



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

December 8, 2013

"Have Yourself a Messy Little Christmas"

The Rev. Dr. Drew Hulse

Have yourself a merry little
Christmas,
Let your heart be light.
From now on, our troubles will
be out of sight.
Have yourself a merry little
Christmas,
Make the Yuletide gay.
From now on, our troubles will
be miles away.

*Chorus—Here we are as in
olden days,
Happy golden days of yore.
Faithful friends who are dear to us
Gather near to us once more.
Through the years we all
will be together
If the fates allow.
Hang a shining star upon the
highest bough,
And have yourself a merry little
Christmas now.*

*Words and Music by Hugh Martin
and Ralph Blane*

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Wasn't that an awesome song? Let's start with a Christmas quiz. Who knows what movie the song is from? "Meet Me in St. Louis" with Judy Garland. Check out the copyright of the song.

I have a confession to make. Can you keep a secret? I love Christmas. No really, I mean it. I love Christmas. I'm not sure if it is the little child that still lives in me, but I love Christmas. You know all those sentimental, sappy holiday movies? I cry. Every year. Don't judge me!

I'm so thankful that Thanksgiving is past because that means that I can legally listen to Christmas music without breaking any family rules.

I am the one who does most of the decorating in the house, with Cathy's permission of course. Most people spend Black Friday shopping, I spend it by beginning to put the lights up on the house. One of our biggest challenges when we moved to Hawaii and downsized our house to figure out where to put all of the decorations we owned. It kills me that there are decorations that don't make it up each year. How sad!

And this particular song, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas", really does it for me. According to the Meiers Briggs temperament analysis test I'm an ESFJ which means I tend to "golden age" the past. "Here we are as in olden days, happy golden day of yore." Oh yeah, it doesn't get any better than that...in my dreams that is.

But as much as I love Christmas, and as the words of the song said, we want things to be all perfect and nicely wrapped, more often than not, Christmas is, at times, more messy, than merry.

I know that growing up in my house, Christmas meant the onslaught of the baking season.

My mom was known for pumping out the cookies, and I mean by the hundreds, plate after plate. The kitchen was always a disaster area for weeks. We have taken to a similar tradition, though we try to hold it to one day per Christmas, but on that day, flour, cinnamon, sugar, yeast and butter are flying every where. It is one messy Christmas.

It could be you have your own version of a messy Christmas. Between shopping pressures, family expectations and tensions, messed up travel plans, economic challenges, not to mention the personal losses that happen in our lives, for some, Christmas can be all too messy.

Why can't it be like it was in the Bible, that perfect manger scene with the Prince of Peace sleeping in the hay? Well, look again. Let's take a look at that first "merry" little Christmas.

The birth narratives are found in Matthew and Luke. We are going to focus on the Matthew passage, but we'll check in with Luke along the way.

Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSV)
18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Verse 19 *Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.* 20 - *But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.* 21 - *She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."* 22 - *All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:*

23 *"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."* 24 - *When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 - but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

At this point in my ministry I figure I've done somewhere between 75-85 weddings. Weddings are great celebrations for all involved—bride and groom, families and friends. There is one thing you learn early in doing weddings and pre-marital counseling. You don't want something to go side-ways, especially for the bride. The phrase, "Bridezilla" didn't just come out of thin air.

And so we come to our passage, and let me tell you, something is going to go very side-ways for Mary and Joseph.

Our passage begins in verse 18 saying that Mary and Joseph were engaged. Other translations translate the word engaged as betrothed which, I think, helps us understand a little better what

Mary and Joseph's relationship looked like. In today's understanding a couple who is engaged has agreed to get married, have maybe set a date or not, and have begun to make plans or not. And if someone gets cold feet or comes to their senses, or just realizes this is not the right person, then the engagement can be broken. Depending upon how much planning has been done there might be some embarrassment, maybe even some returning of gifts, but people move on.

That's not what were talking about here in Matthew and it might be why, at times, there is confusion for some when trying to understand Mary and Joseph's matrimonial state. Look at the passage again:

18 - *When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.* 19 - *Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.*

In 1st century Jewish culture, when a person was betrothed, they were basically married. There was a legal contract, families had agreed, assets had been exchanged. The groom would take that time usually to build a home for his new bride. They were fully married, except they did not live together and the marriage had not be consummated. Thus, Joseph and Mary were legally husband and wife, but they were still in the betrothal stage. Thus, Mary was a virgin.

It would appear that Mary and Joseph had the perfect life, with all plans going smoothly, until God, who had waited 400

years, now appears through Gabriel, the angel of God, to Mary and told her that life was taking a slight side-ways turn.

In Luke we see the exchange between Mary and the angel Gabriel.

Luke 1:28-38 28 - *And coming in, he said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."* 29 - *But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was.* 30 - *The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God.* 31 - *And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus.* 32 - *He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; 33 - and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end."*

34 - *Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"* 35 - *The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.* 36 - *And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month.* 37 - *For nothing will be impossible with God."* 38 - *And Mary said, "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.*

Mary's initial response to God is "Say what?" Luke tells us she was perplexed, questioning and afraid. This word from God did not fit into her perfect life.

It would change everything. What would people say? What would Joseph say? What would Joseph do? How can this be? Why me Lord, why me?

It is only after the angel gives her that amazing promise that “For nothing will be impossible with God” that Mary says “May it be done to me according to your word.” Luke records, what we call “The Magnificat”: *“My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God. For the mighty one has done great things.”*

Somehow Mary understood, if only in a small way, that God desired to do something amazing in and through her. With her fears, her questions, and her uncertainties, she could say, “Do Your will in me.” Can you imagine being that open to God’s will for you?

And then there was Joseph. He had everything to lose and almost nothing to gain. He had every legal right to dump Mary and get his money back and he would have been fully justified in the eyes of the community.

We see the character of Joseph, that even before the angel appeared to him he was going to put Mary away quietly to protect her from public ridicule. But once the angel appeared to him in the dream he was all on board.

He heard the promise of God: *“Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*

Put yourself in Joseph’s position. Your virgin wife is now with child and you’re just

supposed to go along with it. What type of man is this who believed the angel and the promise? It was the man that God chose to raise His Son.

Because Mary and Joseph were willing to have their nicely wrapped world turned upside down and sideways, because they responded in faith to what God had called them to—even when it made no sense—because they trusted in God’s promises when reason and convention screamed otherwise, we have a Savior who has saved his people from sin.

They so easily could have said no at any point, and no one would have blamed them. But their hearts said, “Yes!” Yes to having the Savior of the world be born in them. Yes to making that long, uncomfortable trek to Bethlehem, nine months pregnant, only to have their child born in a feeding trough. Not quite a merry little perfect Christmas. But out of their obedience to God’s call upon their lives, joy entered the world. Because they said yes, Immanuel—God with us—was now in our midst. I know what you’re saying. “Well, if the angel Gabriel appeared to you, you might be willing to say yes.” Maybe.

Her name is Amy, not my daughter. She was a college student at Williams College in Massachusetts. She is the daughter of a successful family in Southern California, she was a college soccer all American, and she was well on her way to finishing her pre-med undergrad. Then she made a fateful decision, having no idea of the consequences. She decided to attend a missions conference called Urbana. She had friends who had done some short-term two to four week long missions

during some of their summer breaks. She thought that sounded like a lot of fun and she was up for the adventure and thought the Urbana conference might be a good place to go and learn about them, maybe find an opportunity before starting medical school.

During one of the worship times, gathered with 20,000 college students from around the world, a man behind her whom she had never seen in her life, tapped her on her shoulder and told her that God had told him to pray for her everyday for the rest of her life because God wanted to use her in mighty ways to win the nations for Christ. Amy was taken aback, blown away and perplexed, and a little freaked out. But she was also captivated. Who was this man and what did it mean?

After the conference Amy returned to school, but the experience and the encounter wouldn’t leave her. Amy finally understood God was calling her to a life time calling to missions, not just a little two week trip. Upon graduating from college, she first joined an agency called Caleb project, like the spies to the promised land, and would go and live in unreached areas around the world to study the culture and give strategies to the missionaries who were not yet there.

In the past twenty years, even after a diagnosis and constant battle with Crohn’s. Amy has trained hundreds of missionaries who are now serving and proclaiming the Gospel all around the world. Her perfect Southern Cal soccer med school life got turned upside down when she said yes to God’s call and she would tell you she has been living the greatest adventure ever since.

Many of you have heard my story. I had plans for law school until I made the mistake of saying yes to a ministry opportunity that I had planned on being temporary. Little did Cathy and I know our lives would be turned upside down by saying yes to God. Then again, I kind of think Cathy knew all along.

As much as I talk about my love for Christmas growing up, the amazing thing was that when I became a Christian, the meaning and joy of Christmas just exploded exponentially. I can still remember that first Christmas Eve sitting in the church realizing that God's in-breaking into humanity in the form of a little baby was because of His outrageous love for you and for me.

What about your life? Have you been hanging on to that perfect, neatly tied up life, but at times you find you're holding on by your fingertips? What would happen if you let God come in and turn everything upside down and sideways?

Revelation 3:20 says.
"Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me."

What would happen if you gave all of your hopes and dreams, sorrows and heartbreaks, and put them into the hands of Jesus? In their Advent Candle sharing this morning, Stephen and Kauai gave powerful testimony of what it means to trust God and cling to God with all the challenges in our lives.

Matthew 11:28-29 promises,
"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. 29 - Take My yoke upon

you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

What would happen if you said to God today, Lord, be born in me? Let me be your instrument. Let me be the one you use to change your world. Let Bethlehem begin anew in me this day.

Be Born In Me by Nicole Nordeman

Everything inside me cries for order

Everything inside me wants to hide

Is this shadow an angel or a warrior?

If God is pleased with me, why am I so terrified?

Someone tell me I am only dreaming

Somehow help me see with Heaven's eyes

And before my head agrees, my heart is on its knees

Holy is He. Blessed am I.

*Be born in me, be born in me
Trembling heart, somehow I believe that You chose me*

*I'll hold You in the beginning,
You will hold me in the end*

*Every moment in the middle,
make my heart Your Bethlehem
Be born in me*

All this time we've waited for the promise

All this time You've waited for my arms

Did You wrap yourself inside the unexpected

So we might know that Love would go that far?

*Be born in me, be born in me
Trembling heart, somehow I believe that You chose me*

*I'll hold You in the beginning,
You will hold me in the end*

*Every moment in the middle,
make my heart Your Bethlehem
Be born in me*

*I am not brave I'll never be
The only thing my heart can offer is a vacancy*

*I'm just a girl, nothing more
But I am willing, I am Yours
Be born in me, be born in me*

*I'll hold You in the beginning,
You will hold me in the end*

*Every moment in the middle,
make my heart Your Bethlehem
Be born in me*

(Written by Bernie Herms and Nichole Nordeman © 2011 Birdwing Music/Bernie Herms Music/Birdboy Songs)

Hear the promise of God this day. He has chosen us to know Him and to be used by Him in this world to be His instrument. All we need to do is say yes to His call.

As the words of the song say, to offer Him the vacancy in our hearts. What will that call look like? Some of you, like Amy, are being called to leave your job and respond to God's call to missions. For others, that call is to understand that God has placed you exactly where He needs you in your current setting.

Wherever the call, we are called to be His instrument, called to ministry, to service, to sacrifice financially, to open our home to those in need, to stand up for justice for the oppressed and broken in the world, to love people in Jesus way in a radical way. The Lord of the universe invites us to a life we never could have imagined.

This Christmas let Mary and Joseph's story become your story as you say yes to God's invitation to join Him in loving the world. The one thing I know for sure, our Messy Little Christmas makes for one exciting life. Hang on!