

Christmas Message 2019

Peace and all good things be yours!

When we look at our day and times, life is anything but perfect. And for many the celebration of Christmas is not the perfect picture that is seen on Hallmark Channel. When we look at the original Christmas, we recognize that the first Christmas was far from perfect.

Forced by government bureaucracy, Joseph brings his pregnant wife to Bethlehem for the sake of the census. Not a single relative with a bedroom to spare remains in the old hometown. And there is not a hotel room to be had. The young couple find some space out back, inside a barn filled with farm animals. There in that lowly place Jesús is born.

Joseph was still trying to understand all that was going on in his life. The months since he found out about this disturbing pregnancy, that nearly brought his relationship with Mary to an end, have been hard. The dream, demanding that he accept the child, was followed by this awkward travel to Bethlehem, and now this sleepless night in the barn.

Nor is it a perfect Christmas for Mary. The unease of pregnancy and the discomfort of travel give way to the pains of labor. Once her baby is delivered, Mary soon yields to her hunger for sleep. Yet this sleep is suddenly broken by the unexpected arrival of shepherds from the countryside. These rough workers approach and proclaim a story of angels filling the night sky with song. Falling to their knees, they ask to see the baby. They delight in Mary's little baby, then, quickly as they came, go off into the night, shouting songs of praises. They are drunk, but not with the wine of this world. Their hearts overflow with the drunkenness of heaven's joy.

Christmas in the barn is far from perfect. The circle around the manger is made up of people with problems. But Christmas in the barn is real. The baby is born and wrapped in humble cloth. Hard-living shepherds hurry to meet him. The small stable becomes a wide enough place to encompass the world, a world of imperfect people like you and me. The gospel makes clear that there is room at the manger for imperfect people.

The gospel comes to us as an awkward surprise, a Christmas gift we did not foresee. God in Christ accepts us in our incompleteness, our imperfection. God in Christ comes to us in an eminently imperfect, unmanageable way, with all the disruptions of a baby born in a barn and put to bed in an animal trough. God in Christ relates to our little, imperfect selves by becoming smaller, less powerful, more dependent than any of us who are old enough to walk and talk. The good news is that God knows our imperfection, and God loves us as we are. God does not require us to be perfect. God only asks that we become real, as real as the events in that Bethlehem stable, as real as divine love.

What we need to do is remarkably simple: put down the burden of the perfect Christmas and accept the freedom of the real Christmas. We can gather around the manger with people who have problems, like Joseph and Mary, with hard-living people like the Bethlehem shepherds. Here imperfect people like you and me finding a surprising acceptance.

May we celebrate the Christ, God's love and grace come to earth in human form. Jesus Christ is Emmanuel-God with us. God is with us ordinary people and wishes to do extraordinary things in and through us.