

CHRISTMAS EVE HOMILY

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Isaiah 9: 2, 6

Luke 2: 1-20



I'll never forget the first time we visited my parents in Salt Lake City after Scott, their only grandchild at the time, started walking. Up to that visit in the fall of 1987, my parents' home always had that warm, cozy feeling that comes from the country clutter style of decorating. Every surface was adorned with salt glazed pottery, shaker boxes, candles, framed pictures or early American bric-a-brac. The total effect was charming, even if it was a lot to dust. I know. I've done it.

Anyway, this first visit after Scott was fully mobile, the work Grandma and Grandpa had done in preparation for their cherished grandson's visit was clearly evident from the moment we walked through the door.

Every tabletop had been stripped of all the usual knick-knacks, conversation pieces and family heirlooms. The high chair had been hauled up from the furnace room, cleaned off, and Grandpa had even added modern safety straps to the 31-year-old antique. Toys were artfully displayed in the corner to keep Scott entertained, bumper pads were installed in the crib, and diapers and wipers were stocked at the make-shift changing table. There were even a new pair of overalls hanging in Scott's room. And of course, the camera contained fresh film and batteries. This child's arrival had been anticipated and appropriate preparations had been made.

Advent is a time when we all prepare for the arrival of a child, hopefully with a sense of joyful anticipation, often to the point of exhaustion, sometimes to the point of frustrated defeat. Some of us may be feeling overwhelmed right about now, with fewer than 24 hours left before Christmas Day. I'm here this evening to say: *Let it go*. Whatever hasn't been done by this point will or won't, but either way, it's OK. Let go of the anxiety and the need to be perfect. Things didn't go exactly according to

plan for Mary and Joseph that first Christmas either, but God's plan was accomplished nonetheless.

Do you think Jesus' parents planned to take a 100-mile road trip (taking 10-11 days), just about the time their child was to be born? Do you think they anticipated Bethlehem to be so crowded that they would have to sleep in a barn? Do you think Mary dreamed of giving birth in a stable and using a feeding trough as a cradle? Who would imagine their son's first visitors to be shepherds?

No matter how hard we try, or how much we do to get ready, there is something about receiving the Savior of the world into our midst that is always surprising. Always miraculous. Always new. And something for which we can never be completely prepared. That something is God's amazing, never fully anticipated grace.

Each year Margi looked forward to Christmas. She loved the shopping and the baking and the decorating, the entertaining and the being entertained. She and her husband didn't have any children of their own yet, but she came from a large family, so there was plenty to do to get ready for the Big Day. Plus, she had to fit all this preparation around her full-time job. But she wasn't worried; there was plenty of time yet to get everything done.

Margi and Gene wanted children, but weren't having much success on their own. So they put the word out among family and friends that they would be interested in adopting a child. They also told Gene's business contacts in Ecuador to let them know should a child become available for international adoption.

The call came in October. A baby girl had just been born in Ecuador. The mother was not going to take her home from the hospital. If Margi could come down immediately, she would be allowed to care for the child herself while waiting for the paperwork to be completed. Margi was in Ecuador 3 days later. She and Gene had a beautiful baby girl. They named her Mia.

They started the application process for a foreign adoption immediately. There was paperwork and more paperwork. Margi and Mia

spent Halloween in Ecuador, knowing they'd be home for a Thanksgiving filled with gratitude.

Signatures were required by officials who never seemed to be in their offices. Another month went by, and Margi and Mia spent Thanksgiving in their small apartment in the village where Mia was born. Of course Thanksgiving is not observed in Ecuador; no turkey, no stuffing, no cranberry sauce or pumpkin pie. But Margi tried not to dwell on what she was missing and focused on Christmas in Pennsylvania with her whole family, including little Mia.

Days slipped into weeks. Every time the adoption seemed imminent, something happened to slow the process down. Margi strolled Mia in her carriage to city hall to conduct a piece of business, and all the offices were closed because of an obscure holiday or a general strike. This happened more than once. Gene visited for a few weeks, but then needed to return home.

And so Margi found herself on Christmas Day, far from home, eating a Christmas cookie for supper and feeling very much alone. But then she looked at the baby in her arms, and all the negative feelings melted away. She thought about Mary and her baby, surrounded by hay and animals. She was filled with the peace, love, joy and hope for the future that is Christmas and realized she didn't need all the other stuff—the decorated tree, the presents and big dinner—all the stuff we often think is essential for a “real Christmas.”

“For unto us a child is born...” Margi not only celebrated Christmas that year. In a way, she lived it. She learned in a very real and personal way not what, but who is at the heart of Christmas.

There is only so much planning we can do. We also need to make room for the Holy Spirit to break in to accomplish God's plan at Christmas and all year through. May God surprise you in ways you never imagined this Christmas, and may the hope, peace, joy and love born that miraculous night so many years ago be yours throughout the New Year.

Merry Christmas!