

RUUMC 12-06-2020
Luke 1:26-38
“The Faith We Have- Giving Up On Perfect”

As we begin the second week of Advent this year, I wonder: What is your favorite Christmas memory? Is there a Christmas that stands out for you as the best ever? When did it happen? Was it last year? 10 years ago? 20? 30?

Every year during the Seasons of Advent and Christmas, I remember the Christmases of my childhood in Korea. Winter break was always a time of rejuvenation after months of school. For those of you who do not know, Winter in Korea lasts several months. They are extremely cold months, like upstate New York in Winter or Winter on Mammoth Mountain here in California. Just think of the coldest you've ever been, and that's probably close to Korea in Winter. Every Christmas Eve during those cold Winters, my family and I would attend the Candlelight Service at our home church. The magnificent choir sang Christmas carols so beautifully. The pipe organ added depth and grace to our Christmas cantata. The lighted Nativity set was always displayed by the pulpit.

After the Candlelight Service each year, our family would stay to spend time with our Church family, sharing Christmas cards and greetings. I remember that almost every Christmas card we gave or received featured an image of baby Jesus, sleeping soundly in Mary's arms. In those images, Mary and Joseph looked peaceful and happy. The Holy Family usually were surrounded by beautiful candles and a bright star, depicting a warm, safe, and cozy first Christmas.

When we got home from the Candlelight Service, my brother and I would stay up all night watching Christmas movies, drinking hot chocolate, and snacking on movie popcorn. The movies we watched were from America, produced in Hollywood. They showed us what we thought Christmas was for everyone here. We saw smiling faces gathered around huge tables, sharing Christmas gifts and gourmet foods. The homes in those films looked like mansions to us and were decorated with Victorian-style Christmas ornaments. When I watched those movies, I wanted to be there with the beautiful and (to us) exotic decorations from another era. Christmas in Korea was very different for us. As a child, I envied the children in those movies. Everything in those Hollywood movies presented a perfect, flawless Christmas.

When I moved to America it was to study at a college in downtown Los Angeles, near Hollywood. Ironic, huh? I remember one particular and beautiful Fall day during my studies in America, when I became violently ill while working in the Chem Lab and was taken to a nearby ER. There, the doctors decided that I needed another surgery to fix my congenital pancreatic disorder. The surgery had a much greater risk than the surgery I'd had years earlier for the same thing. The surgery the doctors in LA recommended had more than a 20% mortality rate during the operation.

Even worse, the doctors feared that, even if I survived the surgery, I would be lucky to live another five years after it. The complications from the surgery were that severe. I was 26 years old. In those days, I spent all my time working around the clock to finish my Ph.D. in Chemistry. I dreamed of being a professor, of teaching future scientists for the betterment of humanity. Suddenly and completely out of the blue, I found myself standing on the brink of life and death.

I still remember watching the beautiful sunset as the physicians delivered the bad news that day. It was the day before Thanksgiving. During the season of gratitude and joy, I was struggling with my own mortality. As soon as I was medically stable, the hospital discharged me. While I did not have to decide about the surgery immediately, I still had to make a decision. I spent the Season of Advent struggling with what I should do. Should I have the surgery? If so, when? Should I leave some sort of final message for my family before the operation? What would I do to make the most of the 5 years of life I would have left after the surgery? Shopping malls and TV commercials were filled with jingles and uplifting Christmas carols. People were shopping and decking the halls as they celebrated the holidays. My own tragedy kept me from being merry and bright that year.

Although it turned out much better than the doctors originally expected, that experience taught me a valuable lesson: Sometimes, life just does not make sense. Sometimes life is unpredictable. I am sure that I am not the only one here to have learned this lesson, whether you learned it in your own life or from the lives of others. When I served as a Hospital Chaplain, I saw how people were affected by painful events in their own lives. Usually, it was my job to offer them support and care as I ministered to them in the midst of their tragedy. But how do you comfort a mother wailing for the loss of her 10-year-old son who died on Christmas Eve after many years of battling leukemia? What do you say when she questions why such a thing would happen to her and her family when they were faithful followers of Christ?

What do you say to the mom of a 14-year-old girl who died on Christmas day after years of cancer treatments? Before she died, the young girl asked her mom to help make her final wish come true. You see, her dad left them when she was just a toddler. At 14, she had seen her dad 2 times in the 10 or 12 years after he left. When it was clear that she would die from her cancer, she asked her mom to contact her dad and ask him to celebrate her final Christmas with her. After much discussion, her dad agreed to come to the hospital to see her for a few hours on Christmas Day. The patient waited and waited for the day to come so she could be with her dad for the last time before leaving this earth. It was her fervent prayer. Sadly, she died before her dad arrived that Christmas Day. Her mother was devastated at the loss of her only child at Christmas. And her dad missed his last

opportunity to make amends with his daughter. How could I possibly minister to them in such circumstances?

I do not know what challenges you are experiencing this Advent. Maybe you lost your job during this pandemic. Maybe your spouse asked for a divorce. Maybe you aren't speaking to someone in your family or someone you love has died from COVID-19 or an accident or other illness. Maybe you were just diagnosed with a chronic illness yourself. Maybe your mental health is suffering from the isolation of this pandemic.

Sometimes, my friends, no matter how hard we try to do right, bad things happen. Life is rarely perfect or flawless like those American Christmas movies my brother and I watched when we were young.

In fact, the Bible is filled with stories of faithful people whose lives were far from perfect. Take John the Baptist. Before his birth, God called John to prepare the way for the Messiah. God sent angels to tell everyone that John was called to greatness, that John would walk in God's ways. As a man, John lived in the wilderness. He survived by eating honey and locusts. He wore uncomfortable clothes. His devotion to God's call on his life was extreme. When Jesus began his public ministry, he went to John to be baptized, recognizing and affirming the importance of John's ministry. Some time later, John was beheaded to satisfy Herod's wife. Even though he was called to greatness in God's realm, John's life on earth ended in uncertainty and tragedy, much like the life of Jesus.

How about Mary? She was a young woman, engaged to be married to Joseph, and turned up pregnant. While we know her pregnancy by the Spirit of God was a miracle, it still put her life at risk. The people of her village could have stoned her for her unplanned pregnancy. To bring God's Son into this world, the teenaged Mary endured potential risks, shame, and social pressure. I don't know about you, but that does not sound like the life of one favored by God, does it?

Mary and John teach us that being faithful to God's call on our lives does not guarantee that our lives will be problem-free. Sometimes our lives become more difficult because of the choices we make when we answer God's call, when we follow Jesus. However, in the stories of John the Baptist and Mary and many others in the Bible, we find one commonality – God did not leave them to travel the difficult path alone. John the Baptist had his disciples. Mary had her cousin Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist. Elizabeth understood Mary's vulnerable situation because she had answered God's call as well.¹ Remember Elizabeth's pregnancy? She had no children but became pregnant in her old

¹ Mike Slaughter, *Christmas Is Not Your Birthday: Experience the Joy of Living and Giving Like Jesus*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 32.

age when she said yes to God. Her pregnancy was as much a miracle as Mary's -- and almost as controversial. Sometimes we find God's faithfulness in our relationships with other people.

Have you ever experienced God coming to you through the people around you when you were struggling with life's challenges? I have. While wrestling with my own mortality during that Season of Advent so many years ago, God showed up in the support I got from people around me. My family and my church family prayed for me and cared for me and helped me get through the darkest time in my life. They opened my eyes to see how God comes to us even when life is messy, even when tragedy strikes. They offered a tangible demonstration of God-With-Us when we are lowly, when we are most vulnerable. From the beginning, Jesus identified with the most vulnerable. He was born in a manger in a little town called Bethlehem. Throughout his life, Jesus ministered to the marginalized and the vulnerable. He wept when his friend Lazarus died. He forgave the woman caught in adultery. He reached out to the condemned: the Samaritan woman at the well, the tax collector Zacchaeus, lepers, and the blind. When there was pain and tragedy, Jesus was there.

Beloveds, life is not perfect. We all carry burdens this season – whether they are related to our health, family, finances, relationships, careers, or some combination of them all. With all that has happened this year, it is understandable that we may not feel like celebrating this season. Yet whatever our circumstances, we know that Emmanuel, God-With-Us, will come whatever life brings our way. In the baby and the man, Jesus came into this imperfect, mad world to live with us. To bring us back to God. To give us hope. Our Advent faith is in the God who continues to come to us no matter what life throws at us. This is the Christ whom we celebrate in Advent. Likewise, Christ calls us to be the agents of God-With-Us in our families, our friends, our neighbors: with all who are struggling from life's challenges.

Our Scripture reading today, the Word of the angel to Mary, assures us that the Holy Spirit will come upon us and the power of the Most High will overshadow us even when life does not make sense, even when life is messy. (Luke 1:35, *NRSV*) May this be our faith as we prepare ourselves for the arrival of the Christ child once again and for his promised return. May Advent joy, hope, love, and peace be with us all. Amen.