

This morning I'd like to tell you two stories of Christmas. The first story begins early on Christmas morning. The house is quiet – everyone is asleep. The sun is starting to peek out over the horizon and just the right amount of snow lightly falls outside. Inside the cozy home, a beautiful Christmas tree stands tall with ornaments, garland, and lights, perfectly spaced out across the tree. Presents are wrapped in wonderful colors with large red ribbons and bows. Soon, family starts arriving with big hugs and laughter. Everyone pitches in to help with the meal as they share stories, and later exchange gifts – with just the right thing for each person. The day is filled with joy, peace, and goodwill among all!

The second story begins with kids screaming as they wake up the parents who are exhausted from staying up late to finish the last-minute present wrapping. The kids rush downstairs and begin tearing away at the presents throwing wrapping paper everywhere and ruining the plan to take turns opening them. The cousins from New York call saying their flight has been canceled, which means more time talking with the less-than-favorite in-laws (here's hoping politics doesn't come up this year). Uncle Ernie is also unable to make it this year – he's sick and unable to travel and now has to spend Christmas alone. After a long morning of arguing about what kind of pie to make, someone realizes that there's no turkey – and everyone starts looking around thinking it was the OTHER person who was supposed to buy it. The kids start fighting, the toilet overflows, the rolls get burnt, and that perfect gift that they were SURE to love ends up being a total disappointment.

Here's another way those stories are told. The first is a story of a young couple in love named Mary and Joseph. They give birth to a sweet baby who they swaddle in cozy blankets as they sit under the most magnificent star that shines above them. Angels sing out in heavenly voices and animals gather all around (all of them miraculously quiet and well-behaved) as they gaze upon the peaceful child. Shepherds and wise men come from afar and bow down with reverence and offer expensive gifts to meet this young infant who is the savior of the world. The night is silent – and all is calm, all is bright.

The second story involves a poor unmarried teenage girl who's been walking with her fiancé for over a week – going 70 miles while 9 MONTHS PREGANT because the foreign government in charge is forcing them to go so that they can be documented (it makes the DMV look like easy). Delivering a baby at that time was a dangerous prospect for both the mother and the child – so making this journey was a huge risk. They finally get to her fiancé's hometown only for her to go into labor before she's found a place to stay. In the midst of the contractions and the frantic search for lodging, her fiancé finally comes to her and says “well honey... I've found a... barn.” So surrounded by baaing sheep and braying donkeys and who knows what else – she labors for hours before finally giving birth to a screaming and hungry baby – whose screams only exacerbate the noisy animals around them. Not only that, but they've also got their minds on that mysterious angel figure that had told her *this* was going to be the Son of God??

Our lives have two stories as well. There's that first story – the one we hope for where everything we plan for ourselves comes to fruition, where we are surrounded by loving friends and family, where all just goes right. But life is messy. Our lives can often end up looking more like that second story where things don't end up quite like we had hoped. Our relationships can be filled

with conflict – or we might be feeling lonely because we aren't surrounded by friends and family this Christmas. Our careers can fall short of our aspirations and jobs can be lost. Our health and the health of our loved ones can come under attack from so many dreadful diseases – cancer, Alzheimer's, depression, anxiety. Our churches face the struggle of how to pass on our faith to the next generation, our particular church struggles right now as well. And where do we even begin when we look at the world and see so much war, poverty, injustice, and hate? All of these things and so many more can fall so short of our dreams – there are so many twists, turns and bumps we'd rather not have to face.

But the good news of Christmas is this: God is with us. Whether we're filled with joy like the angels, or terrified like the shepherds about whatever life challenge we might be facing – God is with us. Whether the world is at peace or is in the midst of chaos, God is with us. Whether we sing these Christmas carols beautifully this morning, or whether we sound like we're all fighting off colds – God is with us. Whether this Christmas day turns out perfectly today, or ends up filled with family drama, stress, or loneliness – God is with us. In the midst of whatever messiness life might bring, in whatever story we might find ourselves in this Christmas, God is with us. Amen.