

December 15, 2013
Christmas is Not Your Birthday

Give Up on Perfect
Luke 1:26-43

Opening words: There are 365 days each year, but Christmas day is special. What is there not to love? That day generates so many things. Our favorite Christmas cookies tempt us for weeks. Our community is illuminated with Christmas lights. Our Christmas trees are decorated with ornaments that remind of the past. Our calendars are filled with Christmas parties, and our Christmas wish list contains the desires of our heart. Christmas is a time of family and friends. You know it is true. It is easy to forget that Christmas is a time to remember the birth of Jesus.

This is my third sermon in my five part sermon series, *Christmas isn't Your Birthday*. This study was originally developed by Mike Slaughter of the Ginghamburg Church (a United Methodist congregation) in Tipp City, Ohio. Each message is designed to help you escape the trappings of this month and reclaim the true meaning of Christmas. This morning's scripture lesson, Luke 1:26-43, maybe one of the most loved and known scriptures in the Bible. The challenge for us is to escape the familiarity of the text and simply look at the words. The words remind us the world has not changed much in 2,000 years. The world has never been a perfect place. Let me call this message *Give Up on Perfect*. If you were with me last Sunday night for Blue Christmas, then the beginning of this message may sound familiar.

Luke 1:26-43 26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." 29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." 34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37 For no word from God will ever fail." 38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. 39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women,

and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

It was Christmas Eve, 1969. I was twelve years old. My family was returning home from the 11:00 Candlelight Christmas Eve service. Our family car was small, so everyone was packed in like sardines. My father was driving. He took us the same route that evening he took us every Sunday morning. Everyone was excited about the next day. Without warning, our excitement was replaced with curiosity. We were a block from our home when we noticed something unusual. The air was thick with smoke, and the sky was filled with color. There was a yellow haze around the area, only interrupted by the red lights of emergency vehicles. The police routed us around the block as we tried to see what was happening. It wasn't until the next morning that we got the news. A house on the parallel street had caught on fire and had burned to the ground. The loss of property is hard; the loss of lives is unbearable.

The family that died on that Christmas Eve was the Campbell family. The only one who survived was their daughter, Maggie. She was a friend of my sisters. The investigation revealed Maggie had caused the fire. She was the one who lit the candle and left it unguarded. That tiny flame sparked an inferno. Years later, it is still emotional to say. On that Christmas Eve, she lost her entire family, her parents and a brother. Her brother didn't have to die. At first, he had escaped the flames because his bedroom was on the first floor. He returned to the house to save his parents, but he didn't return. He was a high school student who was trying to do the right thing. Memories are such a powerful thing. It has been over forty years since that tragic night, but every Christmas Eve I think about Maggie Campbell. I do not have a clue where Maggie Campbell is today, but every year on Christmas Eve I take a second and pray for her. How do you live the rest of your life knowing you caused your family's death? Maggie Campbell's story reminds us that Christmas isn't always merry.

Can anyone here relate to that story? Christmas isn't always perfect. How perfect is your Christmas going to be this year? Maybe perfection isn't possible because you are grieving. The loss of a loved one is never easy. Maybe perfection isn't possible because some relationship in your life is broken? People file for divorce twelve months a year. People ignore their siblings twelve months a year. People refuse to forgive twelve months a year. Maybe perfection isn't possible because you are consumed with worry. How are you going to pay for all those student loans? How are you going to get out of debt? The mole on your back is changing. Maybe perfection is impossible because your time is running out? You haven't lived out any of your youthful dreams. You feel like you haven't done anything! Does anyone here feel like they are letting the next generation down? This is the truth. The world demands we have a perfect Christmas. The problem is, none of our lives are perfect. All of our lives have imperfections. Perhaps this is the best piece of pastoral advice I can give you: this Christmas, give up on perfect. If you are willing to give imperfection a try this Christmas, say, **"Amen!"** Let's look at the text together.

This morning's text is about a young woman who was living an imperfect life. Her name was Mary, and she was the one God chose to be the mother of Jesus. I would encourage you to forget everything you think you know about her, and simply look at the words of the story. Don't think of her as a saint or some spiritual super-hero. Just think of her as a person. The words tell us she is going through an incredibly difficult time. She is more like us than you can imagine. Because of this similarity between us and her, she models for us how to survive in our world. She illustrates three things about life itself. First, she illustrates for us that **life is hard**. There is nothing easy about life. Second, she illustrates for us that sometimes **we need others**. She went to her cousin, Elizabeth. Third and finally, she illustrates for us that **we always need God**. So if you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

Life is hard

First, Mary illustrates for us: life is hard. Life has always been hard. If you don't believe me, then look at the Nativity itself. Don't glamorize the story. Don't get sucked into the tradition. I will say it again - just read the words. Every single person in the story was in a difficult situation. Mary was in a difficult situation. In a time that valued morals, Mary was an unwed pregnant woman. Joseph was in a difficult situation. There was really no right answer. On the one hand, he has every right to divorce Mary and walk away. The problem is, Mary would have been found guilty of adultery. That means she could be stoned to death. How could he live with her death on his hands? On the other hand, if he takes Mary as his own, then he brings shame on himself. He is saying he has broken the abstinence law during the engagement. Zachariah and Elizabeth are in a difficult situation. They have no children, and their society demanded many children. They believed, the more children, the greater God's blessings. The fewer the children, the fewer the blessings. They had no children, so they had no blessings. If you turn to the second chapter of Matthew, then you find the story of the Magi. They were in a difficult situation. All they wanted to do was worship the new-born king. Do you remember what happened? Their sincere actions lead to the death of two-year-old baby boys and younger. How many mothers blamed them for their son's death? Do I have to go on? Each one of the characters reminds us that life is hard. Do you know of anyone who has a hard life? Could it be you have a hard life? Do you know of anyone who has ever said, "Life is much easier than I ever expected!" No! Life is hard! If you agree that life is hard, say, "**Amen!**" Life is hard!

Sometimes we need others

Second, Mary illustrates for us: sometimes we need others. Look at the story one more time with me. Mary was from the town of Nazareth. In her time, Nazareth had a population of between 100 and 400 people. Have you ever lived in a small town? Have you ever worshipped in a small membership church? Everyone knows everyone else. Everyone knows everyone's business. Mary is single and pregnant in a small town. Everyone in her life is talking about her pregnancy. She is the hot topic at the well. The story says she went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. Biblical scholars believe she went for two reasons. First, she goes to Elizabeth to escape the people in her life.

Second, she goes to Elizabeth to receive some unconditional love. Has there ever been a time in your life when you needed the counsel of someone else? Have you ever been the counsel for someone else? Sometimes we need people. Mary went to Elizabeth. Where do you go? Have you ever gone to visit a relative? Have you ever gone to visit a friend? Have you ever traveled to a counselor or a support group? Don't feel guilty! Sometimes we need people. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Life is hard. Sometimes we need people.

We always need God

Third and finally, Mary illustrates for us: we always need God. Look at the text with me one final time. The angel goes to Mary and tells her she is going to have a baby. Mary knows it is biologically impossible. She has never been intimate with a man. The angel tells her the Holy Spirit will come upon her and she will conceive. What does that mean? It means that Mary's personal agenda for her life must be discarded. Her personal will means nothing. God's will for her means everything. Verse 38 is an incredible verse. It says, "*I am the Lord's servant,*" *Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."* She sacrificed her dreams and desires for her life for God's will. Generations later, she reminds us that we always need God. How much of your will are you willing to surrender to God? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

One of my favorite Christmas movies is National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation. You must have seen it, because it seems like it has been on every night. It stars Chevy Chase, who plays the part of Clark Griswold. (However, I love Randy Quaid, who plays the part of Cousin Eddie. He is such a jerk!) Clark is a good man who wants to bring his family the perfect Christmas. He tries everything, but everything seems to go wrong. The Christmas lights don't work. The turkey is dry. The neighbors are annoying. Their relatives are weird. How many times have you seen Christmas Vacation? (If you have never watched it, then cancel your afternoon plans and watch it. It is on my "A" list, five stars!) Do you know why we love Christmas Vacation so much? The reason is, every December we play the part of Clark Griswold. We do our best to give our family the perfect Christmas. The problem is, we live in an imperfect world.

In a few days, I will celebrate my twentieth Christmas as pastor of this church. The longer I am here, the more I enjoy Christmas with you. Can I be honest with you? There was a time when I ruined Christmas for myself because I was consumed by all the details of the holiday. My attitude about Christmas changed in a single moment. It happened during a 7:00 Christmas Eve service. We were just about to take up the Christmas offering. The ushers came forward, and I passed out the offering plates. One of the ushers on that evening was Chic Baber. How many of you remember Chic? I always appreciated Chic because he was such an optimist. I still miss him. On that evening, I handed him the offering plates, and he dropped one. It hit the prayer rail and it sounded like cymbals crashing. I was striving for perfection that evening to impress the Christmas Eve crowd, but Chic ruined it. I was preoccupied by that moment for the rest of the service, and was still venting about it the next morning.

It was at that moment the person I respect the most in the world saved my Christmas forever. She said, "Russ, it is Christmas. It comes once a year. Enjoy it. Things happen." And she gave me a kiss and said, "Merry Christmas!"

I am not going to give you a kiss, but maybe those are the words you need to hear? It is Christmas. It only comes once a year. Enjoy it. Things happen. Why don't we forget about perfection this Christmas, and just remember Jesus. David Jeremiah once said, *"All the Christmas presents in the world are worth nothing without the presence of Christ."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**