

Home for Christmas: 4 I'll Be Home
Selected verses from Luke 1-2 and Matthew 2
December 18, 2016
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"There's no place like home."

"I'll be home for Christmas."

"There's no place like home for the holidays."

For the past three weeks we've been talking about the idea that "home" is not necessarily a building or place, but instead, people, people who love you because of who you are and in spite of your differences. They accept you as are and always try to assume the best of you, even in times of disagreement and difficulties. But this doesn't mean that it's all easy and comfortable and filled with beautiful Hallmark moments. The holidays can actually be one of the most stressful and challenging times of the year.

Those of us who have "Martha-like" tendencies can put added pressure on ourselves to create the perfect Christmas experience for our families; perfectly decorated homes, delicious food-perfectly cooked, the exact right gift and delightful, affirming conversations. But, I'm just going to say it so you don't have to...families can be messy and "coming home for the holidays" can mean we are forced to be face-to-face with some challenging and difficult people. Visiting family can create added stress to our lives and it can take all the fun out of the holidays if we can't find a way to see them as beloved children of God. An expert from the UCLA Depression Center says, "Some people have unreasonable expectations. They expect the holidays to be happy but if the in-laws make quick remarks about your home, your food or your lifestyle, and your two year old has already broken the toy and is wailing in the corner, happiness can be a tall order."

Let's face it, there are no perfect families. Maybe this holiday season you'll be faced with seeing someone with whom you have a fractured relationship, or someone who is always angry but "it's never their fault." Maybe you don't see eye to eye on politics with your outspoken Uncle Elmer. Maybe there is someone in your family who suffers from mental illness or addiction and can make home scary and unpredictable.

This morning, I'd like to look at what happened on the first Christmas and how many different and difficult people were chosen by God to play key roles; imperfect people, stressed out people, unsafe people, disappointed people and even down right embarrassing people. The first Christmas story is filled with just such characters. In fact, we see God using imperfect people throughout the Bible. Remember Moses? Do you remember that he was a murderer? And David, he was an adulterer and a murderer. Elijah was depressed and suicidal. Jonah ran away from God. Rahab was a prostitute. Peter denied Jesus. Paul persecuted Christians, and the list goes on and on.

And yet, God loved them and used them all to further God's kingdom on earth. "For God so loved the world," that's you and that's me, and Moses and Peter and Paul, that God gave us His son. God's very own baby boy, handed over to a dark and scary world filled with imperfect people like you and me, in the ultimate act of love. This morning, I want to take a look at the difficult and different people in the Christmas story, to see how God specifically chose them and used them in spite of all their imperfections and how we might apply that insight to our own lives.

First, let's take a look at some disappointed people, Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah was an old priest from a prestigious family line. He married Elizabeth, the daughter of a priest. She also had a high reputation and a good pedigree. They were a devout couple and righteous in the sight of the

Lord. Remember last week, Steve told us that the word “righteous” meant that they devoted their entire lives to keeping the Law of Moses. They were not concerned with their social status and lived a quiet and humble life in Jerusalem.

But, Elizabeth was childless. It’s difficult for us today to understand the societal stigma of infertility in the first century. Infertility was believed to be the woman’s fault because she had done something to fall out of grace with God. While God knew they were righteous, their friends and neighbors did not. Can you imagine the gossiping and storytelling that went on behind their backs while people tried to figure out what secret sin Elizabeth had committed to cause her infertility? They must have been deeply disappointed in their situation.

Then one day, while performing his priestly duties, Zechariah heard an unbelievable message of encouragement from the Angel Gabriel. “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.” And in his surprise and disbelief, Zechariah’s first response was to question God, “How can I be sure of this?” Even though he was a deeply devoted man, his first, knee-jerk, very human response was to question God. So as a sign, the sign that he asked for when he said, “How can I be sure of this?”, God struck him mute and he was not able to speak a word until the day that his son was born. And his son, John the Baptist, was the forerunner to the Messiah, the one who came to prepare the way for Jesus. Disappointed people, used by God.

And what about that stressed out teenager, Mary, and her husband-to-be, Joseph? Mary, a peasant girl, just 13 or 14 years old, and betrothed to Joseph. As we learned last week, betrothal was a legally binding arrangement in the Jewish culture. And the one thing that was not allowed during a betrothal was a pregnancy and Mary was pregnant. Joseph knew how these things worked and he knew he was not the father of this child. So in his mind, Mary must have committed adultery. Mary was well aware that Joseph might disown her and publicly denounce her. Do you remember the punishment for women who committed adultery in the first century? Death by stoning. Talk about a stressful situation! But fear not, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and says, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.” Well, I don’t know about you but if an angel appeared to me, I think I would be afraid, very afraid, but I pray that I could listen and respond just as Mary did, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”

And Joseph? Let’s not forget Joseph. The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream too, and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” Joseph, even through his stress, disappointment and embarrassment, was able to rely on his own faith, accept the angel’s message that Mary was virtuous and that the baby was from God. Mary and Joseph are examples of God’s scandalous grace, and in spite of their stress, found a way to put their whole trust in God. They are amazing examples of courage and faith.

Shepherds. Let’s talk about the shepherds. How embarrassing to have shepherds show up at your child’s birth! Who invited them to this party anyway? Shepherds smelled like sheep. They slept on the ground. They were unshaven, dirty and uneducated; lower class citizens who were completely disregarded by those in power. Shepherds spent most of their time in the fields away from society and had no influence to speak of. They were at the bottom of the social ladder along with the tax collectors and dung sweepers. Wouldn’t it have made more sense to announce the birth of the Messiah to those who had the ability and authority to spread the news throughout the world: the A List, the Movers and the Shakers, the celebrities? But God didn’t do that. God chose to entrust this magnificent news to a group of lowly shepherds with no social standing and no voice in the

community. “The angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone all around them, and they are terrified. But the angel of the Lord said, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for the people.”

So why shepherds? Maybe it was because the sheep that were kept in the fields between Jerusalem and Bethlehem were raised to be the sacrifices at the temple, and so the shepherds were sent to be the first to see the ultimate sacrifice. Or maybe it is because there’s a special place in God’s heart for the lost, the lonely and the oppressed. We can see this time and time again in verses like, “The last shall be first and the first shall be last,” and “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” and “I’ve come to proclaim release to the captives.”

Even though the shepherds were also frightened by the angel, they did as they were told. Their first response was, “Let’s go!” and they hurried ahead to Bethlehem to see the newborn child. And then they returned to their flocks, “glorifying and praising God.” God speaks to and works through all kinds of people regardless of social status, financial worth, and yes, even personal hygiene habits.

And I love this possible answer that I found online to “why shepherds.” “Maybe it’s because shepherds do crazy things to find their lost sheep. Remember the story of the shepherd who left his 99 sheep to go and look for the one that was missing? Jesus is our Good Shepherd and has done crazier things to find us when we go astray. He was even crazy enough about you to die on a cross.” So when you hear that a bunch of lowly shepherds were invited to the birth of Jesus, let it remind you that God is crazy about you! God longs to have a relationship with you. God will not leave you or forsake you. If you wander away, do not be afraid. God’s going to come looking for you...again and again! Just like the shepherds with their lost sheep.

How about those strangers and unsafe people we mentioned earlier? Where do they show up in the Christmas story? Well, even to this day there is no one more terrifying than Herod the Great. Herod was a magnificent builder of cities but a destroyer of people. He was the ruling King of Judea at this time and he considered himself The King of the Jews. The problem was this title was only granted to him by the Roman government and was never accepted by the people because they knew that he was only part Jewish and therefore not a part of David’s family line, the family line from which the Messiah was prophesied to come. And because his title was not authentic, he constantly watching his back and worried that the people would rise up and he would be overthrown.

So when the Persian wise men, these are the strangers in our story, arrived in Jerusalem looking for the king of the Jews, Herod was paranoid and angry. He called together all of his chief priests and teachers of the Law and asked them where the Christ child was to be born. Well they knew scripture and they knew that hundreds of years earlier, the prophet Micah had predicted that the Messiah would be born “In Bethlehem, in Judea.” Upon learning this, Herod made a secret plan with the wise men. He sent them to Bethlehem with the agreement that they would report back to him once they found the child. But you see, he didn’t want to worship the Child, he wanted to kill him. When the wise men saw the child and his mother, they “bowed down and worshipped him.” Then after being warned in a dream, they did not return to Herod but instead went home a different way. When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the wise men, he was furious and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem two years old and younger. Herod was a jealous, paranoid and ruthless ruler, proof that greatness and power bring neither peace nor security. Did God’s heart break over every terrifying act that Herod commanded, over every baby that died? You bet it did! But even Herod was a beloved child of God and God sought after him every day. In fact, every tyrannical leader past and present is a beloved child of God, the grumpy neighbor down the street, the lady who cut you off on the freeway and your opinionated Uncle Elmer are beloved children of God. God always chooses love.

For God so loved the world that he gave us his son. Jesus came into this world surrounded by truly difficult people and he chose to give love. Over and over again, he chose love. It's the essential nature of Jesus, God incarnate, to love people, even or maybe especially the people who are the MOST disappointing, stressed out, embarrassing, strange and scary. Do not be afraid. God can take a mess and make something beautiful out of it.

As you prepare to head home for the holidays or to prepare your home for arriving family and guests, remember...there are no perfect families. Taking time to prepare our hearts to see our family members and ourselves as intentionally chosen and beloved children of God...is perhaps the most important preparation we can do.

So maybe you're thinking, "But my situation is different." My spouse will never change. My kids will never learn. My in-laws are impossible. Listen to God's word again. Remember the words of the angel, "Do not be afraid." Ask God to work in you and in your situation, to open your heart and mind to see what God is doing in your life and to turn it around for good. God is the master of straightening up messes and bringing hope to the hopeless.

Let's Pray. Loving God, we know that sometimes we can be difficult, stressed out, embarrassing and scary people. But we also know that when we're frustrated and scared and wander away from you, you are going to pursue us to the ends of the earth. Thank you for being crazy in love with us. Help us to put our whole trust in you, to not be afraid, and to see all those around us the way that you see us, as your beloved children. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of December 18, 2016

Prayer for the week:

Lord Jesus, though I sometimes forget it, I need a savior. Thank you for coming into this world to be that savior. I can't do this life alone. Redeem my inner and outer sinful ways that I may walk daily in your light and see myself as your beloved child. Amen.

Monday, December 19

Scripture: Luke 1:11-18

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

Observation: One day, while performing his priestly duties, Zechariah heard an unbelievable message of encouragement from the Angel Gabriel. And in his disbelief, even though he was a deeply devoted man, Zechariah's first knee-jerk response was to question God. "How can I be sure of this?" What do you think your response would be to this kind of shocking news from God?

Application: From Zechariah's human perspectives, his doubts were understandable, but with God anything is possible. It's easy to doubt or misunderstand what God wants to do in our lives. When you are tempted to think that God's promises are unbelievable, think about how God has fulfilled promises throughout history.

Prayer: Ever Watchful God, you have done great things for me and every moment is ripe with your purposes. Awaken me from spiritual drought so that I may harvest the blessings that you give me and reap the joy of your goodness. Amen.

Tuesday, December 20

Scripture: Luke 1:26-37

God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Observation: Mary was young, poor and female -- everything that, to the people of her day, would make her unusable by God. Her initial reaction was a natural human reaction, to be troubled. But God chose Mary, and her submission was part of God's plan for us to receive God's grace, forgiveness and love.

Application: Do you, like Mary, sometimes feel that your ability, education or experience makes you an unlikely candidate for God's service? Don't limit God. Pray that your heart will be open so that God's passion will burn steadily and brightly in you. God doesn't call the equipped. God equips the called.

Prayer: Loving God, I want to respond to your call on my life with the pure innocence and conviction of Mary. Let your word be fulfilled in me, and may what you say be so in my life. Amen.

Wednesday, December 21

Scripture: Luke 1:57-66

The Birth of John the Baptist

When it was time for (Mary's cousin) Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name." Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

Observation: Zechariah praised God with the first words out of his mouth after several months of silence. His words prophesied the coming of a Savior who would redeem his people. He also predicted that his son, John, would prepare the way for the Messiah. All of the Old Testament prophecies were coming true. Is it any wonder that Zechariah praised God?

Application: When I was a little girl, the first thing my grandfather would say or sing to me each time he saw me was, "This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!" How much healthier would our hearts be if we could start each day with these words?

Prayer: Dear God, Your mercies are new to me every morning. I cannot affect the outcomes of my life. I can only rest in you. You bless me so that I might be a blessing to others. Give me a heart that longs for you and a mouth that sings your praises every day. Amen.

Thursday, December 22

Scripture: Luke 1:46-56

Mary's Song

Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors."
Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Observation: In Mary's song, also known as "The Magnificat", Mary glorifies God for what God is going to do for the world through her. In her song, God is the champion of the oppressed, the

poor and the despised. If Mary had denied her incredible position, she would have been throwing away God's blessing. She showed humility in accepting God's gift.

Application: God lifts up the humble, fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty. God remembers faithful servants and calls us into service to be the hands and feet of Jesus. Are there tangible ways in which you are responding to God's plan?

Prayer: Dear God, Who am I that you love me so much? Remembering your faithfulness every day, let me put my whole trust in you. By your grace, teach me to rely more and more on your strong hand to support and guide me so that I can have a faith like Mary. Amen.

Friday, December 23

Scripture: Luke 2:1-7

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Observation: Since Judea was under the rule of the Roman Empire, Caesar was in charge. He issued a decree that a census was to be taken to aid in collecting due taxes. Even in the first century, paying taxes was unavoidable. So, Joseph was required to go to his hometown and sign in. He took Mary with him. When they arrived, there was no place for them to stay.

Application: When we do what God asks of us, we are not promised an easy life. But we are promised that even in our discomfort, God has a plan. Are you listening to where God may be calling you to step into something unfamiliar, perhaps even frightening?

Prayer: Dear God, today I open myself up completely to you. I want to serve you and you alone. You are the Maker of the universe and I am signing up to do your work! Melt me. Mold me. Fill me. Use me. Amen.

Saturday, December 24

Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

(Linus' "What Christmas Is All About" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vJPAQJAYjg>)

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

Observation: God first revealed the baby to those least likely, shepherds! Who invited them to this party anyway? Shepherds were dirty, uneducated and at the bottom of the social ladder. Why did God choose to reveal the glory of the Christ Child to them first? Perhaps it is because God, like a shepherd, will do amazing, crazy things to find lost sheep. God longs to have a relationship with you and will go to all ends of the earth to find you.

Application: "Let's go!" Wouldn't it be wonderful if that was always our initial response when called by God? When you need encouragement, remember that God so loved YOU he gave his only son. And as Linus says, "That's the story of Christmas, Charlie Brown."

Prayer: Surprising God, in your unbounded love you have shown me your face, the face of God in a tiny baby. You have made your ways known to the nations. May I recognize that your decision to become flesh is an invitation for me to live gratefully with others as one family, gathered and held together in your holy name. Amen.