

A Blue Christmas
December 20, 2020
Fourth Sunday of Advent

Gospel Reading
Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of 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."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel said to her, "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 Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Then the angel departed from her.

Here what the Spirit is saying to God's people. Thanks be to God.

I am calling this sermon, A Blue Christmas. If you have never heard of one before let me set a context.

Blue Christmas is also called the Longest Night in the Western Christian tradition. It is a day in the Advent season that marks the longest night of the year.

And it happens because one of the Earth's poles has its maximum tilt away from the Sun. And it becomes the shortest period of daylight and longest night of the year. The Sun is at its lowest in the sky.

At the pole, there is continuous darkness or twilight around the winter solstice.

This is not a new thing. For centuries, the winter solstice has been a significant time of year for many cultures, marked with festivals and rituals. It marks the symbolic death and rebirth of the Sun.

This year the longest night of the year falls on December 21. Tomorrow.

I have to admit that I struggled with a sermon this week. I mean, how many more times can I tell you "Don't be afraid!" Christmas this year falls in the midst of a lot of fear – pandemic, waiting for a vaccine, political chaos, and cyber threats.

This last year has certainly been a long dark night. Of course, it could be just me, but I doubt it.

So instead of proclaiming a message of "don't be afraid" I decided to address what so many of us are experiencing.

The purpose of this service is to provide an opportunity / time to express your grief, sadness, and pain as well as an opportunity to focus on hope in the midst.

Jan Richardson (who knows personally about grief when her new husband died on their summer vacation), and she offers: Grief is so daily. It finds us in every moment we will never share with our loved-one again, every

routine we have lost, every pattern and practice and rhythm we have to create anew. Here's the secret: that's where the solace lives, too, and the grace. That's where love still waits.

Now if you feel guilty or think this going to be a pity party, to express your sadness and grief; remember the Christmas story gives us plenty of permission.

We often take for granted that Christmas is a time great joy and excitement, forgetting that it is the story of a young girl, unwed and pregnant.

It is the story of a carpenter who's betrothed gets pregnant, and not with his child.

It is the story of a baby born in a barn surrounded by the smell of animals and the bodily fluids of birth –

There were no doctors, nurses, midwives, nor a beloved matriarch to oversee the birth, to cut the umbilical cord, to wrap the new-born up or to offer rest to the weary mother or hapless father.

It is the story of refugees, fleeing from a murderous emperor slaughtering baby boys.

The truth is Christmas is not to be found in the comforts of a starry sanctuary, or in the sparkle of a busy mall, or even in the warmth of a private hospital birthing room.

Christmas is found when you grieve, feel the absence of someone who is no longer in your life.

Christmas is found as you deal with brokenness and financial hardship, and in the loss of traditional family and community events because of Covid-19. Christmas is in isolation due to health concerns and fear.

Christmas is in pent-up frustrations – the stress and anxiety ratcheted up by worry and uncertainty.

Christmas is a season when we traditionally “think on the past,” and this year the line between “nostalgia and lament” will be thinner than most.

There is room in our Christmas story for fear, disappointment, sorrow and despair.

So – if you happen to be hurting this holiday season here is some unsolicited advice –

First, let it hurt. Make peace with your pain and allow it. Life is difficult and you aren't okay – don't waste precious energy and time trying to pretend it isn't so.

Let grief and sadness do the invasive work that needs to happen.

There's no defeat in feeling defeated right now.

And please don't hide it. Give people close to you the most authentic version of yourself you are able to give.

Those deserving of you – I promise – will not be pushed away by your woundedness or intimidated – by your honesty.

Find a Way to Honor Your Memories.

Create a special way to memorialize what you have lost.

You might light a candle. I know someone who ate their loved one's favorite food (not sure about the dog food), making your love a tangible reminder that love never dies.

Create New Traditions

Create new traditions this year. It's OK to do something a little out of the ordinary. Make them fit better with this time in your life.

Do Something Kind for Others

Even when you're in the midst of grief, you do have something to offer the world.

Please Ask for Help – Don't be afraid to ask for help when you're struggling.

Remind those loved ones that you're having a rough time. It his not enough may be enough, but you may want to reach out for more

professional support. To help you deal with your grief in a healthy manner. Or if you are comfortable call your pastor.

Don't be fooled by yourself.

Despite how it may feel, most of the pressure to be happy is inside yourself. You are the only one who knows the realness of your sadness, and the only one who's fully walked your road.

Don't beat yourself up the most about this blueness that others may not even see. Don't be complicit in your own debilitating guilt trip. Go easy on yourself.

Give yourself permission to scale back, downsize, or opt out. Don't feel as though you have to do and be it all and continually put yourself in harm's way.

And for goodness sake – step away from quarrels or arguments when you need to. Its ok.

Embrace this Christmas as-is.

You may be overwhelmed and bruised this season, but there is still goodness to be welcomed and blessings to be claimed here, even in the pain.

And there will be holidays in the future when you will feel stronger and lighter.

And I believe these very difficult days are part of the journey to them so accept whatever gifts a Blue Christmas have for you.

And above all friends, know that it's okay to be blue this Christmas.

It really is. So be blue, but be greatly encouraged even still.

I am going to light a few candles. Please join me with your memories and prayers.

We light a candle in memory of those who gave us birth, who nurtured us, offered love, and cherished us. We remember mothers and fathers, guardians and grandparents, and all our family through the ages.

We light a candle in memory of those who are a part of our great circle of family. We remember sisters and brothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins, those near to us and far away.

We light a candle in memory of those who have left us before we expected, those we hold dear, and with those who still walk in our dreams. We remember children and grandchildren, those who leaped within the womb and who danced upon the earth.

We light a candle in memory of those we came to know through the eyes of love. We hold sacred the faces and memories of years past, of those who brightened our days and lit up our lives. We remember those dearest loves and closest friends, who changed our lives forever.

We light a candle in memory of those who shared in our lives in many ways, who worked with us and made our lives more fun. We remember friends and neighbors.

We light a candle for those we do not know, O God, who, like us, have suffered loss, who live with grief, who long for peace and justice, who long for friendship and healing. We remember your people, of every time and place.

Finally, we leave one candle unlit, mindful of the great truth of this life, that in the fullness of time we, too, will join our loved ones -

in a realm without sorrow and pain, in the company of Unending Love.

For these and all your children, we give thanks for life, hope and courage.

Here is another blessing by Jan Richardson:

*When you are in a dark place
and you want to get out of it,
remember that life is not somewhere else,
but where you are.
The story may or may not be
that you quickly escape.
But the story surely is that God is with you
where you are.
Before you leap toward the escape hatch,
be where you are.*

*Notice. Look around, even in a dark room,
and see God there
before you leave.*

I recently was told that this year on December 21st – Jupiter and Saturn will appear close to each other that they'll seem like one bright star, an event that has not happened since the early 17th century and won't happen again until 2080. I am thinking as was suggest – perhaps we all need to bundle up and go out and bath in that precious new light.

Let it be so. Amen.