

Pastor's Point

The Work of Christmas

*When the song of the angels is stilled, When the star in the sky is gone, When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock, The work of Christmas begins:*

To find the lost,

To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,

To release the prisoner,

To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among others,

To make music in the heart.

Howard Thurman, 20th Century Minister, Theologian, and Professor

I'm not very good at the whole Christmas card exchange, but I'm always grateful that so many of my friends are. They send custom cards printed with family pictures on both sides — perfectly composed shots mixed with silly outtakes heavily featuring their adorable children. I receive these cards with greedy fingers, pouring over them, laughing at the funny shots. And then I carry them over to my refrigerator where I carefully remove the cards from the year before, replacing them with these newer versions. And for the next year, I will smile at these silly pictures every time I go to open the refrigerator.

In a normal year, I will have also been to visit these friends and their progeny, experienced both the sweetness and the crazy involved in raising little human beings. I'd have remembered that kids can be demons as well as angels and that no family is perfect. And so my refrigerator faces would recall all those memories, reminding me that these mini-humans are filled with just as many contradictions and challenges as anyone else.

But of course, this is not a normal year. And I've begun the switching out process feeling a little empty for not having memories and reminders this year. And I find myself sometimes giving into the temptation to idealize these children, to remember or imagine only the sweetness, the silliness, the fun of knowing them. Their parents, of course, are happy to disabuse me of that notion; happy to tell the hard stories, the ones about temper tantrums and mean-spirited fighting, about avoiding chores and creating huge messes they then refuse to clean up. But this year, I hear even those stories with a grateful heart, secretly convinced that they couldn't possibly have left that big a mess or thrown that loud a tantrum. Not these kids smiling from my refrigerator door.

And I think about the baby Jesus, sleeping peacefully in his manger, Mary radiantly keeping watch and I am tempted to wrap myself up in all that sweetness and never emerge. My sense is that many of us feel that way, that we imagine this serene tableau and cling to it with everything we have. Somehow we manage to gloss over the harshness, missing the nights Joseph walked the floor with a colicky baby or the days Mary's dress was covered in spit-up. We rejoice in the split-second image, forgetting not only what an adult Jesus faces, but also how his life calls us to live ours. Howard Thurman's poem, "The Work of Christmas," brings all of that reality back. We want to preserve this particular image, to live in the world of 6lb, 5oz baby Jesus, but life cannot be lived in pretty pictures. We have to let go of perfection and embrace the dirty, loud, messy world with its dirty, loud, messy people. And we have to do so without judgement or fear. Christmas is a celebration, but it is also a call to action pointing the way forward. Let's walk that way together, shall we?

Blessings,
Pastor Heather