



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

After the baby
The Second Sunday after Christmas, Year B
Sunday, January 3, 2021
The Rev. Amber Carswell

Years ago, I was doing some research on mental health and the holiday season. Everyone knows that the holidays are stressful, there's this common knowledge of the Blue Christmas, the danger of the seasonal affective disorder. One Google search for sadness and the holidays and you'll find thousands of results telling you how to get through this very worst time of the year, this time where we're at our most fragile due to stress and overeating and overspending and being trapped in confined spaces with people you see only once a year and how studies show that rates of psychological breakdown and suicide skyrocket, right?

Well, it's wrong. It's not just a little wrong. As I started looking for the actual data behind this assumption, I found that the studies on this widespread belief showed the exact opposite. In the weeks leading up to Christmas the rates of psychiatric admissions to emergency departments are the lowest of the whole year. And in general, all holidays show this tendency — Thanksgiving, 4th of July, etc. In case you're curious, the numbers point to late winter/early spring as the low point for America's mental health.¹

The only holiday where you see a rise above normal rates is New Year's Day. And while I bet each one of us has anecdotal evidence of just how crazy they feel in December, finding this out rang true to me.

The lead up to Christmas is hope. We're waiting for a baby, and the whole non-religious world is somehow there for it. You don't have to be churchy to love the season, our nation animates with nostalgic reverie, silver bells and strings of street lights and the sugarplum fairy, just enough people driving around with felt reindeer antlers on their cars to make you remember that even in Memphis, every driver has a mother who loves them. You pour your money into gifts, feeling like you're making up a little for another year of being a lackluster daughter or sister or friend, you think about the resolutions you'll adopt next week after you help yourself to another piece of pie.

It's *after* the visits, nerves frayed, bloated from a week of saying yes to seconds and dessert, replaying the conversations with those people you see only once a year, the credit card bills roll in, and you wake up to the exact same world in 2021 that you left in 2020. That's the time of the emotional fallout.

We've had our season of waiting in the hope and anticipation and preparation for the revelation of the Word, for God to enter into the world, for the ancient promises to be fulfilled, lives like watered gardens, peace on earth, good will to man; and a Son is born unto us, perfect and bald and squishy. Ten days later, reality comes crashing back down. The world around us, in fact, looks quite a lot like the world before the revelation. Even in our Gospel we get pubescent Jesus running away from his family and copping an attitude with his terrified mother, whose side we are all on, and basically telling her that

¹ <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/unhappy-holidays/>

Joseph's not his real dad. What emotional resonance — the lectionary committee really nailed it with this choice.

It just so happens that this is the only story in our bible of the boy Jesus, and of course it's our master storyteller Luke who brings it to us. Luke has an intention here that you might miss if you simply focus with your mother-lenses on tween Jesus. Raymond Brown points out that Luke, in telling these sweet stories of the infancy and boyhood of Jesus, is actually giving us the Gospel in miniature. He's teaching us how to read the rest of his story.²

The son of God shows up at the temple, and what does he do? He listens. He questions. We have no idea the questions he's asking, we only know that it's important that he's asking them. There's been a revelation and exploration must follow. We have no idea the lessons that he's taking from this moment, we only know that it's important that he's learning at the temple. God is entering into the world, and Luke keeps putting questions in everyone's mouths in response -- how can this be? How will I know? Where will this lead us? What does it mean? He wants us to learn to ask these questions, too. We all encounter the divine, but if it stops there -- then the story dies.

Luke says the boy Jesus disappeared for three days from his increasingly frantic parents, and he tells this story to ready us for the three days in the tomb, the silence of unknowing while Jesus is about his father's business. Because there will be moments when these questions of God, "Where did you go? Didn't you know we were afraid?" There are moments where these questions are not only inescapable, but apparently, the right thing to ask.

Maybe the message of tenth day of Christmas, the New Year's fallout, is that this pursuit of the divine contains all this, too. Jesus goes dark for twenty years after this event, growing and listening and questioning. As much as we wanted God to show up and make all things immediately right, apparently faith isn't an on/off switch. Your salvation isn't a formula.

In seminary, my dean was teaching a class where we were talking about this concept of the revelation of God having appeared, the age to come when all things would be set right has been set in motion, and how we live somewhere in both the already and the not yet. I raised my hand and asked, "But why does the now have to be so hard?" It had to have been a class in late winter or early spring. The dean looked at me over the rims of his glasses and pointed his finger up at me: "Because anything worth doing is hard."

² Borrow Brown's *The Birth of the Messiah* from me any time!