

Sermon, December 20, 2020

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-27 & Luke 1:26-38

“The Shepherd Comes: The Shepherd Brings a Song”

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I have to say, even in a year of a pandemic, this is my favorite time of year in the church year. Well, it's a tossup, really. I love Easter, and it's hard to not lift up Easter as my favorite day in the life of the church. Not much gets better than celebrating the resurrection with the body of Christ. But as far as an entire season goes, I love Advent and Christmas the best. Lent is hard to get through. Giving things up, contemplation, Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday. All necessary parts of our yearly Spiritual Journey. But not easy ones.

Advent and Christmas are fun. Especially here. The poinsettias, the incredible display we have every year. The walk-through Nativity. The Nativity Festival, Santa Land and the Black Light Show. The joy of singing Silent Night by candlelight. Even the busy-ness of the year is more fun. And it's not been super

easy this year. All the plans ever changing constantly, having to find new ways to do things. But it's still been enjoyable.

I enjoy all of the preparations at home as we get ready. Now in full disclosure, my wife is much better at Christmas decorating than I am. And so for the majority of things I talk about this morning when I say we decorate, I mean that in a royal *we*. Again, she does the great majority of it. I'm more the heavy contract labor. I bring up the heavy boxes from the basement, negotiating a really tight corner in the basement stairs. Take boxes back down. All the good stuff, looking the way it should for Christmas, that's on her.

She has the better eye for putting lights on the Christmas tree, but then we all try to do the rest of the ornaments, putting things out. Much, I'm sure, as it is in your homes. It's still fun, and when it's done, it looks great.

But it's also messy. It's cluttered for a while, we have boxes everywhere as we begin to pull things out, things get spread out as you look for certain items. Lights gets pulled out as you see if they work and try to find the one bulb that went out. Furniture is moved around trying to see where things go as the tree goes up. For a short while, there is a small amount of chaos and clutter. But in the end, we never seem to mind because we know what the end result will be. In fact, we know that the chaos, the clutter, the mess, is important because we can't get to the end result without going through that.

It's much the same when you walk through the Nativity at Crossroads. It's wonderful, It's incredible. But if you were to come out while it was being put up, it might seem messy. It might seem chaotic and cluttered. Now, it's not. But to an untrained eye, it might look that way. There is simply no way to get to the end result without going through the chaos and the clutter.

In some ways, it reminds me of the first Christmas, at least the months and events leading up to it. Cluttered and disorganized would be an apt description of Mary and her cousin Elizabeth's lives. Elizabeth's life has been turned upside down discovering she is pregnant after many years of hoping for a baby and having given up. Her husband has been struck mute, and they've been told this baby will be the one who will come before the Messiah getting everyone ready, preparing the way. She will be in seclusion for five months alone with a silent husband. Clutter and chaos.

Mary's life is cluttered, as well. I mean, a virgin birth. Being told you are carrying the Messiah, the actual Son of God Himself. Her life has been literally turned upside down. People around her not believing her. Joseph believes, but he is still trying to make sense of it all, wondering what his role in all of this will be. And Mary just trying to make her way through. If you continue to read the next chapter, we'll see that Mary goes to Elizabeth and ends up staying with her for three months. Who can blame her. Who doesn't want to try to escape the mess and the clutter of life.

I realize I may be painting a really bleak picture of the mess and chaos of Mary's life and even of her cousin Elizabeth whose story wraps around Mary's in the Gospel of John. But they weren't. Yes, messy and chaotic. But if you go back to our Scripture today and look at the chapters around it, we see Mary breaking out in song. In celebration. There, in the midst of everything in her life ebbing, different, messy, chaotic, not easy, she sings. We see the same thing in our Psalm for today. In the midst to the messiness of life, in the chaos Mary finds a song.

We are in our fourth week of Advent. Looking at what happens when the Shepard comes. Mary shows us even in the messiness of life that when the Shepherd comes, the people find a way to celebrate and sing.

Perhaps because she instinctively knew that this is what Advent is supposed to be. We talk about it being joyful and peaceful. And it is. But it can still be messy and cluttered. It is extra busy. It does come with an extra sense of frustration sometimes. This year, there is even more mess and clutter as we have to reevaluate what we can and can't do. The extra worry. This year seems for many of us even more cluttered and messy and chaotic than normal.

First let me say, if that's you, you are in good company. You need to know that. For most of us, Advent is messy and cluttered, we just don't talk about it. And if right now your life is cluttered and messy and disorganized, if you feel as if your life has been turned upside down, join the club. You have more in common with Mary and Elizabeth than you might think.

But if that first Advent season teaches us anything, it's that God does His best work, His most important work in our lives when things are cluttered and messy. Going through times of clutter and mess are sometimes God's way of making a time of Advent in us. That what seems like chaos is just a part of God's plan to prepare us for the coming of Jesus, the incarnation of the Christ. Sometimes we look at our lives and we say, *God what are you doing? My life is a mess.* And God says "it's not a mess. I'm just getting it ready for something beautiful. I'm going to make your life into something beautiful."

And we often say to God, *well I don't want that. I want the beauty without the mess. Can't you just do that?* I think God says to us sometimes the beauty can't come until we go through the times of clutter and chaos, because what looks like chaos and clutter to us doesn't look that way to God. We see chaos, God sees a movement into our lives where we experience the love and beauty of Christ like we never imagined.

So if your life is messy and cluttered this year as we head into Christmas, cluttered with chaos, worry, frustration, uncertainty, whatever it is, let me make a suggestion to you. Let me suggest that you do this. Embrace it. Don't act as if you have your act together or everything is Ok. Embrace the mess and the clutter you are going through right now. Own it.

But bring it to God and tell Him, *look I don't like the messiness in my life right now, I don't like the clutter. I don't like everything being out of place. But I know You can create great beauty out of the mess and chaos. God, I know Your word says you bring beauty from ashes. So help me have the faith I need to let You do Your work. Take me through this time of Advent that the joy of Christmas might be made evident in my life. In fact, God, I pray because of the mess in my life, the beauty of Christ will be even more evident to the people around me.*

Secondly, do what Mary and Elizabeth do. Look beyond the mess to the Good News. In the end, God leads us through the mess to celebrate the beauty of Jesus being made new in our lives. And here you, as Mary and Elizabeth did, will find a place to sing and celebrate. Even in the messiness of life. Amen.