

## Sermon

### “Imperfectly and Unexpectedly Perfect”

December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

Based on Isaiah 7:10-14 and Matthew 1:18-25

#### SCRIPTURES:

##### Isaiah 7:10-14

<sup>10</sup> Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, <sup>11</sup> Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. <sup>12</sup> But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. <sup>13</sup> Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? <sup>14</sup> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. [NRSV]

##### Matthew 1:18-25

<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup> “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. [NRSV]

**OPENING PRAYER:** Loving God, as the Word became flesh and came to live among us, so may your Spirit transform the words we hear today to be your Living Word, alive and present with us; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

##### Third Sunday of Advent

Today is the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent. We’re in the home stretch. Christmas Day is only 10 days away! Are you ready? Are you excited? Or, are you maybe just a little worn out? Because of all the hustle and bustle and dashing around (with no snow in

sight) are you maybe just a tad sick of Christmas already and feel like you're just ready for it to get here finally and get gone? After all, think about what we've been through already ... weeks' worth of Black Friday, Cyber Monday, Christmas trees, shopping malls, and parking lots with no empty parking spaces; lines to see Santa Claus, Christmas carols on your favorite radio stations since before Thanksgiving, attending parties and gatherings on top of already busy schedules, spending money (maybe more than you planned to spend), and there's still nine more days to go until "The Night Before Christmas."

### **Christmas Movies**

This is why at about this time every year I begin to wonder about how relatable this whole Christmas thing really is ... with all the hubbub surrounding the season and the go-go-go schedules of getting ready for Christmas Day, are we missing out on truly relating to the Christmas story. And, this is why I love so many awesome Christmas movies because they help me relate to the characters in those stories! Indeed, the movies are one of my favorite parts about Christmas—I never get tired or sick of good Christmas movies.

Now, my family tends to find the Hallmark or Lifetime channel and watch the more dramatic and inspirational (some might say "sappy") movies, but not me so much. Sure, I do like those kinds of movies sometimes, and I find great satisfaction in annually watching "It's a Wonderful Life" and "Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street." But, my favorite Christmas movies include a bit more laughter and comedy than you'll typically find on the Hallmark channel. It's not that I need artificial cheerfulness this time of year—I just prefer more recent Christmas comedies like "Home Alone" and "National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation!" For me, these are my classics!

### **Imperfect Characters**

These two movies provide great laughter and mindless entertainment. But, I enjoy them for more than just good Christmas fun. I enjoy these stories because they are familiar. Sure, the plots can be a little far-fetched, but any one of us, or our families, can relate at some level to them. Movies and stories like these have imperfect characters we can connect with ... like the little boy Kevin in "Home Alone"—which of us has never felt frustrated enough with our parents or family that we didn't want them to just vanish;

which of us has never wanted to have the house to ourselves to do whatever we wanted with no one watching; which of us has never made bad choices and felt afraid when being alone for too long?

Or, like Clark W. Griswold in “Christmas Vacation”—which of us has never wanted the very best for those we love; which of us has never at some point felt cheated when our hard work didn’t pay off the way we expected; which of us has never lost our temper and said things we regret; and which of us doesn’t have crazy relatives like Randy Quaid’s character Eddie? And, these two main characters are not alone—other characters in their stories are just as imperfect and flawed—they are just as human.

### **Unexpected Situations**

Not only do these movies have relatable characters, but they also have unexpected situations that are relatable and that any one of us might similarly react to ... like how Kevin at first joyfully took advantage of his new-found freedom of having the house to himself, only later to feel the emptiness and solitude of being home alone; like how he did his best to buy some simple groceries and run errands, only to realize he really couldn’t do everything on his own and truly needed his family; like how he did his best to prepare and execute his plan to thwart the “wet bandits,” only to be saved by his seemingly frightful neighbor he had come to know earlier that evening as a friend and loving father and grandfather who missed his family, too.

Or, like how Clark was determined to open his home to his extended family, only to spend as much time as humanly possible avoiding them by putting up a world record amount of Christmas lights around his house; like how he in good faith and integrity wanted his family to have the best Christmas ever, only to ruin his own home and also his neighbor’s; like how he dreamed and planned of affording a pool in his backyard, only to panic and embarrass himself to the point of prompting his crazy cousin to kidnap his boss.

Throughout these Christmas stories, and in all of their funny moments, there is a subtle and deeply meaningful sub-plot that develops where Kevin and Clark both realize they can’t make the perfect Christmas happen all on their own. Kevin could not force his family to magically reappear, and Clark could not force the Christmas of his dreams to occur no matter how hard he tried. As humans, like us, they were limited, flawed,

and imperfect. And, more than they were aware of, or wanted to admit, they were dependent upon circumstances completely out of their control.

### **The First Christmas**

Come to think of it, they are all too similar to the characters in the first Christmas story. That first Christmas long ago included a variety of imperfect characters, too ... like Mary, who as a young woman found herself pregnant with no believable explanation, no marriage, and no options; like Joseph, who found himself in the incredibly awkward social circumstance of having a pregnant fiancé before it was the proper time to consummate the marriage; like the shepherds, who were most often a rabble of poor, unskilled laborers, and often times were ex-cons living on the fringe of society; and like the magi, who at the very least were Gentile foreigners from the East crashing a Jewish birthday party.

And, like the characters Kevin and Clark—and like us—they found themselves in some of the most unexpected situations ... like how a pregnant Mary might have been able to fabricate a believable story about conceiving a child, only to likely know that Joseph's only viable option was to dump her and abandon her to single motherhood; like how a kind and righteous Joseph might have concocted a great plan to not humiliate Mary, only to start having the craziest dreams with talking angels—not to mention how to figure out how to transport a very pregnant Mary some 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem for something as trivial as a census (a trip that likely would have taken nearly a week for them to complete); like how both Mary and Joseph arrived in Joseph's ancestral town of Bethlehem, only to find that all the family guestrooms were taken already, leaving them just a dirty floor in the family room next to where the animals were kept to crash for the night; like how a group of shepherds were avoiding trouble by minding their own business and their flock of sheep, only to become the first non-family people to see God in the flesh, as a baby in a manger; and like those wise scholars from the East, who traveled over a long period of time from very far away to bring gifts fit for a king, only to smell out King Herod's insecurities and his plot to destroy the Christ-child.

Indeed, throughout this first Christmas story, there is a subtle and deeply meaningful sub-plot that develops where Mary and Joseph both realize they can't solve

their problems all on their own. Mary could not explain her pregnancy, and Joseph could not deny God's will for him and his soon-to-be wife. As humans, like us, they were limited, flawed, and imperfect. And, more than they were aware of, or probably wanted to admit, they were dependent upon circumstances completely out of their control.

### **The Incarnation**

You see, this is what the perfect power of the incarnation is all about, my friends. This is exactly what the coming of Emmanuel, "God with us," means. God comes to us, and God is revealed to us, in the midst of imperfect people and in unexpected places. Two thousand some-odd years ago, the first Christmas was not flawless or elaborate, but it was perfect.

Mary and Joseph were just common people. They were nobodies. And, nobody expected God to come among us through a bunch of nobodies. But, God chose to use the common for uncommon purposes, the insignificant for something significant, and the ordinary for something extraordinary! And, God still chooses to work in such perfect ways—through common, insignificant, and ordinary people like you and me. Like Mary, each of us are provided opportunities to be instruments of God's perfect grace. Like Joseph, each of us are provided opportunities to perfectly trust God in all circumstances, no matter how bizarre or seemingly impossible. Like the shepherds, each of us are provided opportunities to be perfect witnesses to God's will and purpose in our world. And, like the magi, each of us are provided opportunities to be gift-givers in God's perfect name.

Christmas is almost here. In ten days we will celebrate the birth of the living God—our savior, Jesus the Christ—who we know and proclaim to be Emmanuel, "God with us"—the one who was foretold by the prophet long ago: "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel;" (*Isaiah 7:14*) Emmanuel ... who came to us as a baby in a manger ... made possible in seemingly the most imperfect and unexpected ways. But, to God ... it was perfect.

Thanks be to God! Amen.