

The Perfect Christmas

A Christmas Eve Meditation by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
On December 24th, 2019

A few weeks ago on the 2nd Sunday of Advent, the choir, with orchestral accompaniment, sang Brian Wilhour's marvelous cantata *Light from Light*. It was magnificent and moving, as his works always are—and this year I think I was touched even more deeply than I usually am. Perhaps that was because I knew something of how he wrote it while he was recuperating from his bike accident. Maybe it was because I looked in the choir and knew something about each of the singers & their lives.

But it was wonderful.

At our Session meeting later that week, Chris Payne mentioned in his devotional that Brian told the choir during one of the cantata rehearsals. "I know it's not going to be perfect. There will be mistakes. Somebody will come in a measure too early, somebody else might hit a wrong note. Just try to stay focused and do your best. It'll be what it'll be." When the Sunday morning performances came, I'm sure it wasn't absolutely perfect—but you couldn't have told me that. It wasn't perfect, I'm sure, but man, was it glorious.

So many of us in this part of the world labor under the illusion—**whether we admit it or not**—that we can somehow reach perfection. It even happens with preachers on Christmas Eve. We think because it is our Super Bowl we have to come up with the perfect meditation.

The holiday season can bring it out in most any of us. We hustle and bustle to try to create the perfect Christmas experience with family and friends, with the food prepared flawlessly, with the place settings laid out just so, with just the right gift for each person dear to us. We read the Christmas cards and letters from our friends and relatives, we see their family pictures and hear about their travels and accomplishments, and perhaps the tiniest bit of envy creeps in—as we compare our insides to their outsides.

Because, beyond the images of ourselves we may try to project and protect in our Christmas letters and carefully curated social media identities, we know all about the messy realities of life.

We know, don't we?, about the emotional stresses and financial strains, the jobs that aren't going so well, the fractured family relationships, the unmet expectations, the addictions and other forms of mental illness that are part of our experience, so many of us. Any notion we have of living the perfect life rubs up against death, and disease, and disappointment and the sheer human frailty of the people, all of the people, God puts in our lives—including ourselves. So much for perfection. Which is why the real meaning of Christmas is so important to hold onto and meditate on tonight and throughout the year.

Because what the Christmas story says is that God's love came—and God's love still comes—into the world **as it is** and our lives **as they are**, not as **we wish they were**.

To wit: Jesus was not born in a royal mansion with a well-manicured garden out front and behind. There wasn't even room for him in the crowded inn. He was born in a barn, amid the stink and mess and muck of sweat, straw, and dung—and placed in a manger, a feed trough for the animals. His mother was Mary, a brave teenager if there ever was one who said yes to God and became pregnant

out of wedlock. His father was Joseph, a good man who came to accept what was, even though it was far from what he had imagined it would be.

The first people to come to the stable and greet Jesus were the shepherds, the smelly underclass of their society, sent to see him by angels who deigned to sing to them. All of that ran counter to established ideas of perfection, then and now. It wouldn't be how anybody would draw it up, except for the One who comes to us in raw, human vulnerability and is made incarnate in an imperfect world and through imperfect people like you and me. That first Christmas wasn't perfect, but man, was it ever glorious.

That's how the One whose love Jesus came to embody is made manifest in the world still. Not in a set of unperturbed and impassive ideals from on high at some remove from life as we know it, but in imperfection and vulnerability that plays itself out **in the real world** with complicated decisions to be made. That's where God's glory comes in. CS Lewis wrote that the word translated glory from the Hebrew—the word KAVOD— means weight. So that glory is God's weighty presence. It's in the real world that God's weighty presence can be beheld—in the imperfection of what is. In vulnerability, like a baby born in a stable and laid in a feed trough.

Or the friend or family member who forgives us or whom we forgive. Or the person who lends us a hand or an ear or a shoulder to cry on when we admit that life is just too much for us to handle on our own. Or the fellow traveler on life's journey who risks issuing a word of challenge to us.

God comes to us in them **and** in the ones we write off or the people we **other**—acting as if they are a “them” when really we're all us. The God Jesus came to embody comes in the hungry and thirsty, in the prisoners and immigrants, in the sick and the vulnerable poor, all of whom, at least at times, it might be more convenient to ignore.

God comes to us in imperfection. This past week, we had our third annual Hypothermia shelter week here. On the coldest nights of last week, we provided a place to sleep and good food to eat over in the Meeting House for up to 30 of our fellow children of God who were experiencing homelessness. Any pretense of living the perfect life disappears when you live that close to the edge.

Like a number of the rest of you, like a lot of the rest of you, I did what I could to help out. I spent at least a couple of early mornings and a couple of evenings helping through the week. Singing carols and conversing with some of our guests, seeing real human connections get established between people from very different backgrounds, watching the light click on as some of us started to think to ourselves what it must be like to live a week or a year or more in the circumstances our guests face. Oh last week wasn't perfect, but it was glorious.

On the afternoon of December 12th, just a few hours before Chris Payne shared his story at session about Brian telling the choir that the cantata wasn't going to be perfect, we had a memorial service in this space.

The service was for Jim Wright, who with his dear wife Betty, had been an Immanuel member for more than 25 years. For the last ten of those years, Jim, who had been a brilliant economist whose life was dedicated to helping others through international development, was afflicted with severe dementia, which got to the point several years ago where he could no longer even talk.

My sermon on that occasion was based on the beatitudes, and how Jesus pronounces blessing on people who are vulnerable and whose lives are dedicated to helping those in need. I went on to ask what else a blessed life might consist of. I said, *Well, from Jim's life we know it doesn't mean that we get to skip hard times in life. It doesn't mean we avoid occasional times of depression, or the ravages of dementia, or the experience of death. It doesn't mean we get to miss out on mourning. It means we get comforted. It doesn't mean we get to take a pass on being poor in spirit—it means we get to experience the kingdom of heaven when people come around and support us. The blessing Jesus pronounces, I said, is that there will be meaning in the midst of the messiness.*

Jim's life wasn't perfect, but parts of it, parts of it, including the way his wife loved him to the end and his neighborhood rallied around them both—parts of it were just glorious.

Friends the glory of this night—and the glory of this life-- is not that we get to avoid the darkness, it is that the light of God's love shines right in the middle of it, right in the middle of the imperfection.

So go ahead and try to have your perfect Christmas. But if it's not perfect, remember that God's going to be there just the same. And remember the words of Leonard Cohen, words I return to often on Christmas Eve:

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.*

In Jesus' name. Amen.