

“An (im)Perfect Christmas”

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Matthew 3:1-10

In those days John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness of Judea, crying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” He was the one of whom Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one shouting in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People from Jerusalem, all Judea and around the Jordan came to him, and all the region along the Jordan. He baptized them in the river Jordan as they confessed their sins.

Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized. John said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the judgment to come? Bear fruit that shows changed hearts and lives....

The first daffodil of spring. Bowling 300. An early-morning contemplation of the night sky. A knee-melting glance from a loved one after time apart. Tasting the season’s first tomato. Snowflakes dusting our eyelashes. A newborn’s fingers. That moment after singing Silent Night before extinguishing our candles on Christmas Eve.

These things and many more might be considered perfect, a moment we catch a glimpse of the holy. Our breath catches in our throat. We marvel. Then wondering why we seldom notice such moments anymore, we get back to what we were doing.

We all have such experiences. When we were children, they happened every day. As we grew older they came less often. Maybe you blamed it on growing up but I submit that adulthood is not the reason.

“Awe and Wonder” is the name of our new sermon series. In these weeks, I invite each of each to notice what gets in the way of our God-given sense of wonder and work to reclaim our awe.

When you were young, what everyday happenings always caught your attention and made you pause? Would you take a moment and jot down a few? (*pause*) Would you share? (*The sun rising every morning. The smell of laundry dried on the line. The gas coming on every time someone turned the knob on the stove. Handwriting. Fireflies.*) These wonders are different for everyone. When we’re young they’re so abundant we don’t how special they are.

But life gets busy. Maybe you didn't even notice your sense of awe vanished. Until one December you were getting out the decorations or listening to the music and all you felt was frazzled and maybe a little puzzled. You put on a good show for the ones around you but Christmas was missing something.

When my kids were young I was determined to do everything in my power to make sure they had the best possible Christmas season. I put all sorts of pressure on myself to create the *perfect* Christmas experience – magical, meaningful and memorable. I'd plan Advent wreath devotion times, going to church and caroling at the nursing home, cookie baking sessions – all so that Advent and Christmas would be both exciting and spiritually meaningful. And how much time did I spend, do any of us spend, on the road, in stores, or on the computer, shopping for just the right gifts?!

Each year, I labored to arrange this perfect Christmas, then when perfect didn't happen, I fell apart. I had failed, let everyone down. And in both the weeks of preparation and in Christmas itself, I felt cheated.

How often do we strive for the perfect Christmas, only to find that our efforts elevate our frustration and take us further from the true meaning of this day? What would it be like if, this year, we prepared ourselves for an *imperfect* Christmas? How would this change our expectations and experience? How might it lead to the bigger gifts promised us, of hope, peace, joy and love?

I cannot speak for you, but I intend for this year to be different. I will stay out of the rut of planning and stressing, buying and hustling that comes so easily. I will work to peel back the layers of familiarity of the season – the familiar carols, familiar food, familiar traditions and seek the awe and wonder within each during this holy time of year.

I'll let you in on a secret. I believe every time of year is holy. Every moment that we draw breath is a meant to be a celebration of God's love for us. God who loves all of creation enough to send Jesus, born in a manger, growing up in occupied Palestine, teaching and preaching until he is arrested and executed but even then loving his enemies. It is for love that God raises Christ. And he lives now, through you, through me, through every act that spreads that love of God.

But, back to familiar. I like familiar things. Watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Eating oatmeal chocolate chip cookies. Journaling on a Sunday afternoon. You have your favorite familiar routines too. And familiar is fine. It's only when we let the familiar become routine, especially in faith, that it takes a bad turn.

Advent is a familiar season for many of us. We're used to this four-week preparation period. Used to the circle of candles lit one a week to mark our approach to Christmas.

We've heard the stories – of Zachariah learning that his menopausal wife is going to give birth and that he's to name John. Of the angel Gabriel giving Mary similar information, only his name, Joseph learns in a dream is to be Jesus. We know that John grows up to be quite a character – harassing people who come to him to be baptized. “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the judgment that's soon coming? Produce fruit that shows you've changed your hearts and lives. And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire.” Talk about charismatic preaching.

Yet even if you come to church every Sunday and know all the stories, are you allowing yourself to be exposed, cracked open to reveal your core hopes and fears. Are you really allowing God to work on you so that you can truly welcome Christ into your life again in sixteen days?

If you're still determined to create the best Christmas ever – are you doing it by baking and shopping 'til you drop or by pausing each day, if only for a moment, to let God as Spirit soak you through with what this season is really about?

One of the marvelous things about Advent and Christmas is that every year we get to try again to get it right. A perfect Christmas is absolutely possible but to have it we have to let go of our assumptions and expectations of what makes a Perfect Christmas.

If you can think back to those perfect things we mentioned earlier, what do they all have in common? Each one is gone in a moment, fleeting. Snowflakes on the eyelashes melt. Newborn's fingers grow. The second bite of tomato never tastes as amazing as the first.

Such treasures happen in a moment. If we want to know such beauty or wonder, we need to accept that they're fleeting. When we try to stretch out a perfect moment, it vanishes like a mirage. Pops like a soap bubble.

We can take heart-pictures, recording within the sights and sounds, smells and feelings of a particular perfect moment. The cool moistness of mud between your toes, a sky so blue it makes your heart trip, a breeze brushing the fine hairs on your arms, the smell of rain coming. Our lives are made up of such moments and when we take the time to savor them, we'll never feel that we've missed out.

I was going to talk next about the need to take time, to give yourself time and permission to notice what's around you. I was going to say that this is a necessary part of experiencing awe and wonder. But then I then I thought of a friend I once knew who was in an almost constant state of motion. She had to keep busy or she would go crazy. Becky

was too busy living her life to contemplate. And yet, Becky was one of the most caring, faith-filled people I've known.

Yet, whether we're the contemplating sort or the go-go-go sort, we can each experience the holy, rekindling that sense of wonder and awe, when we practice awareness. I've talked about living in the moment before. Children do this effortlessly, at least until they start anticipating... birthdays... Christmas... growing up. Being in the moment allows them to notice all that's right in front of them

When we live mindfully, we too notice the gift of each moments. This is true whatever our life circumstances. Life is still precious and wonder-filled, if we but have eyes to see.

Sometimes we think that life is supposed to be good. When bad things happen we wonder what went wrong. But life is always full of both bad and good. Beautiful yet also so painful. This is the nature of life. We need to set aside our illusions about perfection being all good. When we can let perfection contains both good and bad, disappointment vanishes. We can live each day celebrating the gift that it is.

Consider John from our gospel lesson. This odd character doesn't have a paying job, sleeps in the open and eats insects. John is strange, clearly an outsider. He tells it like it is and leaders don't that. Yet, he's God's messenger, the insider announcing the coming of God in human form. John gets that God is showing up and he doesn't have time for people who are only lukewarm about cleaning up. Can we be as fully present in our lives as John is in his? Can we enjoy the familiar yet not lose an awareness of the holy, even in the most mundane, everyday happenings?

More next week, although you'll have to come to the 8:00 service to hear it.