

Is That All?

I married into an Italian family. It's a feat that has required this Scandinavian to build stamina. An Italian Christmas is a gluttonous affair that includes a full day of eating when you realize that the amazing assortment of food that you had been eating all day were just the warm-up. When you join a family where everyone you meet is family, it's a festival. My badge of honor that acknowledges the survival of the Italian Christmas is the T-Shirt received by all of the brother-in-laws: Pray for Me, My Wife is Italian! You are welcome to join me for an Italian Christmas, and you will understand what a badge of honor it is to earn this shirt. The funny thing about sharing Christmas with my Italian Family is the family traditions. While the preparation is extensive and the celebration hits its climax on Christmas Day, the only thing better than getting ready is putting everything away. The build up is paced along the lines of the Advent calendar. The crescendo of building to Christmas, the highlight of family and sharing in the four hour festive five course meal, yet the miracle in our house is the day after. I haven't yet finished my cup of coffee, and it is a mad dash of Olympic gold proportions with ornaments and tree parts flying back into the closet. And the family is comparing notes on the phone about who wins the medal this year for closing this years chapter of Christmas. It's an annual tradition. I laugh reminding my mother-in-law showing me last year how everything was already put away, as she walks me over to show the one exception-- the little baby Jesus still lying in the manger and the nativity scene. It's that little moment of peace to pause and recognize that Christmas is a beginning of a journey, and that all is calm in Bethlehem. We gathered around the cradle stand, I cracked a joke about how everyone else in the family is like our current health care where in the joy of a new birth...better not overstay the welcome...only 24 hours in this stable. Calm, I join the rest of the family to settle in for the football game and next thing I know...baby Jesus is being put away for another year. Checkout is at 10:00am for this stable, time to saddle up the donkey and start heading to Nazareth.

Following worship today, we will saddle up our donkey and head to my parents house for Christmas part 2. The Italian Christmas Extravaganza is just the opening band compared to my family. My parents have 8 grandchildren, and seven of them are nine years old. The Italian Christmas is practice for this next survival challenge. A place where the manger is still up, but a nativity that is a Fisher Price Set that blares Away in Manger, and by the 18th time in a row--the kids laughing as they perch the donkey atop the manger in place of the angel, all-the-while laughing how our the Christmas carol selects another word for Donkey eating with the Ox. A gathering with nine nine-year-olds and I long for hiding with sweet baby-Jesus in the Christmas closet back at the Italian Fiesta.

Another year of opening presents trying to take turns with an attempt to instill some sort of emphasis on the giving rather than the receiving.

It was around the dinner table our last Christmas gathering, my sister shares the story of her kids and her Christmas most embarrassing moment. My sister carries the majority of the seven nine-year-olds with four of them being hers. It really is a blessing after many years of wanting to children, God blessed them with quadruplets—and they are four healthy and beautiful children. Much to be thankful for. But kids are kids, and we have all had moments that she shared from the Christmas when a dear friend brings gifts for each of the children, and upon opening the presents—the reply from all four was, “Is that

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all” while in the awkward pause “where’s the big gift?” That kind of sums it up, Is that all? All the anticipation, preparation, and we find ourselves hoping for something more? That’s it?

And here we are, the Sunday after Christmas with the finish line of 2013 in our sites. We had a wonderful, joyous, and Spirit led Christmas Eve service. I was so moved from a service of joyous song, a sanctuary that was filled, the perfection of God delivering an abundance of a White Christmas outside the windows while basking in the presence of God indoors by candlelight—yet five days later and we all have a story in there somewhere saying, “Is that all?”

Our reading from Isaiah today is a text of the sentimental variety. It makes for good Christmas reading as we begin winding down singing the carols with good cheer, goodwill, and a sense of peace on earth—that is if you isolate today’s reading from what is happening immediately before and after. My preference today is to avoid the context...in fact, self admittedly, why I first chose Isaiah over our Matthew text. In the glow of Christmas, a lot of hard family stuff going on—yet a wonderful Christmas—so I really did not want to preach a sermon on the killing of the innocents. Nothing says Merry Christmas like a sermon on the killing of the innocents, let alone the hours needed to spend in the text to deliver a sermon. No thank you, at least for this year.

So as I glanced at the lectionary texts for the week, saw the Matthew text and quickly turned to check Isaiah, ahhh...a tidy cheerful text that includes gracious deeds, praiseworthy acts, mercy, steadfast love, savior, in love and pity—redeemed, God lifted and carried them... ahh—Isaiah, I pick you. That’ll preach!

And then I sit down to write—the immediate line before reads, “I trampled down peoples in my anger, I crushed them in my wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth.” And immediately following, “But they rebelled and grieved his holy spirit; therefore he became their enemy; he himself fought against them.” Shucks!

And I enter back into the fray, the chaos of tree limbs flying back into the closet, seven nine-year-olds laughing about words for donkey, sweet baby Jesus being tucked away until next year... and I remember not only the context of what happens before, and what happens after—but what is it hand.

That our chaos is no different than the wonderful memories when I was nine and laughing to the same lyric about Ox and Ass feeding. Our kids excitement about presents I too remember... and I too remember the fondness of Christmas Eve services by candlelight, sharing a meal together around a feast, and those breakthrough moments of purpose—something bigger than me happening in God entering history as a child.

And now, as a parent and knowing how much it is to love a child...that what happens before, and after—that in all of this seeing how much God loves by entering.

That in all of the chaos, as our text shares, may we “recount the gracious deeds of the Lord”...all that God has done, “according to the abundance of steadfast love.” For God said, “Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely” and God become their savior in all of their distress.” It was no messenger or angel...no pastor, no elder, no

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deacon, no Bible Thumper, no missionary...”but it is God’s presence that saved them; in God’s love and God’s pity God redeemed them; God lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.”

While God is so much more, that God loves as a loving and nurturing parent: God is with us—caring for us as a mother—as Mary carried a baby in her womb. God protects us as a father protects a child.

Long for sentimentality—good cheer and peace on earth—hidden in this is the exterior mask shielding that underneath the surface, much of life is hard. That in the good times, and in the bad... that God is with us—even while we are living in exile. And while in our exiles, God is present and helping us to grow and restore us in relationship. For this is why we have Christmas.

In our moments when we find ourselves thinking, “Is that all?” May this week call us to go deeper—that may our resolutions this coming year be more than dressing the exterior—more than losing inches—more than gym memberships—more than our own self-help... but recognize that our help is in the Lord. May we continue to go deeper in relationship through prayer, in reading Scripture, in our compassion for one another—and the other. In the name of a living, loving, and nurturing God. Amen