

New Years Day 2023

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[0 : 00] So as I was preparing this service in this sermon, I knew that I wanted to take this unplugged service to share a little bit more about my personal experience.

If you've been here at the table before, you probably know that my sermons lean a little bit more on the academic side, talk a lot about the context, about how the original audience of the Bible understood it, and I often hesitate to share my own personal experience because it takes a great deal of vulnerability to do that.

But if there's one thing I have learned in my preaching journey so far, it is that it is often someone's story, their own experience with their faith that draws us closer to God and to each other.

In my personal experience, the touchstone of a sermon is when a pastor shares something from their own experience in a way that shows us how our faith intersects with our life and illuminates it in a different way.

Telling our stories and learning to listen to the stories of others is an act of vulnerability, no matter how little or how much we end up sharing. There are no small acts of vulnerability.

[1 : 17] So I wanted to give time during this sermon to not only hear the stories of others, but to talk a little bit more about our own personal stories, specifically what brings us into this space and how we hope to leave this space.

And I wanted to ground this sermon in a time of reflection because I know that this time of year can be complicated, that there are many different stories in the room about how we relate to the holidays.

On the one hand, we are celebrating the birth of Christ, Emmanuel, God with us. And then when we turn the corner into a new year, it's full of a sense of possibility, of new beginnings, of fresh starts, that idea of new year, new me.

What doesn't seem possible during the new year, during the rest of the year, suddenly seems possible during Christmas and New Year's. But on the other hand, we are bombarded with signs all around us that don't match our expectations.

I know very few people who are not struggling on some level during this season, whether it's because of a complicated family situation, illness, death, life transitions, work stress, raising a family, or just the everyday grind of life.

[2 : 33] And I am no exception to this. For my personal story, I feel very vulnerable during this season in particular, because it reminds me of the gap between my expectations and my reality.

One of my expectations, and one of the things we often hear about the holidays is that, oh, like, are you going home for the holidays? It's an often taken for granted sort of thing. But for the last three years, I have not gone home to spend the holidays with my family back in Maine.

A couple of years ago, my family sort of fractured into many different factions after we struggled with the death of my paternal grandmother, and a member of my family was suddenly incarcerated. These two events shattered my family, and in many ways, I felt caught in the middle. And even the thought of going home can be an exercise in figuring out how willing I am to relive those two experiences.

And going home is also complicated by the fact that as I have grown more progressive in my political and religious views, my sister and her family have only grown more conservative. And it seems like an impossible gap to bridge.

[3 : 49] For example, I am standing here today and preaching. My goal is to eventually be a pastor. But my sisters feel that women cannot be pastors, and that makes it difficult.

And we also have frequent debates about homosexuality, racism, and politics. And we've never been able to see common ground on those issues, even though we're all Christian.

So it's easier to just not go home. But that means that I don't have a concrete place to spend the holidays. It's not, oh, like, you have a place to go, that one spot that you know.

And it can be lonely to solve that puzzle of where to spend the holidays by myself. So this season leaves me feeling a little bit fragile, a little bit hollow, and yet still searching for signs of hope in the middle of it all, searching for God with us.

And then after Christmas, we're in New Year's mode. And I am someone who constantly wants to go and change. I have a bullet journal that I update regularly.

[4 : 54] I have a notion. I love being organized and planning. And I love setting goals and achieving them. I love the energy around New Year's of this is a time for a fresh start. It's about becoming a better version of ourselves.

And there's nothing inherently wrong with that. But it often makes us feel that we are not enough just as we are. And I struggle with the tension between those two things around this time of year. And that's why I wanted to start with a time to stop and think about our thoughts and feelings during this season. Because there are so many things that are vying for our attention.

I don't want to negate the fact that during this season there is hope, peace, joy, and love. That some of you are having the best time of your life. That you are on the mountaintop.

That there are wonderful things happening in your life. But I also don't want to ignore the fact that the holidays are not an easy time for everyone. That there seems to be a heaviness in this season as we struggle with all the things I mentioned before.

[5 : 54] Illness, death, job transitions, anything else that you can name. We dream of what can be at the same time as we wrestle with the reality of what is.

And it was a moment quite like this one when Jesus came to live with us. On this first Sunday after Christmas, it makes sense to consider why it matters that Jesus was born so long ago.

So if you have a Bible, please turn to Galatians chapter 4, verses 4 through 7. But the words will also be on the screens. If you don't want to have a device, that's fine too.

It reads, During the last two Sundays in our Advent series, Aaron and Richard walked us through the significance of Jesus being born of Mary.

They talked about Mary's willingness to say yes to God. And the radical truth that Jesus was born as a human baby through Mary. One of my favorite Christian thinkers, Rachel Held Evans, talks about it as God becoming vulnerable on our behalf.

[7 : 27] As he enters human life as we all do. As a baby. As somebody's child. God shows up at times we don't expect. And in ways we don't expect. No one anticipated that God would show up in the form of a baby in the backwater corner of the Roman Empire.

But that's exactly what happened. And God showed up just as we are in our full humanity. And this fact is absurd. That Jesus became a baby and lived just as we lived.

Jesus lived under the law. So that means that Jesus was born as a Jew. He was subject to the Torah. We often miss that Jesus was born and lived his life on the basis of our concrete religious tradition.

But we can also see that Jesus was subject to the laws of life just as we are. As a baby, Jesus needed to be held and comforted by his parents.

He was reliant on Mary and Joseph. Two flawed human beings. Humans for everything. He cried. He needed his diaper changed.

[8 : 34] He fell down trying to take his first steps. In every single way that we can imagine, Jesus was like us. He experienced every single emotion that we can name from fear, love, frustration, anger, disappointment, concern, grief, loneliness.

God is truly with us. So when I consider my complicated feelings during Christmas time and the new year, I am reminded of the beauty of this story.

Of God coming down as human. Wherever you are in your life right now, God is meeting you there. If you are having the best time that you are excited about the next year, then God is with you.

If you are wondering how you are going to make it through another day, God is with you. There is no place that you can go where God cannot reach you. And this passage also means a lot to me personally because of its emphasis on family.

For so long, I felt like I needed to wrestle through my feelings of loneliness and pain on my own after feeling estranged from my family. But I am convinced that one of the most beautiful things about the Christian faith is this emphasis on adoption.

[9 : 54] That through Christ coming down as a baby, that we are invited into this family. And that's why the early church took off like it did. The early movement of Jesus followers attracted widows, orphans, foreigners, slaves.

People who had no family and no place to call home. In a society where your household name was everything, the movement of Jesus called everybody in and said, You belong here.

We all belong. We are all children of God. There is nothing we can do to earn this status. And there is nothing we can do that can take it away. Christianity at its best is not just a set of rules to follow or a set of beliefs to follow.

Instead, it is a family where all are welcome. It's not a family that we may have experienced growing up where we thought that there was something that needed to change about us. That we didn't fit in.

That we needed to contort ourselves into a mold in order to be accepted. And it's also not a family in the sense of toxic work culture where they say, We're a family.

[11 : 02] But in reality, all that means is that we never communicate and expect endless loyalty. Instead, it is a family in the truest sense of the word where people can be seen and known and accepted and loved for exactly who they are.

This is the good news. That God is with us. And I only really and truly recognize this truth when I'm in the presence of other people. We see God in the face of another.

We experience the love of God through a conversation with a close friend, a moment of celebration and lament with a community. And I have seen the beauty of Christ in my experience at the table, which has become a second family to me ever since I stepped foot through those doors four years ago.

And so when we look at the meaning of this season, when we focus on why it matters that Jesus came to earth, we can remind ourselves that Jesus came to show us that we are not alone.

That we are part of a family. And that means we have a place to belong exactly as we are. And there is nothing that needs to change about us. And as we move into this new year, I hope that we can ground ourselves in that truth.

[12 : 17] It can be hard to wrap our minds around it sometimes because it feels so contrary to our reality. But we can dream of a future where we live into this truth. And so if we do nothing else this year, I hope that we will experience more deeply and truly that we are all part of God's family, that we are enough, and that we belong.