turns out all right. And in fact, we are a little disappointed that the birth is so, understated. Young couple. Young baby. Far from home. Yet it all works out.

The scene shifts. Shepherds. Flocks. Angel. Fear. You would be afraid, too and so would I. Then the angel speaks. News of great joy. Unnoticed by emperors and governors, a child is born. In the City of David, Bethlehem, never itself a famous city, and even less famous now that David’s kin had long since royalty behind.

But great joy. This child is, let’s see: Messiah, or Christ, or anointed one, depends on how you translate that word, but it means God’s specially chosen one to do God’s special work.

Other titles given by the angel. Savior, also means one who heals. And, the Lord. Means master or teacher. Someone to follow. Then more angels. Many more angels, who break out in song.

And in this child the promise of peace, not just for the rich or the powerful or the well-connected, but for those whom God favors. . . and the shepherds are given to understand God favors THEM. . . shepherds, folks who live outside town and outside polite society, and outside religious propriety. . . God is interested in them. Incredible. God is indeed doing a new thing.

Well, the angels leave and the night is again dark and quiet and the shepherds say, well, let's go check it out. God has something to do with us? Incredible. And so they leave the sheep behind and hurry into Bethlehem.

And what do they see? Nothing out of the ordinary. Just a mother and a father and a baby, nestled in that manger. Christian art always shows a halo around Jesus' head. Which totally misses the point. It is in the ordinary, the ordinary baby not even in a proper crib, that God has unleashed his most profound power. Power that doesn't look like power. Rather, power that looks like love. How do you not love a baby?

Nothing out of the ordinary. Except this: the meaning God has imparted to what has happened. Peasant Mary, and a woman at that, down at the bottom of the social order, if you will, has been given place and prominence by God. And shepherds, those outcast folk. . . to them God has given a place and a message, the hope, the promise, the salvation, bound up in this child. . . are even for them.

Sometimes we think of Jesus and salvation only in terms of eternal life. And this is far from unimportant. However, the message of Christmas, of Jesus' being born into our world, is that in Jesus there is the promise of salvation, healing, transformation in this world, this life, as well. Jesus enters fully into our world, and he enters as vulnerable as everyone else: as a baby.

At Christmas, God entrusts humanity with his child, with his purpose. God entrusts Mary and Joseph to be his parents, an unmentioned innkeeper to find a place somewhere for his birth. God entrusts shepherds and you and me to spread this word, to tell abroad this good news. . . to us a savior is born, to transform hearts today, to transform the world, today.

So, what changes for the shepherds? Nothing. . . . And everything. Sure, they go back to the same hills, the same sheep, the same problems and challenges. But everything changes, because on this night, their hearts are transformed. This child is born for them. . . and for every "them" who ever thought he or she was outside God's love, God's mercy, God's purpose, God's

providence.

The shepherds tell everyone they know. And folks are amazed. Why? That God had something to do with shepherds? That God's wondrous power is tied up in nothing more and nothing less than an infant child?

Incredible. Puzzling.

And Mary treasures all these shepherd-spoken words. And ponders them. And wonders what to make of God's stepping into history, God's reaching out to shepherds, God's mighty activity being seen not in earthquake and destruction, war and unrest, but in the birth of a baby.

There's something wondrous and compelling and hopeful and fragile about God acting in this way, isn't there? And as Mary ponders, so too might we. Let's resolve to keep in our hearts what it means that Jesus, savior, lord, is born for us. Jesus enters our lives as well, and how will this change us? Will having Jesus in our lives make us more merciful, more patient, more compassionate, more hopeful? Perhaps make us more concerned with others, less concerned with ourselves?

Well, let's be realistic. Not everything is going to go just right this Christmas. Relatives might stay too long. Presents might disappoint. And those kids you love so very much might really get on your nerves and you really can't wait for school to start again. Roasts might burn and trees might topple.

But let me invite you to take a moment and ponder again that one night, when everything went right. When God found a place for Jesus to be born. When angel spoke of good news for all people, and that means even for you and even for me.

And that means your life, even in the midst of burned roasts and toppling trees is still filled with promise and possibility, because the Jesus born in Bethlehem is alive in Spirit today. And in his birth and resurrection is promise for our lives. May we, like the the shepherds before us, face tomorrow with joy and anticipation, because, because, against all odds, unto us a child was born, unto us a savior given. Amen.