

Sermon for Christmas Eve

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Merry Christmas! Y'all look right cozy down there. It really is a treat to see so many faces I've come to know Christmas after Christmas, and you new folks aren't half-bad either. I'm tickled to've made it to Christmas this year. You know, ever since I missed Christmas to Covid a few years back, all the prep work and planning and proofreading feel a little less certain. Like, I know Christmas is always going to swing back around on the 25th, but I'm not so certain I'll see it. So, to get here candles, creche, and all, to get here carries a little more meaning. This is no ordinary acknowledgement to woo the audience, by the way. I mean it, I'm glad to see you.

There's something a little extra bittersweet to Christmas. Always has been, but it feels different now, doesn't it? Maybe this is just the natural progression of things, but when I think back to Christmas as a kid, everything was big and exciting and it happened for me. I didn't have to do anything but make my bed and put on an itchy sweater. Everything else just appeared like magic. Presents were exciting, sure, but what I really loved were all the chances to see family. And y'all, I come from two big families. Not Catholic big, but big enough for my wife to need flashcards to learn everybody's names. But that was the best part, all that family. And as cousins grew, they married and had kids of their own, and there was more family every holiday. One 4-foot-something inlaw used to say going to family get-togethers with us tall, scrawny folks was a visit to The Land of the Legs. You should see our stockings!

So yeah, I knew I'd see family, and I knew I'd meet more cousins, and I knew the chaos tornado would strike with wrapping paper and elves flying. It was nuts, but it was fun, and it was family, and I looked forward to it every single year. I can't tell you when that changed. I suppose it probably happened gradually. But one year, when I wasn't looking, that big massive chaotic Christmas was just a teensy bit less exciting and a teensy bit more fragile. I probably didn't realize it that first fragile Christmas, maybe not the second either. But in time, Christmas was less about seeing who had grown and who was new and more about how much grandma had shrunk and which favorite dish just didn't have the pizzazz it used to. Maybe some of the magic fled just by growing up, but some of it fell away for reasons too hard or too sad to see coming. Like a snow globe sitting on a shelf, nothing sparkled quite right. Sure, you could shake it and make it be festive for a time, but the shimmering always sank, Christmas joy turned to litter on ceramic ground.

Gifts and family and love persevered, but another change struck more sharply in that gap between one generation's time of spawning and the next's. Because in that lull of newborn appearances, older generations lost their sparkle and sank, too. One Christmas, the always-occupied chair by the fireplace stood empty, and even though Christmas remained standing-room-only, no one could bring themselves to sit in *that* chair. It wasn't ours. It belonged to another, and surely if we left it empty and waited long enough, Elijah himself would escort the dead back and reignite the party. But of course, he didn't, and the chair remained empty. Come Easter, we weren't afraid of the chair anymore, but another loss, this one not of a generation we were prepared for, another loss weighed heavy. Too much weight to carry in this world opened another spot at the table. By the next Christmas, a divorce opened up another seat, gin another, politics another still, and one or two seats still occupied threatened not to be the next go 'round, and for the first time in my life it registered that holidays were getting smaller and quieter but somehow just as chaotic. The snowglobe got harder and harder to shake, and family fell just the same.

A lot of us force ourselves to like holidays whether we like 'em or not. There's a real beauty in marking special days with special people in special ways. But for a lot of us, special days are complicated. Even with anger or grief or regret, even still we want the days to be special, but the pain of another holiday without what

once was or never was can't be avoided. Which is tough, because the entire world says you should be happy right now. "Rejoice! It's Christmas! Look, there's a baby!" And sure, we love those things, but they don't erase what lies beneath. We can't fake what the season demands of us, at least we can't do it well, or if we can, we can't do it for long. I mean, y'all, as much as we love each other and want Christmas to feel right, every single one of us is feeling some kind of stress, and odds are good that as much as you love your family, they aren't exactly helping with that 24/7. I wish we could take these holy days and let them hold our fullness. 'Cause There's room under the tree for a heavy moment. Stockings hold plenty of space for loss. Fireplaces draw eyes staring off into festive melancholy. And not only is that a part of Christmas, it should be.

That manger scene we know so well, this is obvious, but it was far from perfect. I can't imagine Mary was terribly happy with her accommodations, and you know Joseph kicked himself for forgetting to make reservations. Jesus was about as happy as any newborn screeching for that first breath, and a whole crew of strangers piled in to watch fresh from fields, foreign lands, and the firmament itself. No, this was pure chaos. A Silent Night, much as I love the hymn, it most certainly was not. And that chaos is part of what we love about it! Next time you see a nativity scene, ask yourself why don't we have more donkeys at Christmas parties. If it was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for us. Mary and Joseph's world was odd in that moment. Their family grew by one that year, but I wonder who they wished could've been with them. Maybe it was the census that kept them away from family, or maybe time and empire eroded who was left to see. Surely they wanted to share their baby, pass it around to parents and siblings and that one cool aunt. But they couldn't because they weren't there.

There's a book from one of my favorite singers, Nick Cave. "Faith, Hope, and Carnage" is the title. It's a heartbreaking and insightful series of interviews conducted after his teenage son died from a tragic fall. The writing took place long enough after that terrible loss that he could reflect on how drastically things changed after life emptied another chair. He describes a moment where he paced the same worn path through the halls of his house and caught a glimpse of his wife sitting at the kitchen table. She sat in dim light with a radio on the table in front of her and stared off into the infinite distance contained within the speaker. He knew then that nothing would ever be the same. Life had broken her more than he had known, and it had broken him more than he had realized. He wrote a poem that he'd later set to music from that scene, imagining his son as a tree in a garden with a tiny nest in the highest branches holding a bird with a wing and a wing with a feather. Cave says he himself died with his son, and his wife broke like a vow, but when the tree fell and returned to the earth, the feather spun upwards, further and further, spinning weather vanes all on its own. "Spinning Song," it's called, "Spinning Song" comes to an end beautifully in spite of all that brokenness and pain. Repainting the scene of his wife staring into the radio, he sings, "I love you, I love you, I love you. Peace will come. Peace will come in time. A time will come for us."

I hope I haven't brought you down too far this evening. There's plenty of room for good tidings and cheer, there always is come Christmas. But this year, hold space for more. Hold space for yourself, for the people you love, for everwhat Grinch you run into. Hold space for the places cheer hasn't infiltrated. Hold space for love, and if you're so inclined, hold space for Christ. We know his story holds more than simple cheer, but still we come back to remember, seats crammed full, one or two filled by new additions, one or two missing old friends. I meant it when I said I'm glad to see you, but maybe it's more. Maybe that "Spinning Song's" got Christmas right. So along with all the complicated feelings of this season, remember: "I love you, I love you, I love you. Peace will come. Peace will come in time. A time will come for us." Merry Christmas.