

Sermon: Blue Christmas Service-2018-Luke 2: 1-20

Last January I had a congregation member ask to meet me for a coffee, and after I had arrived at the coffee shop, had a few sips of my latte and shared in a few pleasantries she asked me a really profound question, "Now that the Christmas season is over and done with," she said, "and you have written and preached all the sermons and finished all the liturgies for another year, I wonder which of the Christmas services that you prepared and led was your favourite or was most meaningful to you?" Honestly the question caught me a little off guard, as I am not normally asked questions like that, but I quickly recovered and answered that is this service here tonight, this service that you and I are currently participating in, is the one that I always find, personally, to be the most meaningful.

And the reason for that is that this night, gathering here with all of you to worship, feels real to me. There is a true human emotional vulnerability that is present in this time and space, that for the most part is always there, but often completely covered up in the other areas of our lives during this time of year. So many of our Advent and Christmas traditions, both outside and inside the church, create this wonderful expression of joy and gladness. That's not bad, its good to feel joy, but for so many its not real its just a façade that covers the true emotions that are right under the service; joy becomes like a mask that so many people place over their true feelings, simply because we think we cannot be honest about how we really feel; because we think its not okay to not be okay. In our minds Christmas is all about joy and abundance and gifts and wonder and to feel or express feelings that are different, feels as if we are doing something wrong.

I can remember the first Christmas after my parent's divorce watching my mother create this amazing Christmas Eve. She had spent all week decorating the house, cleaning up after my sister and I and just ensuring that the everything was just right. My grandparents always hosted Christmas Eve, but for some reason my mom wanted it to be at our home that year; she wanted to be the host, she wanted to create joy filled memories for my sister and I. For days she baked family recipes of cookies, cinnamon buns, butter tarts, you name it and all the while she sang to her favourite Christmas songs which played on the cd player just under our microwave.

She filled the candy dish with all the candies that we would normally find at my grandparent's house and even ensured that, like my grandmother would have done, that an open box of After Eights was on the coffee table in the living room. On Christmas Eve morning my mother drank her coffee with a smile on her face (maybe with a bit of baileys) and then went about making sure everything was just right. Our families favourite Christmas eve drink, a warm apple cider was prepared, the turkey went into the oven and a few last minutes presents were wrapped and placed lovingly under the tree. My sister and I must have sensed just how

important this night was to her, because we got along all day. We didn't bicker or argue, we just played together, sang songs and danced in the kitchen with mom; just generally had a merry Christmas.

About hour before everyone arrived, my mother brought out her grandmothers Christmas platter; a beautiful white fine china platter with stunningly colourful holly along the rim. The turkey would be placed upon it, ready for my grandfather to carve when he arrived. I can remember being so amazed how my mom had ensured that everything was just perfect; the house looked and smelled like Christmas; even our clothes had been ironed and laid out for us on our beds; it was a magazine picture perfect Christmas eve.

But you know I couldn't shake this feeling that something was off. That feeling had grown in the days leading up to Christmas Eve as I watched my mom attempt to make a Christmas for the ages, but on that day, even though I tried to ignore it, it was almost as if I was waiting for something and then the something happened, I don't quite remember how, but the fine china platter had been placed on one of those old brown and gold TV tables, and the legs just buckled and the platter fell to the floor and shattered into a million pieces.

And right before my eyes, it was as if my mother shattered along with it. Everything she had been hiding from us with a mask of joy suddenly appeared. She just sat on the floor surrounded by brokenness and wept; tears streamed from her eyes like rivers. I didn't know what to do or how to respond. My sister and I stood frozen in the kitchen and finally after what seemed like an eternity she said "I just wanted this Christmas to be something you two could hold on to, something solid and normal, in an otherwise disruptive and messed up year." The something, that I could feel just below the surface, was that, that Christmas that year was not normal, it was not merry, it was hard and sad and painful; we all knew it and felt it, but my mother didn't want us to feel that, she wanted Christmas to be something good, joy filled and positive. And now the broken platter all over the floor was a symbol of our broken family, our broken hearts and a broken Christmas and it caused her to weep.

Then the door bell rang and my mother quickly jumped up, wiped her face and carried on like nothing had happened while my sister and I cleaned up the broken pieces of the platter; swept the brokenness under the rug and we all put our masks back on. Yet all night I could see that sadness in her eyes. Even when she laughed and enjoyed the company of the extended family, I could now see through the mask of joy that she wore.

I never got to ask her about that night, but I can imagine that my mother felt like she had failed my sister and I somehow, that the perfect Christmas she had attempted was not perfect, because she had shown us the brokenness just underneath; she had allowed us to see through the mask of Joy to what was just under the surface. But truthfully, I think I needed that more anything else. I didn't need a perfect Christmas I needed a real one. And that Christmas

was maybe the most real experience of Christmas that I had ever had. Because I was sad, and everything she did lifted me just a little bit, but importantly when she broke down, it showed me that it was okay not to be okay; that it was okay to feel broken.

You see friends the Christmas story, the story of Jesus coming into the world, yes is a story about joy and abundance and the gift of wonder and light, but not necessarily in the way that our picture-perfect traditions attempt to showcase it. The real joy, wonder and light of this account is that it is a story about God coming into the brokenness of human life; it was God's way of saying things are not okay, but I am here with you in it. Jesus wasn't born in the inn, or with a silver spoon in his mouth, he didn't open his eyes to sugar plums and boxes and boxes of perfectly wrapped presents under an evergreen Christmas tree. The blanket he was wrapped in was not ironed and the straw likely wasn't fresh. His family didn't eat a turkey dinner with all the fixings and then sample candies and butter tarts for hours afterwards. Jesus was born into a stable, to unwed parents, surrounded by the broken pieces of people all around him; people heavy under the foot of debt, grief, sadness and oppression. Jesus wasn't born so that everything could be perfect, Jesus was born to show us that in the brokenness of everyday life, we are not alone.

That is the true joy and abundance of Christmas. That in the face of whatever has brought you here tonight, that God places a little light, just a little light that can cut the shadow that hangs over you. It will not be perfect, it likely won't take those feelings totally away, but it's real. It's real, because this story, much like my memory of that Christmas eve so long ago, and much like whatever has brought you here shows us that amid the broken hearts, broken relationships, broken expectations and hopes, that the true joy of this season, is that in those human experiences we are not alone and no matter what that message still comes. Whether we ignore the season, or mask our emotion, the true message is that God is here, not seeking to just make it better, but presently holding us in the shadow of whatever hangs over us.

In the coming day, weeks, months and even years, those heavy hearts, become a little less heavy, the pain never fully goes away, but that light of God's enduring presence, does something wonderful. It becomes brighter, we start to recognize that the pain and grief we feel remembering what once was, is okay to do, and that we don't need to mask ourselves with joy. And amazingly when we no longer need to fake joy, like that light of God's presence and love, joy begins to grow.

My friends, my hope, is that if this Christmas is heavy for you, that you will find that one little light in your life, that you will see that God does come into the brokenness and if this night is a night that you have been present in before, then I hope that tonight, and this Christmas overall, finds that light within you to have grown and may you always know that it's okay, not to

be okay. For in those feelings is where the true joy, abundance and blessings of Christmas are found.

Thanks be to God for that. Amen.