



## Hit By A Sledgehammer

December 29, 2019

I dunno about all of you, but my tree is definitely still up. I've never quite understood those folks who busy themselves taking down the tree literally first thing on the morning of December 26<sup>th</sup>. No disrespect if any of you are sitting here today, of course. To each their own. To be quite honest with you, more than a few years go by that our tree will remain up deep into NFL playoff season, coming down only shortly before the Super Bowl. (Regardless of whether the Steelers are still in the running or not.) I figure it's so much work to put up all the decorations, I'm gonna enjoy them for a good long while, darnit.

A Jewish man, a Muslim, a Hindu, and an Atheist are asked to help decorate a Christmas Tree. The Jewish man says, "My faith believes that Christ was just a really wise man, but we don't celebrate Christmas. I'll put 7 candles on the tree to represent the Menorah." The Muslim says, "My faith believes Christ was A holy guy, just not THE holy guy, so we don't celebrate Christmas. I'll point ornaments to the east; I can use it to tell me which direction to pray in." The Hindu says, "Christ is basically an incarnation of Krishna and we are always happy to have a religious festival as long as there is food." The Atheist says, "I don't believe in your Christ or your god and I think you guys are all a bunch of idiots for believing in some magic man in the sky, but I guess I better help because otherwise Santa's going to leave me coal again."

The season immediately after the conclusion of the holiday can be very rough for some of us out there. The Post-Christmas-Blues are a very real thing. There are enough folks out there already struggling with Seasonal Affective Disorder at this time of year. The lack of sunlight playing around with our brain chemistry is a real medical disorder – don't make any mistake. Depression and anxiety are already heightened at this time of year for many. In my sermon the first week of Advent I referenced all those to whom, the Christmas season looks a little different – those who can't afford gifts or decorations, those who are alone at the holidays, who've lost people around Christmastime, those from broken families.

It is specifically because this is quite literally the darkest time of year, that the ancients of old invented "Christmas" in the first place – which, as you all know, was of course a pagan holiday before it ever became a Christian one. Pagan religions were celebrating the birth of their gods – complete with using evergreen trees as decorations, and with the exchanging of gifts – hundreds of years before Jesus came along, and Christians eventually appropriated the holiday for their use. The ancients chose this time on the calendar to celebrate their gods being born in human flesh, for the express reason that at this darkest time of year, the human heart needs light and joy and a reason for hope, now more than at any other time. We needed *something* to celebrate.

This time immediately after Christmas can hit some like a sledgehammer – the joy of the holiday is gone. The Christmas parties are over, the gifts have been exchanged, it's time to take down all the darn decorations, and now we're left with the prospect of several months of darkness and cold with precious little to look forward

to. Once the Christmas lights go out, and the loved ones have all boarded their flights back home, a lot of folks just sit down and ask themselves: “What’s next??”

Some folks live their entire lives in anticipation of *the next thing*, you know? The folks who spend most of their time looking forward to that next special event in their lives – the next holiday, the next vacation. The next break from the ordinariness of our daily routine – the routine which some of us can’t bear to admit out loud, how much we hate. Or at least, maybe not *hate*, but find empty, unfulfilling, and barren of soulfulness and purpose.

And our Gospel reading today doesn’t appear, at first glance, to offer us a whole lot of hope and encouragement, does it? We were just celebrating the glorious birth of the Christ Child four days ago! Only four days ago, we witnessed that wonderful moment in history when God became one of us, walked as we walked, hungered and hurted and lived and loved and laughed as we do. Only four days ago, we sung Joy to the World at the top of our lungs, surrounded by family and friends and candlelight, with trees and gifts and banquets ahead of us, and all seemed right with the world.

And now, in today’s Gospel, it all seems so very far away, doesn’t it? It sure feels like God’s plan for salvation went to hell in a handbasket awfully quickly. The Holy Family takes flight to Egypt to escape the psychotic clutches of Herod, and Herod, being the insane sociopath he is, heartlessly slaughters all the male children in Bethlehem two years and younger. Our sisters and brothers in the Roman Catholic tradition have historically referred to these as the “Holy Innocents” - they even dedicate a feast day to them. Herod does this in a jealous attempt to stamp out the competition before this new would-be King of Israel could come of age and threaten his position.

You ever wonder what Joseph and Mary must have thought to themselves as they took to flight? Ever wonder if they looked at each other and asked, “Did we misunderstand the angels? This kid *was* supposed to be the Messiah, right? Did we hear the message correctly? Surely this must be a mistake, there’s no way this child will live long enough to redeem Israel when he’s already running for his life at less than two years old!”

And of course, this not even beginning to address the tragedy of, what to say to the parents of the Holy Innocents – looking back now in retrospect, it’s easy to see Luther’s Theology of the Cross at work here. The Holy Innocents did *not* suffer in vain – the Messiah did survive, and went on to redeem all humankind – but I wouldn’t recommend approaching the families of the children and telling them that. At that moment in time, I’d venture to guess they wouldn’t be much impressed, when all they knew was that they’d just lost their children.

In the midst of all the darkness of this tragic story, undoubtedly the Holy Family, as well as the families of the Holy Innocents, were certainly also asking, “What’s next??”

Well, sisters and brothers, I can only offer you this... the Gospels never give us any indication at all, that Joseph and Mary ever doubted, ever gave up their faith, in their Son's mission. They persisted. They pushed on. They trusted in blind faith that what the angels had told them would come to pass. And with the Christ Child in their midst, lighting their way, God took care of them – *not* meaning that God took away all of their griefs and sorrows in this life. But meaning that God gave them the hope and the sure strength to carry on – brightness in the midst of the cold and dark world around them. *That* is the meaning of Christmas. *That* is what the Gospel is all about. The unconditional and boundless love of our God overpowering every evil the devil can throw at it.

The Holy Family takes flight to Egypt – now of course, you know that for thousands of years, the land of Egypt has been an allegorical symbol, for the Jewish people, of oppression, of slavery, of bondage, and of fear. This meaning could not have been lost on Joseph and Mary as they journeyed there. (A journey of probably around six hundred miles, by the way.) But just as Yahweh eventually led the Israelites in Exodus out of their slavery to despair and suffering, and into the Promised Land, so too the Holy Family did not remain in Egypt forever, figuratively or literally speaking – with the Christ Child alighting their path, God eventually brings them back home.

Hope in the midst of the howling dark. Here we are, only four days removed from Christmas Day, and we're back to the theme of Advent – watchfulness, waiting, anticipation. The perpetual trust that our God will *always* find a way to light our path in the midst of fear and despair, and deliver us back into faith and trust in the goodness of God's promises again. This is the Gospel message. Christ has triumphed over sin and death, has conquered hopelessness and sorrow, has defeated the darkness and the powers of this world, forever.

In our Old Testament reading, Isaiah writes: "For he said, 'Surely they are my people... and he became their savior in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.'" *In their distress*. Meaning, *right in the midst of it*. God does not promise that the pressures and stresses of this life will be miraculously lifted up from our shoulders... sometimes, maybe they'll be taken away. Sometimes, they won't. But just as God lifted up and carried the Holy Family through the trials and tribulations of life, so God does for us today. *That* is God's answer when we ask, "What's next??"

Coming back to my opening thoughts – sisters and brothers, we certainly all can empathize with the folks who look forward to that next "big thing" in their lives, because they're not exactly super happy with their day to day routine – trust me, there was a time in my life when I wasn't terribly fulfilled with where I was on a day to day basis either. But if we're only ever looking forward to that *next thing* all the time, we spend the majority of our life being unhappy right where we are. There are three hundred sixty-five days in a year – say maybe thirty of those days are spent on vacations, holidays or special occasions – that leaves three hundred thirty-five days a year to be miserable while we wait for the next *big thing*.

The Holy Family likely was not thrilled with where they were on that first Christmas night. I'm sure a filthy stable is not exactly where Mary envisioned herself giving birth to the Messiah, right after the angel left her. But God finds us, where God finds us. Once the Christ Child arrived in their lives, Joseph and Mary were right where God needed them to be. All was right with the world in that moment. Then as they took flight to Egypt, I'm sure they weren't terribly thrilled with that, either – picking up and leaving behind their friends, their family, their home, their jobs, their possessions – everything they knew. But the Christ Child was right there in their midst with them, lighting the way.

As we take down the lights, trees and tinsel, finish putting away the gifts, and polish off the last of the cookies – we will remember that the reason for the season, the Christ Child, isn't going anywhere. He is still here. He's arrived in our midst. And he will continue to light the way for us. God will take care of us as long as he is with us. That doesn't mean God will take away everything that hurts – like the long, cold winter ahead, which may seem so lonely and so barren. But as long as the Christ Child is in our hearts, and we continue to see his face – especially as we return to this place, and see him in one another – we will have reason to proclaim Joy to the World. No matter, "what's next." Amen.