

So, what kind of plans did you have for 2020? At this time last year, what did you envision 2020 would be like? Was it anywhere close to what you thought?

We have arrived at a Christmas that feels like a mess. So much is different, so much has changed, so many traditions have been put on the shelf next to the elf. I'm making light of it a little, but I do not want to downplay the very real tragedy and loss that many are experiencing this December. There are many for whom the behaviors of Christmas—the cooking, shopping, baking, decorating, gift wrapping, and so on—are surprisingly empty and even painful this year. If I just described you, I want to assure you, there is nothing wrong with you. You have nothing for which to apologize. It has been an unusually traumatic year, and for every person who has latched onto the rituals of Christmas for the normalcy, there's a person who just doesn't have the emotional energy to participate. Let's be as gentle and gracious as we can to one another, wherever you fall on that spectrum. A little understanding might be one of the better gifts you can give this year.

Having said all that, it might be worth asking, should we even have a Christmas this year? My response to that question is, "It depends what you mean." There's really only one thing that I pray you will not set aside. There's really only one thing I pray you will not leave in the box until next year, and that is the Word of God, the story describing the birth of Jesus. The fact that you are listening right now suggests that a part of you understands there is something about Christmas that must not be lost. That "something" is the report of Jesus' birth found in the writings of Matthew and Luke. This is not the year to avoid Bethlehem. We have arrived at a Christmas that feels like a mess. The first Christmas was no different. This is what I hope you will realize tonight.

If we could somehow travel back in time and meet up with Joseph, I would love to ask him, "What kind of plans did you have for your life with Mary?" Can you imagine? You're doing pretty well for yourself. You're engaged, which is tremendously important to your family, your community, and, of course, to you, personally; but then your fiancée reveals she's pregnant, and you are absolutely sure that you are not the father. Suddenly, you're confronted with the question, should I break this off publicly or privately? What a mess.

What if we could travel back in time and meet up with Mary? Right after she accepts Joseph's proposal, we could ask her, "How do you envision the next twelve months?" Before the angel Gabriel's visit, I sincerely doubt her answer would have included an unplanned pregnancy, and all the shame and sideways glances that went along with it. All the gossip and judgmental conversations she would've overheard. The dishonor this brought to Joseph's name—there was no quick recovery from something like this. What a mess.

Then, the government of Rome, whose occupation of Israel was thoroughly resented, calls for a census. What this meant for Mary and Joseph was a trip to Bethlehem to register as relatives of good old King David. Practically speaking, they were looking at a 90 mile journey

over uneven terrain, doing probably 10 miles a day at most. After all, Mary was, as our English translations delicately put it, “Great with child.” Thank you, Caesar Augustus, let us please embark upon this trip so that you may have accurate numbers for your files. What a mess.

And then they arrive at Bethlehem. The only thing that Mary would’ve wanted and that Joseph would have wanted to provide was a place to stay, nothing fancy, somewhere warm and clean and quiet. There was just one problem. Bethlehem was small, and the extended family of David, not small. They go from place to place; they keep getting turned down. Imagine the exhaustion and finally the desperation as the signs point to labor and delivery and the best option is a stable. Mary, I hope you’re an animal person. Joseph, watch your step. What a mess.

This was the situation into which Jesus was born; a situation of uncertainty, tension, and hardship. Yet the most shocking statement in the whole account just might be verse 19: “But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.” Treasured up all these things? How in the world is that possible?

Well, first of all, the baby. The swaddled boy in the manger. The little person whose name means “the Lord saves.” He is living proof that God keeps his promises.

Mary could ‘treasure up all these things’ because she believed God’s Word. The same could be said for Joseph. These two give us a lot to consider at the end of this messy year. Here’s what I mean. Both Joseph and Mary had been visited by angels, and those angels had given them messages. Those messages enabled them to interpret what was happening to them. Things looked bad, but behind the scenes, God was up to something good. But here’s the thing: their interaction with the angels was momentary. The angels didn’t stick around for nine months or show up every day. What they left behind were words. God’s words, burned into their memories. “Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” “The child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.” And these words were all they had to go on when things seemed really bad. These words were a life raft in the storm. And God was faithful to His Words. He kept his promises. In time, he let Mary and Joseph see those promises fulfilled. Jesus was born. The shepherds arrived. That was just the beginning. It is crucial to note that the arrival of baby Jesus did not make Mary and Joseph’s immediate circumstances less complicated. And yet, Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them. It was more than worth it to hold this holy Child in her arms. He was evidence that God is faithful.

And, he lived up to His name. The Lord saves. He would trade the humility of a manger for the humiliation of the cross. He became the sacrificial lamb. The offering of His life would save his people from their sins. He became the bad thing to do you good. Not only that, He would trade death for life at his resurrection, bringing victory over death to anyone who believes his words, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

In a Christmas that feels like a mess, rely on God’s Words. They are your life raft. Trust that God is working behind the scenes to make all things new. Look for the ways his promises are coming true in your life. Start with the baby in the manger.

