

I Can't Wait

Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

CWZepp, BWCOB, December 29, 2019

Was it just me, or was the juxtaposition of that hymn with the scriptures that Christy had just read before a bit unsettling? But to be clear, I did it knowingly: “Angels we have Heard on High” is probably my favorite Christmas carol, so why not? And what Christmas carol *would* be a fitting follow-up to the slaughter of the innocents? At least the song and the last scripture reading both featured angels, albeit with very different messages – one leading a full-nature choral rendition of “Gloria” and the other with an urgent message of “Get the heck out of Dodge.”

In truth, moving from one to the other is rather abrupt. Despite the fact that our gospel reading comes immediately after the visit of the familiar magi – only two verses removed from their gold, frankincense, and myrrh – it is decidedly not very Christmasy. And the Hebrews text isn't exactly full of holiday cheer either.

But that's how it is sometimes, is it not? As much as we may want to carry on the charade...Christmas has to yield to the real world sooner or later. (That is if Christmas ever really gained an upper hand). Eventually, life returns to “normal”, which for most of us most of the time, is emphatically un-Christmasy. Hopefully not slaughter-of-the-innocents level material, but still rather lacking in glory or chestnuts roasting over an open fire in a winter wonderland.

Now I have a confession to make – I don't usually like Christmas. This shouldn't shock anyone out there who counts themselves as my friend. I have generally been one to *endure* the holidays rather than celebrate them. All the obligatory gift-giving and party-going, mandatory family visits, frustratingly limited playlists of holiday music, sappy holiday movies and TV specials – not to mention the exhausting schedule of special services and special events at church and school – all of it has generally placed me rather solidly in the “Scrooge” or “Grinch” categories for most of my adult life.

But I was hoping this year might prove to be at least a little different. For the first time in a long while, I was not going to be working until midnight on Christmas Eve. For the first time in what seemed like forever, I was going to be going “home for the holidays” (or at least going to Amanda's home for the holidays!) For the first time in years, I would be sitting in the pews on Christmas Eve and the Sunday before Christmas without leadership responsibilities. For perhaps the first the time since I had had kids, I hoped I might be able to *experience* Christmas rather than help to orchestrate it. That was the hope.

Maybe it was this past year that made me uncharacteristically eager for the holidays this year. Most of you know 2019 has been a doosey of a year for me – probably the hardest year I have yet had to endure (which is saying something if you know me). A year ago this time, on our holiday visit with Amanda's family, her mom informed her children and their spouses about her breast biopsy. And shortly after the New Year, a cancer diagnosis was confirmed, complete with surgery, chemo, and radiation to follow. A few months later, a lump was discovered in Amanda's breast during a preventative mammogram she underwent early because of her mom's diagnosis. Soon cancer was confirmed for her as well, and two surgeries and a month of radiation followed. Meanwhile, Shylah broke her elbow, which ended her gymnastics season and revealed a defect that required several consultations, a major surgical repair using donor tissue, and months of

rehab therapy. And somewhere in there, my mom ended up in the hospital for over a week and my grandmother fell and broke her hip.

That was all just on the home front. We're not even going to speak about the state of things in our country or our world right now. But it has not exactly been a banner year here at BWCOB either, especially for me. While this congregation has been amazingly supportive of my family and me through all of our challenges this year, nevertheless, a lot has changed, and much that was solid and known and comfortable has been lost. Jeff and I were partners in ministry here for nearly a decade. The future that we had envisioned leading together in this community of faith has been lost. And now, I don't know what the future holds. I can't deny my anxiety around my role and my future here, no matter how much optimism and confidence I am able to muster.

All of this led me to seek the services of a mental health professional for the first time in my life this fall. And when my therapist asked me several weeks ago how I was feeling about the approaching holidays, my spontaneous answer was – somewhat surprisingly – “I can't wait.”

I think what I meant in that moment was that I couldn't wait for the two weeks off that I was anticipating over the holidays. But as often happens in such sessions, the things that come out of your mouth often reveal more than what you might have consciously intended. And as I pondered my response in the days following my session, I found that I was *actually* looking forward to the holidays this year. I surely didn't become the holiday cheermeister overnight, but I was genuinely eager for Christmas to come. And so as our congregation journeyed through this Advent season with the theme “What can't wait,” I added myself to the end of the list... “I can't wait.” Two months ago, I would have said I can't wait for this year to be over. But two weeks ago, I found myself thinking that I can't wait for Christmas this year.

Which brings me to Christmas day. Four days ago. After Christmas lunch with Amanda's family in Elizabethtown, PA we traveled to my family's farm just outside of Hagerstown, MD for the Christmas evening meal. We had gotten settled in, and since my sister and several of the rest of the family had been sick and were still pretty exhausted, we decided to forgo our gift exchange until another day. We also ended up cancelling a planned visit with my Grandmother and other extended family because they didn't want to chance picking up any bugs from us, which was disappointing and frustrating, since I hadn't seen my Grandmother since she had broken her hip and I haven't even met some of my cousins' kids. So as Christmas day was winding to a close, I was feeling moody and grumpy. The holidays were not turning out as I had hoped. The previous days with Amanda's family had been fine – nothing bad had happened, but nothing terribly special either. They were pretty much like any other family visit, plus an extra church visit on Christmas Eve and the obligatory gift exchange. And now things were already off-rail in my visit with my family and we weren't even a day in.

I'm not sure exactly what I was expecting or hoping for. Best I can describe it at this juncture is to say that I was looking for the holidays to be “different” – that they would be special or other-than the usual. I guess I had fallen victim to the pull of holiday nostalgia and the unrealistic expectations of Christmas sentimentality. Whatever it was, by Christmas evening, I was laying on a bed in the house in which I grew up, feeling the exact opposite of Christmas cheer. In that moment, I couldn't wait to get home and get this year over with.

I was killing time on my phone – which is itself commentary aplenty for those who know me – and I was browsing CNN when I found a headline that caught my attention:

2019 wasn't ALL bad.

Here are all the good things that happened¹

The article led with these words:

We know you want 2019 canceled, reported and blocked. You think it was awful, depressing and went on far too long. But — and hear us out here — it wasn't ALL that bad. To end things on a great note, here's a list of some of the good things that happened this year.

It went on to do exactly what it said – listing highlights from world and national news, sports and entertainment, human rights and the environment, health, science, and space.

Frankly, I didn't read most of the list. I found I wasn't in the mood for one thing. But I got stuck on its opening lines. Because even though it didn't speak at all of my personal or family experience this year, it described in two sentences my true feelings about the past year, while also convicting me.

Because in that moment I remembered feeling much the same thing before. In fact, I remembered preaching about much the same thing several years ago. Some of you may recall that 2016 wasn't a great year for me either, and in my first sermon of 2017, I spent a fair amount of time rejoicing in the reality that it was over. I recalled looking up news stories highlighting how bad 2016 was, many of which put it in the running for the worst year ever.

One of them was from the New Yorker, entitled “*The Worst Year Ever, Until Next Year.*” I went back and revisited it, and this is what I found:

It's in the nature of years to feel exhausting in retrospect. The world is punishing; we have short collective memories and a cognitive bias that makes us recall bad events more vividly than good ones. The awful folkways of social media—which encourage us to call out bad things in dramatic fashion and then pretend that we've been helpful—have led to something of an annual conclusion. Google searches for “worst year ever” spike each December. Every year is the worst year ever, we've started to say.²

Sure enough, in addition to the expected 2019 laments, I easily found stories from late December 2018 from *USA Today* and *Time* magazine citing 2018 as the worst year ever³, along with an article calling 2017 “The Year of the Dumpster Fire.”⁴ I didn't go any further. Seems I had fallen victim to another trend. And I don't like being trendy.

Which brings me back to our scriptures. Earlier this month, I was reading a commentary on the lectionary texts – all four of which are being read in our worship gathering today – and Barbara Brown Taylor referred to one of them as having been “airlifted” out of its context to fit into the liturgical Christmas season.⁵ Thinking back on that phrase, it occurred to me that this is exactly what I was yearning for during the Christmas season this year (and perhaps ironically, back in 2016 when these texts had last been featured in the lectionary cycle). I longed to be “airlifted”

¹ Andrea Diaz, CNN. December 25, 2019. Online: <https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/25/world/good-news-stories-of-2019-trnd/index.html>.

² Jia Tolentino. December 14, 2016. Online: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/the-worst-year-ever-until-next-year>

³ <https://time.com/5460027/worst-year-history/> and <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/voices/2018/12/28/worst-year-ever-2018-trump-1968-vietnam-war-column/2239141002/>

⁴ <https://behavioralscientist.org/2017-worst-year-ever-depends-youre-asked/>

⁵ *Feasting on the Word*. Year A. Vol. 1. P. 147

out of the present, and into some imagined magical land of Christmas bliss. I wanted to escape – to be saved from the turmoil and anxieties of life.

If Joseph had a phone, I can easily imagine him googling “worst year ever” one night along the road while he was fleeing Bethlehem on the way to Egypt. His fiancé had turned up pregnant with a child that was not his own and he had to wrestle with what to do about that. After making the decision to stick with Mary despite the certain social costs and raise her baby as his own, he had to hit the road late in her pregnancy and she ended up giving birth to their first child in a stable. And before he knew it, he was on the road again, made a political refugee by a jealous and violent ruler. I don’t know if he ever knew what happened to those who were left behind in Bethlehem, but even if not, it had been a pretty rough year for him and his family.

But that *is* the Christmas story. The Holy Family opened their gifts, and two verses later, they are running for their lives. And if they were not immune from struggles, who are we to expect anything different? In fact, the writer of our Hebrews text for today makes the exact opposite point, saying that “It was fitting that God...should make the pioneer of...salvation perfect through sufferings,” and that in becoming “like his brothers and sisters in every respect...because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.”⁶

In speaking about the story we have from Matthew today, commentator Daniel Schultz says this:

*Matthew’s audience probably did not live through a slaughter of innocents in Bethlehem. They may or may not have had to run for their lives down to Egypt or anywhere else. But they did live in a nation occupied and occasionally terrorized by foreign troops. They know about Rachel weeping and mourning for her lost children. Matthew tells his audience, in other words, that Jesus knows what it’s like to stand in their shoes.*⁷

Far from “airlifting” us out of troubling times, Jesus was born into the midst of ours. Instead of saving us *from* our trials and struggles, the coming of Jesus saves us *in* our trials and struggles, for he and his family knew well what such distress was like.

I confess, at the heart level, I had forgotten. Perhaps we all do from time to time. But thanks be to God, I was reminded. And maybe that is how Christmas ultimately works.

I don’t know what 2020 will bring, but I do know this – I won’t journey into it alone. None of us will. For Christ has come, and remains with us still. And today....well, I still have to say I can’t wait for 2020. But I will move into the new year looking to catch glimpses of Jesus along the way...

⁶ Hebrews 2:10,17-18, NRSV

⁷ “Reflections on the Lectionary.” *The Christian Century*. December 18, 2019. p. 19.