

Putting Together Christmas
Some Assembly Required – Luke 1:39-56
Dec. 9, 2018
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For the eight years we lived in Chicago, we had a yearly Christmas ritual. Every year on the day after Christmas, which was also the start of my vacation, we would load up our car with suitcases, diaper bags, snacks and drinks, strollers, pack-n-plays, presents, and then squeeze in ourselves, to make the six-hour drive to Jeffersonville, Ind., to see our family.

To pass the time, we'd play games like "On which Chicago highway would you like to sit in traffic?" and "Can you hold it until we get to the Chick-Fila in West Lafayette for lunch?" and, my favorite, "Who can kick Daddy's seat the hardest?" Fun times! We'd enact this ritual every year, subjecting ourselves to the traffic and the bad weather and the construction and being confined in a small space with two little kids. Did I mention this was during my vacation? By the time we arrived in Jeffersonville I was ready to give up the nuclear codes. Why in the world would we do this each and every year?

Because our family lived in Jeffersonville, Ind., and there's nowhere you would rather be than home for the holidays, surrounded by people you love and people who love you. For our Advent sermon series this year, we're talking about the challenge of putting together a meaningful Christmas from all the pieces that are thrown at us during this season. Last week we talked about the importance of being quiet in order to hear God's instructions for us. This week, we are going to recognize that, for us to have a meaningful Christmas, there is some assembly required.

Those three words have been the bane of many parents' existence on Christmas Eve. One year my sister was getting a giant fairyland dollhouse for Christmas and I drew the short candy cane and had to put it together. I got the box out of the closet and read the dreaded words: "Some assembly required." In this case, that was an understatement on par with a puppy coming with a sticker that says, "Some attention needed." I opened the box to find about a gazillion pieces and an instruction booklet thicker than a Penney's catalog. I think I had my first breakdown on page 32 where it said, "attach flying buttress 4B to princess gargoye 5D."

The word "assemble" comes from the Latin root "simul-", as in simultaneously. It means "together." So, to assemble something is to bring it together in a common place for a common purpose. I was assembling my sister's dollhouse by bringing different pieces together for the common purpose of giving my sister minutes of enjoyment until she moved onto the next toy. And we assembled in the common place of Jeffersonville each Christmas season for the common purpose of being a family.

That may explain Mary's actions in our story today. Let's remember where we are in the narrative. Last week, we heard Luke tell us about how Zechariah was given the good news that his wife Elizabeth was going to have a baby, even though she was no spring chicken. Zechariah momentarily disbelieves and is struck mute, but Elizabeth receives the news with great joy. That story is followed by a parallel birth announcement, except this time the angel comes to an unwed virgin teenager in the backwater town of Bethlehem. The virgin's name is Mary and she gets a Christmas surprise much bigger than a giant fairyland dollhouse.

In the midst of that divine exchange, the angel tells Mary that her cousin Elizabeth is also pregnant. So, we learn in our passage today that the first thing Mary does upon receiving her

good news is that she goes “with haste” to see Elizabeth, making the perilous three-day journey on her own, presumably not even taking the time to stop at Chick-fila for lunch.

Why would she do that? She’s just found out she’s going to have the most unexplainable pregnancy that would be a threat to her and her fiancé Joseph. Wouldn’t it make sense to hunker down, to stay put, to take time to contemplate all that this means for her? Instead, she beats a path to Elizabeth’s door because Mary recognizes that some assembly was required. She needed not to be alone. She needed her family.

So, here’s the scene: an older woman beyond child-bearing years who is enduring a risky pregnancy that could threaten her life and the life of her child, and a younger woman facing harsh social criticism and banishment for being unwed and pregnant. This is not a casual visit between two cousins in happy circumstances. This scene is ripe for tense words of desperation and anguish, for questions like “What do we do?” and “Why us?” and “What’s going to happen?” Instead, we get, “Blessed are you among women!” and “When I heard you the baby in my womb leaped for joy.” and “My soul glorifies the Lord.” Those are hardly the words of two women facing such anxious unknown futures, not to mention swollen ankles and morning sickness.

I believe this highlights one of the reasons why it’s so important to assemble at Christmas time with those we love. There is strength in numbers, but even more than that, there is hope. Mary had to be scared for her future, Elizabeth had to be anxious about such an unorthodox pregnancy, and yet when the women come together, they are filled with the Holy Spirit so much that they can’t keep from singing. Coming together at Christmas can often be the balm that soothes the fears and anxieties that this world produces within us. It reminds us that we are not alone in this scary world.

At my last church, I had a call one day from Bill. Bill was a big guy, very macho and confident, but on the phone he sounded quite upset and vulnerable. He asked if he could come to my office to talk. About 15 minutes later, he showed up and crumbled into a chair, slouched over, tears streaming down his face. He told me that one of his best friends had just committed suicide. But then he said, “That’s not what’s really bothering me. What’s really bothering me is that in the note he left, he said he had no one he could call.” Bill struggled with the feeling that he had been there for his friend, and yet when his friend needed Bill, his friend felt alone.

Christmas can be a lonely time, can’t it? It’s a harsh yearly reminder of those loved ones we have lost, of opportunities we have missed, of dreams we’ve had that might never come true. Maybe there are fewer presents under the tree this year. Maybe you’re still in the same job you promised yourself you wouldn’t be in at this time last year. Maybe your loved one’s health is noticeably worse than last Christmas. Even when we are spending time with friends and family, the difficult dynamics of those relationships can feel isolating and painful. If there is dysfunction in our relationship, the holidays can only exacerbate that. At a time when we’re supposed to feel joy, because that’s what you do at Christmas, we may instead feel hopeless, despairing, alone.

That’s why some assembly is required. That’s why it’s so important that we come together during this season. That’s what the church is for. That’s what worship is for. That’s what our fellowship dinner is for. That’s what Christmas Eve is for. God calls us together during this time of year to remind us that we are not alone and that God is coming to earth once again in the form of a baby to show us that we are loved, we are treasured, and we are not alone.

There’s power in coming together. Why else would we spend hours sitting in Chicago traffic in sub-zero weather? Something happens when the image of God in you connects with the image of God in me, maybe akin to Elizabeth’s baby leaping in her womb when Mary appears. It

is so important for us to connect at the human level, setting aside any superficial differences this world has instilled in us, instead recognizing our basic human need to not be alone, especially at this time of year. We don't assemble in spite of who we are, but because of who we are, recognizing we all bring our own idiosyncrasies to the encounter. C.S. Lewis said a friendship starts when one person says to another, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one." We come together at Christmas to be reminded that we are not the only ones who struggle, who fear the future, who have no one to call.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months. How they must have talked, wondered at what God was doing in their lives, and what God was planning for their very special children. Dr. Virginia Hoch calls their time together "stable time," not in the sense of stability, but in the sense of a time when we glimpse God breaking into our world, as God does at the stable in Bethlehem.

Our time together in worship, in fellowship, in the listening to and singing of hymns, in prayer, is stable time. When we assemble here, we are reminded that God is once again breaking into our world, showing us that there is more to our existence than what we see and hear. God knows your pain. God knows your struggles. You are not alone if Christmas is less than merry for you. There is no place in our world that is too poor, too remote, too embarrassing, too painful, too messy, that God cannot break into in order to bring out new life. When we come together, hope expands exponentially.

Hebrews tells us that faith is "the assurance of things hoped for." Just as Mary can sing about future events in the past tense – "He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty" – we can have assurance that what God has promised us, God will deliver. So, we can come to this time of year expecting, in spite of our pain. We can come expecting that God is at work. We can come expecting that Christ is coming again. And we can come expecting that, when we're here, when we're with each other, we are not alone.

My family and I are very thankful not to have to make that drive from Chicago to Jeffersonville anymore. We're thankful that our family is now just down the road, and also right here in this sanctuary with us. We are your family. You are our family. And each time we come together, we witness to the powerful bond we share through our faith in Christ. It's a busy season, I know. You may be tempted to skip worship or the church dinner or even a Christmas Eve service. Please don't. You need to be here. Because this is stable time. This is where God breaks in with good news of great joy. This is home.