

Rev. Christy E. Dew
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Text: *John 1:6-8, 19-28

“Reaching for Joy”

First Christian Church
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I absolutely love Christmas. I absolutely love Advent. Now, I want to share something a little odd about my humor. I love Christmas and Advent for a couple of different reasons. One of the reasons I love Advent is for all the perfect images that come with it. I love children sitting on Santa’s lap. (*Showing a picture on the screen of two adorable children smiling with Santa*) I love beautiful Christmas trees. I love family coming over. I love it all! But the odd part about my humor is that I get great joy when it goes wrong. (Shows picture of small child screaming on Santa’s lap and the congregation laughs.) This is Elena. She is the daughter of two of my very good friends who live in Oklahoma. This is the first time she ever saw Santa Clause. But what I most love about Christmas is when it goes wrong in a good way. I love the Christmas Nutcracker, and the hats falling off the tin soldiers as they so triumphantly walk in. I love the conductor so into what he’s conducting that his tie pops off. I love the Christmas presents that the children unwrap before Christmas and in their haste never get them wrapped back up the way they were supposed to be. I love the fact that every Christmas my mother burns the biscuits, no matter how many times the 45 people in our house say, “Don’t forget they’re in there!” I love it because it shows the reality of it all. It shows us what happens when things go wrong. And it’s in these moments that the perfection of Christmas breaks down, and we find the true miracles of the holiday. I have two favorite stories that I want to share with you, and hopefully you’ll see what I mean...

Kelly was four years old. In the preschool Nativity pageant that our church put on every year, she was the one designated to be Mary. Now what you need to know is that for three weeks, they had to talk her into this, because every child in the Nativity play wanted to be the star. They wanted to be the star that popped up out of the choir loft. That was their favorite part. This was Kelly’s year to be star and while she begged and pleaded, she was chosen as Mary. So after much cajoling, she came in sitting on one of the Youth’s back who was dressed as a donkey and she was heavy with child. About halfway down the aisle, she leaned a little too far to the right and baby Jesus fell out and hit on his head. (laughter) Everybody did exactly what you did. Everybody in the whole congregation burst into gales of laughter. She stood up off of the youth’s back, she grabbed baby Jesus by the leg and in that blessed moment, stomped to the front and laid him in the manger. She said, “*I told you I wasn’t supposed to be this one!*” (more laughter) They kept laughing and they kept laughing and finally as the tears started to fall down her face because she thought they were laughing at her, her dad got up from his pew, walked down the aisle and picked her up and said, “*That’s ok honey, most of us drop Jesus once in a while too.*” She leaned back in her dad’s arms and he sat there and held her in his arms as the rest of the play went on. That was the Christmas miracle that year.

But I think my favorite one comes from being in North Carolina. Now I have to tell you, in North Carolina, I think that the church I grew up in has Christmas down to perfection, because it’s run by one of the elder deacon women and that’s because she doesn’t tolerate anything going wrong in *her* Christmas program.* All of the children have been told through all of November and all of December that they have to get it right. They come and on the night of the pageant, they are literally shaking at the back of the church because they don’t want to disappoint Miss Rosie. She is the grandmother of that congregation and on this one particular year, her daughter was the narrator of the play. Now if any of you haven’t recognized it yet, this is the perfect storm “a brewin’”. So as the script is laid out and all of the characters in their parts are coming in the sanctuary; the children have on their feathery angel’s wings that are coming over the balcony as the angels are to appear. All of the kings have their crowns on perfectly which are secured by approximately a hundred bobby pins. Mary and Joseph are humbly walking. The narrator speaks about the angel of the Lord appearing to Mary and then the narrator speaks about the

angle of the Lord appearing to Joseph. This is where I will know if most of you remember the biblical story correctly. You see Anna Beth starts this beautiful part of the Christmas oration and she says, “*And Joseph, having found Mary to be with child, and being “just a man” decides to put her away quietly.*” (The congregation begins to laugh at the misspeak.) The choirs started shaking in their robes, but they knew if they started laughing they would all be in trouble. Anna Beth didn’t know what had happened. She didn’t know what had gone wrong and why she had gotten this laughter response. So she tried to make up for it and improvised and she said, “*You know Joseph was just a man, just like my Harold.*” And the laughter got louder and louder and louder. And that’s when part of me fell in love with the character of Joseph, because Joseph, being ‘just a man’ found himself in an awkward predicament. The reality of the story begins to unfold there for me in a way I had never quite understood it before. Joseph, this man who was so upstanding and righteous and humble and wanting to do all of the right things, found himself in a place that didn’t quite fit his image of the perfect Christmas. He wanted all of these things to go well. He had done everything right and then it all kind of fell apart. And the miracle of the story was the Joseph went about this in the right way. He thought, I will put Mary away quietly and then God intervened, as God often does, in the places where we are broken. God intervened and said “*No. Your joy will come. You will find it again, but maybe not in the way that you had hoped. This child will come and you will raise him, and he will be amazing. He will be the Messiah. He will be the one that you will know.*” But there was a bit of unrequited joy for Joseph, because while he could believe the hope in the words of God that the angel had spoken to him, it was still a little bittersweet. You see, Joseph still had to deal with all those folks around him and that Mary had to do so as well. Sometimes in the midst of things that go wrong, you can quite see the joy that is coming in the distance.

Messengers that announce God’s coming are often greeted this way. We think that if the angels speak it. “OH Wow! It must be so!” Great joy shall be shouted! Hark the herald angels sing! But when someone comes to tell us about the messiah coming into our midst that looks like John, we’re not quite so sure that this is the real thing. You see John came eating all the things we can’t possibly imagine. John came looking like a homeless man shouting off crazy ideas. For one, he could have been a prophet. They might have understood that. They said to him, “*Are you a prophet? Are you the one that comes?*” He says quite frankly and truthfully, “*No. I am not one of them. But I am here to tell you of the Christ who is coming to be in your midst. I shout in the wilderness, the joy that is coming.*” And they couldn’t quite accept what he was saying. But then again, this Messiah that was coming didn’t quite meet their image of the perfect Messiah either. He wasn’t a royal king, in their idea. He didn’t fit the bill. He didn’t have his crown on perfectly and he wouldn’t say all the things they thought a messiah should say. But you see, that’s the miracle for me. That’s the Christmas miracle and the miracle that comeswhen our idea of perfection breaks away, that’s where the real miracles of God can happen. If in the brokenness, if in the unexpected we can allow the mystery of God to be present with us, the a miracle beyond our greatest imagining can occur.

You know, at the end of that play, when I was in NC, Anna Beth covered it up, got through it, realized what she said, I’m sorry. They went on with the play and then everything was done. And when it was over, she got the response that no one in that congregation had every received before. They stood up and applauded and shouted for Joy! Rather than waiting with baited breath to make sure that everything went well, they found the joy that Christmas; the joy that comes when we all recognize that things aren’t perfect. But in the brokenness, God’s perfection is made real and joy can be found for all of us. My hope is that as you prepare for the coming of the Christ child, that if a tree is tipped over for the first, second or tenth time you pick it up and with joy put the ornaments back on the tree. If your biscuits get burnt, buy a bag of rolls. And if by chance, you have somehow dropped Jesus on the way... pick him back up, put him back in your heart where he has always belonged and find the miracle of seeing him anew once more.

Will you pray with me?

*O God, in this season of Advent when we are reaching for joy
Some of us come to this time of the year with great pain.
We can't possibly find a smile or happiness
When those we have loved are no longer with us.
O God, be the hand of someone who comes to comfort us.
And O God, as we reach for this joy,
We see so many things going wrong in our world.
But the real miracles are not vanquished in the occurrences of brokenness,
The real miracles come in how we respond.
So God, let us be compassionate,
Let us view every event that occurs that doesn't meet our expectation
As an opportunity to respond with your love.
And, O God in the midst of it all
that your joy is sufficient
that your hope and your love are there for us all.
In your holy we humbly pray, Amen.*

**Since our sermons are now posted online, many of my family and friends from my hometown have begun to listen and read them. Lest anyone from my hometown wonder of whom I am speaking, this story is a blend of several churches I have attended as a child and as a pastor. To protect the innocent and the guilty, no names will ever be shared! ☺*