

Sermon for Christmas Eve

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Y'all. I miss you. Here I am sitting in this church with Jim and Dianne, a beautiful Christmas tree, poinsettias, candles, all the trappings of Christmas Eve we're used to, and 17 rows of empty pews. You know, this time last year, we had so many folks we had to bring in folding chairs to pack around the back. Everytime a choir member walked by, someone had to tuck their Christmas stockings under their chair to avoid pedestrian collisions. We even had the aisle lined with chairs, and even then there was about as much room left for a late arrival as there was at the inn in Bethlehem. Your families came flooding to Hamilton, filled your homes, spilled over into hotels and AirBnBs. They made epic journeys to get here, bringing older members that couldn't get behind the wheel anymore and brand new ones that had never seen an airport. Some even made the epic journey all the way here from just down the street. But they came. And my God, did they. The Bishop was here, too, you remember that? She sang beautifully. You know, I picked the hardest chant in our book for her to do? I figured, she's the Bishop and it's Christmas, why not? Why not make today as beautiful and as grand as we can? And she did. We did. You did.

You know, Christmas is always sort of a funky holiday. On the one hand, we get to see family and eat good food and share our gifts with each other. We get to celebrate everything this day means for our faith, too. We share a precious story and warm our hearts by the Spirit of love that enters this world. For some, maybe the miracle of it all isn't especially compelling, but there's still a beauty and a warmth to the familiarity and all this story means in our memories. But together, we come to this place, we come to this moment, we come here, and we share the experience of being together, with whatever we think or believe colliding in a sacred place in countless sacred ways. On the other hand, Christmas -- let's be honest, Thanksgiving through New Year's -- on the other hand, this time of year isn't always jolly. There's the reality of gathering as family that can be beautiful but can also be really painful. Families typically aren't as picture perfect as those Christmas letters we send to each other. We're complicated things, and the ways we collide can be really difficult. We know we're *supposed* to be happy about being back home for the holidays, but we leave so many things behind. Projects and work and friends and chosen family -- they all go away or wait for us to return. And all those things that occupy our time or our brains or our search for fairness and justice, all those things get set aside while we return to the homes and the relationships we've grown up in and grown away from. We return to old habits, old ways of being with our parents, our kids, our siblings, and sometimes there's joy in that, but sometimes there's years of therapy flying out the window when your 45-year old kid brother says that one thing that always sent you over the top. And all that tension of who you used to be and who you've become gets so bad that you're honestly beginning to wonder just how bad it would be if you were to shove the turkey atop the Christmas tree and snag a half-full bottle of eggnog but not your coat as you storm out the door for a two-hour walk in single-digit weather. And when you finally get back to the house, well, that's just about time to grab that coat of yours, set the eggnog aside, and pile in separate cars to go to church. You know, it's funny. We have this idea in our heads that family is something to be cherished above all else. But we also complain to each other when family's around. Maybe we won't admit it, or maybe we really do love them to the Christmas star and back, but we all come to a point where it probably would've been better if they'd come to stay for a day less than they actually did.

All that to say, for all of you who have made that journey in the past, for all of you who made journeys like that somewhere else or came all the way here, for all of you who opened up your home and set aside your routines to make space for piles of loved ones under the tree, thank you. For being willing to bear all the things family is, the good, the bad, and the therapeutically demanding, thank you. And especially, for taking all that the holidays are, bringing your full and true and complicated collisions of yourselves to this place, for filling

seats all up and down the aisle and squeezing in uncomfortably close next to a stranger or that annoying manchild brother of yours, thank you. I thank you because you have given me memories to cherish, hilarious stories and bittersweet remembrances of your families. You've become my family here when my own is a thousand miles away. You've invited me in for the Southern delicacy that is pimento cheese and weird Yankee foods like salt potatoes and spiedie sauce. You've shared so much joy, gratitude, frustration, so much life with me, and this place has become more than just home. It's become a treasure that I desperately love to share.

So this evening, as I sit here with more candles lit on the Advent Wreath than there are people in the room, I can't help but mourn while we celebrate. This room should be bursting. Those doors should be straining to keep the cold at bay with so many bodies packed in. Shoot, we should be able to sit cheek by jowl without feeling anxiety about the integrity of our pandemic pods. But "should" doesn't do us much good. The reality is, we are here, wherever here is, and we are joining together with family and friends and total strangers to cram into a Zoom call, where all those little squares on the screen give us the illusion of being closer than we actually are. My little square feels like I'm only inches away from you, but my heart knows the distance all too well. And for many of us, these empty pews and these little squares represent something worse. The loss of this place in your Christmas celebrating routine is a painful reminder of other losses this year. We all know the many laments of 2020, loss of income, of housing, of security, of our image of our country, of our faith in humanity, of hope, and maybe, sadly, of a person or people dear to us. Were we in-person, that sting would be just as awful as it is now, an empty space in a pew that should've been too full. But here we are. A room of empty pews that should've been too full. The losses are real, and they sting, and they will lead to many tears tonight, if they haven't already. But you all know this. By saying that 2020 has been a terrible year, I'm not saying anything new. You all know what you've lost. You know what you miss. You might even know what you don't miss. But what you might not know, and what I want you to hear, more than anything else, is this. Your losses, your pain, your anger, the despair, the frustration, the fury, the I-can't-wait-for-2020-to-be-over, the I'm-honestly-a-little-worried-what-2021-will-bring, all that, *all* that is what it means to have faith.

The Bible is chock-full of all those things, well maybe not the 2020 stuff, but the Bible is full of people taking whatever it is they are living and naming it before God. The Psalms, the Book of Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Exodus, Micah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Job, everything from Paul, the Gospels, even that fever dream Revelation -- they're the stories of God's people telling God they've had enough or don't understand or can't bear whatever life gives them any longer. But they keep on. Keep on going to those uncomfortable places, keep on colliding with other people, keep on packing out pews and folding chairs and whatever the BC version of Zoom was. They keep on, and God holds them close.

Y'all, I miss you. I miss what this place looked like last year. I miss all the things that Christmas quote-unquote should be. But I've realized something, only in the past few days. I think it was sometime when we were out getting the Christmas tree to put up in this empty room. I've realized something. Whatever Christmas is this year, wherever it falls short of our memories or of what we hoped it would be, this, this right here, empty pews and pained hearts and guest room towels still in the linen closet, this right here is exactly what Christmas should be, at least this year. Because in spite of all that, we've set aside time to gather. We've set aside space to be with each other, as we can. We love our neighbors by staying away from the things we cherish. We give up our creature comforts, our happy song, our annual pilgrimage so that others might live. We give of ourselves, maybe not without grumbling, maybe not gracefully, but still, we give. And in putting the world ahead of ourselves, we honor this tiny birth and all that it represents.

These empty pews are a sad sight to see, but the more I look at them, the more I see your faith. It is your love that means we'll make it through all of this, maybe not unharmed, but we will make it through. In our baptisms, we make impossible promises, and we vow to uphold them by saying, whatever it is that must be

done, “I will, with God’s help.” We will make it through, with God’s help. What must be done this year is a brutal loss at the end of a brutal year of losses. But there is inspiration there, right there. Maybe you can’t see what I see, but right there, where a family of four kids would cram in with another family of four kids all dressed to the nines in welcoming-the-Messiah-into-our-world best, right there where they would be sitting, right there I’m inspired. Because those dozen people are where they should be.

Right there, where the same two ladies sit every Sunday of the year and then crush in their spots with grandkids and great-grandkids on a night like tonight, right there, I’m inspired. Because they aren’t here. They are right where they should be.

Right there, way in the back, right there in the pew the choir members get up from to make space for a family in from out-of-town, right there, where the blue pew cushions collect dust instead of people, right there, I’m inspired. Because right there, Christmas can happen because whoever those far-off folks are, they are right where they should be.

Every year, Christmas comes into our world no matter what our world looks like. There’s no constant shoulds to what this means, except for one: that whatever this world holds, whatever Christmas falls into, Christ comes into it. Christ comes to share in what we live, everything. Every joy, every loss, every sorrow, every should, Christ comes to know this. That little bundle of warmth on a chilly night, that little swaddled, wailing child, that little savior comes here, in the midst of a pandemic, at the end of a wild year, in the middle of a divided people, that child comes here. Right where he should be. I don’t know about y’all, but that’s the kind of good news I need to hear. It’s the kind of good news that shows me your faith when all I see is empty pews. It’s the kind of good news my heart so desperately needs to be reminded of. It’s the kind of good news that keeps me going.

So this year, this Christmas, right now, wherever you’re Zooming in from, know that you are precisely where you need to be. And know that Christ comes to you, even there, even in your living room, even in your pjs, even in your suit-coat and tie up top with board shorts and fuzzy slippers below. And right there, whatever it is your heart is screaming, name it. Name it before God. In the great tradition of all our prophets and of Christ himself, name it. It’s what you should do, with God’s help. It’s what all Christians should do, with God’s help. And this year, with God’s help, it’s what Christmas does.