

4th Sunday in Advent
"Nothing was Right, but All was Perfect"
Matthew 1:18-25

Don't you just love it when a child sees something that adults don't see?
I see that when I'm leading the chapel service for our preschoolers.
We'll be looking at a Bible story and I'll ask a question and I'll be expecting one kind of response and then out of the blue, one of the children will see something I didn't see, and their answer will be just perfect.

At three or four or five years old, they've captured something about a Bible story that gets right to the heart of it.

Why is that?
Why do children sometimes see things that adults don't see?
Isn't it because they see things with new eyes and ears?

I think that is especially true when it comes to hearing familiar passages of Scripture like the Christmas Gospel or the readings that lead up to Christmas.

This morning, I want to begin by sharing with you something I read in a devotion recently. Because there was one sentence in that devotion that helped me see today's Gospel in a whole new way. This is the sentence I read:

"Nothing was right, but all was perfect, that first Christmas, because God made it that way."¹

Hang on to that thought for a minute as I share a story with you.
It's a story about a crusty old sheep farmer named Irwin.

Nothing had gone right in Irwin's life.
His sister Lois blamed it on heartbreak. When he was young, "he loved a girl but she ran off with his best friend," Lois would explain.
"After that, things were never right again with Irwin."

So it was that Irwin lived with Lois on the old family farm,
and now it looked as though the farm was going to have to be sold.

Irwin's legs were bad, he could hardly walk at times.
Getting up in the early bitter winds of February and March
to help the ewes lamb, was too much for him.

¹ From a devotion by Christa von Zychlin (including following story and observations)

When Irwin's pastor came to visit, she'd climb out of her car and head to the barn.

When Irwin saw her coming he'd meet her and ask,
 "Well, you wanna see somethin' Pastor?" And he'd lead her into the barn, and there'd be
 newborn lamb twins, or even triplets.

"That's somethin' to see now," he'd say.

Looking at those lambs, stroking the cobbled woolly nose of the mother ewe,
 they would stand a minute in the silence and then he'd repeat it.

"That's somethin' to see now."

Everything was wrong in Irwin's life, but for the moment it was perfect. God made it that way.

Everything was wrong, too, that night in Bethlehem, the night Jesus was born.
 It was the wrong time, the wrong place, with the wrong people around.
 Still, all was perfect. God made it that way.

The first thing that's wrong with the Christmas story is the timing.
 We see that clearly in today's Gospel reading.

Mary was expecting a baby, and yet, she and Joseph were not properly married.
 And as everyone could see, she was with child.

Why did God choose to do it that way, and not wait until things could be done without all the
 neighbors talking? Why the hurry? Why the secrecy and the scandal?
 Why hadn't God sent the angel Gabriel to the whole town of Nazareth
 to tell them all exactly how and why this Savior would be born?

But no, the angel came only to Mary, and then later to Joseph, in a dream.

When you think about it, what better way to prepare Mary and Joseph
 for the scandal of a God who talks and cries and dies as a human being?
 Mary and Joseph would be able to teach their young son a few things
 about doing what's right according to God, instead of according to what the neighbors think!

So the timing seemed wrong, but God made it just right.

It was also the wrong place.
 It was the wrong place because it was Bethlehem, a small, out of the way place.
 It wasn't an impressive city like Jerusalem.

But most important, for Mary, was that Bethlehem was not home.

A decree had gone out from Caesar Augustus, and the Roman government scattering folks across the country to register in their ancestral home, most likely so the Romans could impose more taxes!

But when the Roman Empire said move, you moved.
So Mary and Joseph moved.
It didn't matter to Caesar that Mary was in no condition to travel by donkey.

What they didn't know was that over 735 years before that night, the prophet Micah had written,
"Bethlehem Ephrathah, you are one of the smallest of towns in the nation of Judah. But the Lord will choose one of your people to rule the nation..."²

So as for the place, God made it perfect.

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.
It must have surprised them.
Joseph evidently had been thinking that there was still plenty of time, to get back to Nazareth.
Maybe, Mary did too. It was their first baby after all.

But God's time was right, so Mary gave birth to her firstborn child and wrapped him in swaddling clothes.
And she laid him in a manger filled with hay, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Nothing seemed to be going right.
And none of the right people were around to help.
Mother and sisters and aunts and trusted neighbors were far away.
And no one from the nice inn up the road came to help.

So, the angels went to the countryside to find some people to comfort this young family, And what they found were some disreputable shepherds.
A grizzled old man and his son, maybe.
Two guys who hadn't had a bath in weeks, out there with the sheep.

These are the people God chose to be the first greeters and nannies, and worshippers of the Prince of Peace.

These sheep farmers were all wrong for the part, but God made them perfect.

"That's somethin' to see now," old Irwin the sheep farmer used to say, picking up the smallest lamb.

² Micah 5:2 (CEV)

Maybe those are the same words the first shepherds used on that holy night!

How about you this Christmas?

Like the shepherds, can you hear the sound of God calling to you.

Like the voice of Jesus crying out in the manger,
God is saying to you: "I'm here!" "I'm with you!"

Maybe some things are wrong in your life.
Maybe some things are not perfect. or not even close!

Maybe there is brokenness, or frustration, or grief, or sin.

But this Christmas God shows you perfection:

A baby is born who is God's own Son, Jesus.
His full name is Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

And He's bringing grace and truth, and healing and forgiveness, and peace into this hard world.
Even now Christ is coming! Christ is coming.

"That's somethin' to see now." God made it that way. Amen