

Merry Christmas or Messy Christmas?

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[0:00] This morning we had a song called Mary Did You Know. And when we play that song we often think about what did Mary actually know about all that was taking place.

Did she know that one day her son would walk on water, would save our sons and daughters? The message that perhaps Mary could not know, although when the angel appeared to her and told her that her son was going to be the savior of the world, she just wondered how it could all possibly be. She was, after all, a virgin. And that's impossible unless it's a miracle. And if you don't know that, you need some biology lessons. Okay.

But what I want to say to you today is that the good news of Christmas and the thing that makes Christmas such a joy for me, for believers in Christ, is that God is with us.

That's what makes it very, very special. We can have a merry Christmas because God is with us. But what I want you to consider is that actually Joseph and Mary, the first Christmas, had a very messy one.

[1:11] It was very messy indeed. And I want to think about it not from Mary's point of view, but from Joseph's point of view. So next slide, please. You'll know the song, Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas. My favorite version is Frank Sinatra's, but you might like Judy Gollins.

Or even Michael Bublé. Have yourself a merry little Christmas. Let your heart be light. Next year, all our troubles will be out of sight. That would be nice, wouldn't it? No more troubles. Have yourself a merry little Christmas. Make the yuletide gay.

Next year, all our troubles will be miles away. Good news. Once again, as in olden days, happy golden days of yore. We're always very nostalgic at Christmas, aren't we?

Faithful friends who are dear to us will be near to us once more. Isn't it funny? When you were a kid and you think about Christmas, there was never any problems at Christmas, was there? Christmas was always great. Always great. I can't remember a bad Christmas when I was a child.

I can remember not sleeping. I can remember wondering if I could get up without my mom and dad hearing. I can remember trying to get up at about one o'clock in the morning and being sent back to bed, that kind of thing. But it was never bad. Always exciting as a child.

[2:25] And all the best Christmases were always in the past. It always snowed more. You know, the food was nicer. The presents were better. The trees were greener. Life was easier and sweeter.

And so it goes on. Nostalgia. Faithful friends who are dear to us will be near to us once more. Sadly, not always true.

I'm nearly 60. I know it's hard to believe. I'm nearly 60. My mother's 87. I'm the youngest in my family. I was trying to work out with my mother how old everybody else was.

We were a family of five siblings. And because I'm trying to keep her memory going, I was talking to her about her mom and her dad and her brother and her sister. They're all gone.

They won't come back to us once more. Someday soon we all will be together. If the fates allow. Until then, we'll have to muddle through somehow.

[3:27] So have yourself a merry little Christmas now. The song, though hopeful, looks perhaps more realistically at life.

And says actually sometimes things that we can't control happen to us. That knock our life off course. That make our lives messy.

That interrupt with the script that we had written for ourselves. Where everything would be wonderful all of the time. And we'd never have any more troubles. But perhaps, perhaps once we

get through all of that.

Perhaps the fates will allow us somehow to be together. So there's hope. Next slide, please, Josh. Christmas, as I say, for Joseph was messy.

And he was going to learn a really important message. That you are not alone. Joseph was told that the child that was to be born to Mary would be called Emmanuel.

[4:36] Which means God is with us. I live every day of my life in the hope of that. Every day.

Now, most days it's relatively easy to live. Because most days things go to script. But occasionally things don't go to script. And when they don't go to script.

And you begin to be anxious about the future. Or worried and upset about what may be around the corner. It's really important to know that God is with us.

Because as Christian believers, we look to a world that is so dark and uncertain. Where nothing is predictable.

Where everything is unclear. And the only certainty that we can have when things seem to collide and get out of control. When the script is interrupted and our lives don't work out the way we planned them.

[5:35] The only place we have to look to is God. God is with us. Now, Joseph discovered that God is with us in a very special way.

So the good news is you are not alone. But the bad news is that sometimes it feels that you are, doesn't it? Sometimes it feels that life is so messy and out of control.

That there is very little hope or very little prospect of hope to hold on to. And then we're grateful for Christmas because Christmas provides us with a kind of break.

A chance to be together as a family. To be at peace. To put our differences aside. To get a bit of a breather. And a bit of a respite.

A bit of a holiday. To eat nice things and drink perhaps more than we ought. And to just take a moment to be grateful for the good things we have in life.

[6:35] Christmas punctuates our life in a very special way. It gives us that hope that next year perhaps all our troubles will be out of sight.

We make our New Year's resolutions with that in mind. But of course, none of us can guarantee that. I'm not God.

I can't guarantee to you that all our troubles will be out of sight. And I need to say to you that God doesn't promise you a trouble-free life. God doesn't say that you'll be able to walk through your life without any troubles and everything will be fine.

What God does say is that in the midst of trouble, you are not alone. And I will be with you. He will help you to bear your troubles.

He will help you to sort out the messiness of your life. He will give you courage and faith when you are afraid. And when life is uncertain.

[7:41] And that's what he did for Joseph. Joseph, I like the, I don't know if you can see it, the picture of the, you know, the Highland cow. It says there, expecting a trouble-free life because you are a good person is like expecting the bull not to charge you because you're a vegetarian.

We would like troubled lives to come to people that we think deserve it. It's just that most of us think we don't deserve it. And we get a bit cross with God when we get troubles that we don't think we deserve.

But it's because we've told ourselves something that is fanciful. But somehow, because we're good, we will be exempt from life. From trouble, rather.

Exempt from trouble. It's not true. Bad things happen to good people. Just as they happen to bad people, too. But I want you to see that actually bad things are not always really bad things.

Actually, bad things make us better people. When things go wrong, we learn to value the things that are really important to us. Our family, our faith, our God.

[8:56] So next slide, please. The first Christmas was messy. Joseph was in a mess. He had his life mapped out. He was going to marry a lovely, beautiful young girl called Mary.

She was very young, probably just about 14, something like that. They could be married at 12 girls and boys could be married at 13. In the society where many of them only lived until they were 30 or 40, that's not necessarily that surprising.

And it's a relatively recent thing to wait too long in the world today. He was engaged to be married, and engagement was a really important thing.

It's called betrothal. And it had two parts to it. You have your engagement where you have a party, and then Joseph would pay what's called a ketubah.

And the ketubah was a sum of money he paid to Mary as a kind of dowry to secure her in a contract. 200 denarii it would cost him to purchase Mary as his wife.

[10:02] If she had been a widow, she would have cost 100. But it was 200 for a young virgin. Now, Joseph then got a shock.

Mary turned up one day and said, Joseph, I'm pregnant. And you don't need to worry, Joseph, because it isn't a man that's done this. God has made me pregnant.

And I'm going to have a baby. Yeah, that's a bit tricky to believe, isn't it? You know, we hear the story being read, and we think, well, that's fine.

It's all all right, isn't it? But there was a big gap between Mary being told that she was pregnant and Joseph being told. And Mary must have played that one out in her mind all of the time.

This is a bit of a mess. Joseph is never going to believe me. And Joseph, we read, was a righteous man, and he thought, what do I do here? As a righteous man, he wanted to obey the law.

[11:04] So what did the law say should happen to a woman who is pregnant, who is married, effectively married, although there is a year separation between the betrothal and the homecoming?

She's effectively married. This is a legal contract. What does the law say should happen to Mary? She should die. She should die by stoning because she's an adulterous woman.

And Joseph, rather, he's a righteous man, so he says, well, if I follow the law of Moses, she should die. And what is more, she's really messed my life up now.

I spent 200 denarii. She's pregnant. Everybody knows we're going to get married. Now they're all going to discover this. My reputation is shot. Now that must have gone on in his head.

It must have done. And so Joseph figured out what he was going to do. He was going to divorce her, but quietly. If he did it quietly, she wouldn't be killed.

[12:06] He could send her away. She could have her baby in shame. And nobody would know. So he figured it out.

Yay, good man. It's all worked out, Joseph. All that mess. You've sorted it. Except he was wrong. Except that wasn't God's plan.

And so God turns up and says to Joseph, you're in a mess. But the solution is not what you figured out. The solution is you take her to be your wife.

She will bear a son. And he will become the savior of the world. And every time you speak his name, you will remind the world that God is with you to sort out your mess when you can't sort it out for yourself.

That's why Christmas is special. It's not really like this, you know, twinkling lights and make us all feel wonderful. It's saying to us that God has come.

[13:14] God has sent his son to help you sort out your mess. And the mess is caused by something the Bible calls sin. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

I hope that doesn't offend you. Sin is just not doing the things you ought to do that you know you ought to do, but you excuse yourself.

Or doing the things you know you ought not to do, but you did them because you were weak and you failed. Now, if you've never sinned, congratulations.

You're the first person I've ever met. But come and tell me your secret. But most of us know, don't we, that we are not as good as we would like to be.

We have to acknowledge that sometimes we don't meet our own standards. And sometimes we don't, certainly don't meet the standards of our mother or father. But that's because we're sinful.

[14:16] We can't help it. We're born that way. And Christmas is God's solution to the mess we've made. The first Christmas was messy because God was saving people in a messy world.

Joseph was in a mess. And God was going to fix it, not Joseph. And Joseph would learn through his son that what man could not do to fix the mess of this sinful world, God can do if we trust him.

Next slide, please, Josh. So here we are. 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. Easy to read. Difficult to believe when you're looking at a pregnant woman. This is not your child.

But you must raise him as your own. And you must believe that I have a purpose through this. That you don't understand. But one day, the world will be grateful that you obeyed me.

[15:27] So the lesson here is when things don't make sense, when things don't go to plan, we are called to trust in God. Sometimes people say to me, why do you believe?

Isn't belief, isn't faith a crutch? Exactly. It absolutely is a crutch. But I don't mind having a crutch of faith.

Because I can't manage life without faith. I need to be able to lean on God when I can't even rely on myself.

There's a song called Joseph's Song by Michael Card. And in the song it says, Father, show me where I fit into this plan of yours.

How can a man be father to the Son of God? Lord, for all my life I've been a simple carpenter. How can I raise a king? How can I raise a king?

[16:26] He didn't understand. He couldn't make sense of it. But God was sorting out his mess. Next slide, please, Josh.

So what I want you to discover today is when life is messy, do not be afraid. God is with you. You see, what is striking in this account of Joseph's experience is that God provides the answer only after Joseph wrestled with the problem and figured out how he would resolve it.

And isn't that like God? Why doesn't God just sort out our problems as soon as they happen? It would be much easier, God, if as soon as I had a problem, you just said, there you go.

You're not very happy today. Zap, there's some joy. Or, well, you're struggling today. You've got your aches and pains. Zap, there's some energy.

Or, oh dear, you've been diagnosed with cancer. Zap, there's some healing. It would be easy, wouldn't it, if God just zapped as soon as there was a problem?

[17:41] Except, I would never learn to trust him when problems arise. You see, God tests faith.

God tests our resolve, our willingness to believe. He allows us to go through the agony of it all in order that we might learn to trust him.

It's infuriating. It's infuriating. But that's what he does. Joseph expected his life to work to a script. He was a righteous man.

He believed that if he did good things, God would always bless him, always honor him, always give him what he needed. He would have his virgin. He would marry his virgin. He would live a decent life.

Everybody would say what a wonderful man he is. Perhaps one day he would become a leader in the synagogue. All will go well. He'll have lots of children. He'll have lots of money. And life would have no more problems.

[18:42] Because that's what Joseph believed the script should read like. But then God did something differently. God upset his script.

God wrote a different story into his life. Joseph wouldn't have chosen it. But thank God, God intervened to tear up Joseph's script and to give Joseph a new story.

For without the change of the script, there could be no salvation in the world. See, we can't always make sense of why God allows things to go wrong in our life.

But what we discover is that when things go wrong in our life, somehow, somehow, we become better for it. I've said it before.

Watching my mother get to the point where she is. Spending most of her time lying in bed. Not really able to communicate very well with her family anymore.

[19:55] The only thing that really matters to her is to be loved. To have her family around her. To be able to hold our hands and kiss us.

And tell us she loves us. It doesn't matter how much she's got in the bank. It doesn't matter that she went on holiday here, there, and anywhere, everywhere.

And it doesn't really matter that she had a nice house. None of those things really matter now. The only thing that matters when you come to the close of your life is that you are loved. And you love. And you love. Sometimes it takes losing somebody we love to help us to understand how valued they were to us.

We only really ever appreciate what we have when we're about to lose it.

[20:54] So sometimes the script has to be torn up in order for us to understand that when we're in a mess, don't be afraid.

God is with you. So, coming to a close. God is with you.

God is with you. You don't need to be afraid. God is here.

Christmas tells us that God wants to be with you in Jesus. Now, you might be struggling. You might be in the dark somehow. You might find it difficult to trust God.

Okay, try Him. You've tried everything else. You've tried to fix your life on your own. Why not try God?

[22:17] God says to you, I am Emmanuel. You're not alone. I'm here for you. You don't necessarily always know what is coming down the road of your life.

But you can know that you do not need to face an uncertain future on your own. God is here. God is with you. And so, next slide.

If you know Jesus, God is with you. God knows that sometimes you will be enveloped by fear. God knows that sometimes you will face uncertainty.

God knows your lifespan and how long it will last. God knows that sometimes you will face a lot. None of us will be able to escape the reality of our human mortality. But even in death, God says, Don't be afraid.

I will be with you. Being a minister, I've had the privilege of being at the deathbed of many a Christian. I've held the hands of people, and I've literally said to them, Don't be afraid to die.

[23:36] Jesus will come to you. He said to you, In my Father's house there are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go and prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again to be with you.

That where I am, you may be also. I have literally watched people go to their death as if they were lying down to sleep. Unafraid.

In the land of darkness, in the shadow of death, Emmanuel has come. God with us. Wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

He will speak peace into your soul. And he says, Don't be afraid. I will be with you. That's the hope we have this Christmas.

That's the joy that has come to the world. That in the midst of our darkness, in the midst of our trouble, God is here. Don't be afraid. He is with you.

[24:39] God with you.