

The Christmas Question

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Luke 1:26-38

I was talking to a friend from out of state the other day and she asked me a question that I think I have been asked at least a hundred times since the beginning of December...a question maybe you've been asked. Her question was this: Are you **ready** for Christmas? Are you ready for Christmas? I so badly wanted to tell her yes, yes I was ready for Christmas, all things were under control, the whole Christmas list checked off, but I couldn't say it with a straight face so I told her the truth and said, "No, not even close." And with that "No, not even close," came this impending sense of anxiety and self-loathing. What kind of human being am I that I am not ready for Christmas? What kind of pastor am I, for God's sake, that I am not ready for Christmas? I kind of wished the question had not been asked or at least that I had not taken it so seriously. Maybe I should have lied and said yes and remained in a state of denial. Are you ready for Christmas? Because as soon as someone asks that question it does reminds me of how unready I am, of how many more presents I have to buy, of how many more sermons I have to write, of how many more cards that need to be sent. So I told my friend no and to be polite I asked her in return, "So are you ready for Christmas? Hoping beyond hope that she was as bad off as I was. Of course she responded, "Yes. Gifts bought, cards sent, house cleaned, party planned." Two weeks before Christmas and this woman was ready! I hate these kinds of people. Now, my anxiety is off the charts. If she can be ready why shouldn't I be ready? Lord, I'm a pastor ... of all people I should be ready for Christmas!

Are you ready for Christmas?

Now before that question spikes your blood pressure I want to wonder with you for a moment as to whether that is the right Christmas question. Are you ready for Christmas? To ask the question is to imply, of course, that Christmas is something you can be ready for and that you should be prepared for. That is to say that Christmas is something that you and I can somehow plan for, save for, buy for and otherwise engineer --- and that if we do not somehow plan for it, save for it, buy for it and otherwise engineer it that somehow it will not come off as it is supposed to?

How is Christmas supposed to come off? Don't we all go into Christmas with an idea of how it is supposed to come off? There it sits a week away --December 24 and 25 --- and with all our plans and purchases and points of destination we have this idea, don't we, on how Christmas is supposed to come off. For some of us the expectations are really, really high and for some of us the expectations are really, really low --- and for the rest of us it is somewhere in-between. But we all have this idea, don't we, of how Christmas is supposed to come off. But if there is anything that is constant about Christmas is that year after year it does not come off exactly how we thought or hoped it would. For some of us it comes off a whole lot better, and for some of us it comes off not the way we hoped and so it begs the question --- can you ever be ready for Christmas?

It's a question begged not only out of our experience, but maybe even out of the Christmas story itself. Which of the Advent characters would you dare to ask if they were ready for Christmas? If you were to ask the characters of the nativity – the little figurines in your crèche display – what would they say?

What about shepherds? What would the shepherds say if you asked them? Out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night. Are you ready for Christmas? What might they say? Because Christmas for them happened when they were just trying to mind their own business. Completely unprepared. Not necessarily the religious types. Not frequent attendees at the nearby temple. Nevertheless, the

angel and the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased." How can you be ready for that?

Lord is with you. Don't be afraid for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of

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The innkeeper? Of course the Bible makes no mention of an innkeeper, but maybe there was someone who had to deliver the bad news that there was no room in the inn. The young couple at his door. Mary great with child. "Just booked the last room 1/2 hour ago. You know, the census rush. If I had known you were coming. If you had called ahead. Had you used Priceline, Hotels.com???" How's a guy like that supposed to be ready for Christmas?

Zechariah and Elizabeth well beyond their childbearing years --- settled into a life without children. Preparing for retirement. Just made a down payment on a little place on the Mediterranean Sea. And then all of a sudden Elizabeth begins to show with the voice that will someday cry in the wilderness. Are you ready for Christmas Elizabeth? Had you asked she might have slapped you.

And what about Mary? Dear young Mary. Minding her own business. Making plans for the big wedding. Looking forward to getting on with a normal young Jewish peasant life. Are you ready for Christmas, Mary? Are you ready for the angel, Mary? Are you ready for him to say, "Greetings, favored one! The

the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Merry Christmas, Mary! Now it does not take much of an imagination to imagine that at this point in the conversation there was a pause. A pregnant pause. Can you hear Mary trying to catch her breath? Can you see her face turn white? Can you see her looking for a seat to sit down? Can you feel the pregnant pause? And then Mary asks her own Christmas question: "How can this be? How can this be since I have no husband?"

"Oh, the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God. Nothing will be impossible with God."

Now notice what the angel does not say. Notice that he does not ask our Christmas question: Are you ready, Mary? Are you ready for Christmas, Mary? Because of course she's not. And she never will be. When the news comes for the census and Joseph tells her that they have to travel to Bethlehem in the ninth

month -- are you ready for Christmas Mary? Don't ask. When the innkeeper sends them away because there is no room in the inn --are you ready for Christmas Mary? Don't ask. When the best they can find is a barn where delivery comes on a stack of hay no better a birthing room than for a cow and a calf -- oh, are you ready for Christmas Mary? Don't ask. When you deliver your first born son and wrap him the best you can in swaddling cloths and the best place you can find to lay him is a manger, a feeding trough -- oh, the indignity! -- are you ready for Christmas, Mary? Please, please, don't ask.

Because it is true, isn't it? Christmas in the end is not something you can be ready for --- and maybe, just maybe it's something you shouldn't be ready for. Because as far as I can tell reading the Christmas story Christmas is a whole lot more about what God does than about what we do. And who can be ready for what God does?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer the German Christian theologian who participated in the resistance to Hitler during World War II and for it was arrested, imprisoned and later executed --- in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* wrote this about Advent: "Life in a prison cell reminds me a great deal of Advent --- one waits, and hopes and potters about, but in the end what we do is of little consequence, for the door is shut and can only be opened from the outside."

Who can be ready for what God does? Is there a chance that Christmas is more about the things we don't prepare for -- than the things we do prepare for?

Several years ago when Brittany was young we decided to give her for Christmas a high chair for her dolls. We had it delivered and I had procrastinated in putting it together until late in the evening on December 22. Some of you know how skilled I am mechanically well sure enough I had gotten to the end of putting this high chair together and realized I had put one of the parts on backwards and it needed to come off. Well, it wouldn't come off. So I pulled and tugged and yanked ... and snap! The piece broke and with that piece broke there was no high chair. My

life passed in front of my eyes. If this was going to be Christmas I was not ready for it.

The next morning I called the toy company and got a customer service person on the phone and told him what happened and that it was entirely my fault and so on and so forth and after telling my tale of woe do you know what he said to me? He said, Mr. McConnell, you're in big doo doo." Talk about a pregnant pause! But then out of the silence he said to me, "Don't worry, Mr. McConnell that piece will be on your front porch Christmas Eve morning. And there's no charge." "How can this be?" I asked. "Merry Christmas," he said. The next morning it was there.

An act of grace, unsolicited and undeserved. It caught me unprepared. I wasn't ready for Christmas to happen that way from a toy company service representative.

Seven years ago it was like today the fourth Sunday of Advent, I stood in the back of the chancel preparing to process up the center aisle into our Fourth Sunday of Advent worship. How many times had I processed? Impossible to count. And on that day, all the decorations were up. All the poinsettias carefully arranged. The prelude of familiar carols coming to a close. Everything ready for Christmas. Except that the day before I had buried my father. The one who I saw countless times process down the aisle of a half dozen churches. The one whose not fully on key voice would bellow through the sanctuary. The one who embodied for me much of what the manger child enfleshed. Ten days before as he lay semi-conscious in the hospital I was humming to him Christmas carols. But now he wasn't here anymore. And as we began down the aisle singing, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" there was this pit in my stomach and lump in my throat and a hole in my heart. But draped from that Advent wreath was that word love. All of what I was feeling was love. Love felt most keenly in the deepest sadness. And above it the light. Light seems most striking in the deepest darkness. How can you be prepared for that?

You see, Messiahs don't come to people who have their acts together. It's not the purpose of a Messiah.

Messiahs come to people who know that as much as they plan, as hard as they work, as prepared as they hope to be, they still know that the door is locked from the outside. God comes when God wants. And God shows up at the strangest of times and in the strangest of ways. Our readiness comes when we know how unready we really are. Just ask Mary ... just ask Joseph. Just ask Elizabeth, Zechariah, the innkeeper and the shepherds.

So are you ready for Christmas? That is to say --- are you ready to be surprised? Are you ready to be caught off guard? Are you ready to have something work that you don't expect to work? Or something not to work that you really wanted to? Are you ready for God to show up in an unexpected place -- even in the deepest sadness, the deepest darkness?

Because Messiahs come mostly to those who are unprepared.



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Church of the Palms

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