

HOLY MONOTONY

Luke 2:41-52

December 29, 2024

So here we are. It is the first Sunday after Christmas Day, and I wonder what word or words you might use to describe how you're feeling. Relief? Exhaustion? Joy? Sadness? Anticipation? Disappointment? Or maybe you're feeling hopeful.

I must admit that your preacher this morning is feeling a sense of relief. And I also must admit that I feel bad feeling this sense of relief.

However, I suppose I shouldn't be too surprised. You see, this year, this Christmas season, I have felt distracted, rushed, flustered, frenzied, and frenetic. For me, the anticipation of Advent had me feeling antsy. The waiting and the watching felt tedious and taxing. Somehow, somehow I managed to miss the wonder and the awe of the Christmas season.

Let's get to the presents already! Let's get to the manger, sing our songs, and head home! I was the scrooggiest of Scrooges. I was the grinchiest of Grinches. To be sure, as the song says, I was about as cuddly as a cactus. I found myself snarling and sneering at all those elves on their pious and righteous shelves. In my darkest moments, I found myself imagining consuming all the cookies that had been carefully crafted for Santa and eating them before he could get to them.

I was the scrooggiest of Scrooges. The grinchiest of Grinches.

And if you don't believe me, take it from two little humans whom I share life with daily. "Dad, you've been yelling a lot." "Ugh! You're the parent that's always rushing us!"

So there it is. Scrooge. Grinch. A South Pole elf. I simply wanted to rip open the packaging and rush to the manger! After all, that's where we find hope, peace, joy, and love, right?

Every year Advent shows up. Every year we wait and anticipate together. Every year we light candles. We sing those familiar songs. Every year Christmas comes again. *Every year* hope, peace, joy, and love arrive, right?

Well, yes. Hope, peace, joy, and love...but did you also know that Target is having a sale on gifts cards? And that Kohl's has a great deal on Nikes this year? Oh, and Von Maur has those beloved Ugg boots, and don't forget—we need to make a run to Kroger to get all the ingredients for that coffee cake that absolutely no one is going to eat. And we've got family photos this week for the Christmas card, and *you better smile*.

But you see, this year I had said things would be different. This year I would start my shopping earlier. This year I would commit to less and be more present and available. I'd move slowly and calmly throughout the season. And yet, there was, once again, another last-minute shopping spree on Christmas Eve for those beloved digital gift cards. And it was another year of a calendar full of gatherings and get-togethers and all kinds of commitments. Instead of slow and calm, I was erratic and bewildered.

This year was going to be different. But I'll be honest, I say that *every year*.

Every year they went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And this year, Mary and Joseph said it was going to be different. This year—Jesus' twelfth journey to Jerusalem, a year that would begin to mark his transition to adulthood—this year, they'd be ready. This year, they'd be organized. This year, they'd move slowly and thoughtfully. This year, the four-to-five-day journey to Jerusalem would be smooth, and it would be calm. It would be a joyous family occasion. All would be merry, and all would be bright.

But as the days grew closer, the bags still hadn't been packed, and there was a pile of dirty laundry still left to be cleaned. I can just imagine it now. Exhausted, Mary and Joseph looking at each other and saying, "Okay, we've just got to get through this Passover, and then things will settle down a bit."

And so, they do just that. They head off for Jerusalem. They arrive at the temple. They sing those wonderful, familiar songs. They speak those familiar prayers. Offerings are made, and the unleavened bread is consumed.

Check. Check. And Check.

Every year they went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And this year was supposed to be different, and, according to Luke it was, except not in the way we mean different. With those temple tasks completed and the rituals and routines finished, the pilgrims begin their travels back home. The whole crew is there—Mary and Joseph, Anna and Simeon, as well as Elizabeth and Zechariah. They don't immediately see Jesus, but they assume he's off running around with his cousin, little Johnny the Baptist (that's his official name). So he's off running around with little Johnny the Baptist stirring up some kind of holy mischief with other family and friends.

But then, like an ancient version of *Home Alone*, a day into their travels it hits Mary and Joseph that they still haven't seen Jesus. So, they turn back. I wonder what that journey back was like. Anger and despair? Finger pointing and fighting? Angst and terror? Silence? I imagine there were some passive aggressive slights and some personal jabs thrown as well.

They finally arrive back to Jerusalem, and after what I imagine were three very grueling and very long days, they find Jesus back at their original destination, back at the temple, calm and sitting amongst the teachers, listening intently and asking thoughtful questions.

Every year. This year things were supposed to be different. This year was supposed to be different. Every year is supposed to be different. And doesn't Luke know that when we said this year was supposed to be different, we mean it in a good way! Not in an "Oh, no! We lost Jesus" kind of way!

And why is Luke rushing us to an awkward altercation between teenage Jesus and his frazzled parents? It has been less than a week since we were at the manger! Can't Luke take a page out of Matthew's gospel and at least give us one Sunday with the magi?

But perhaps, if we take a moment to really sit with this story, to listen intently and to ask some thoughtful questions, we might find that Luke is up to something altogether different. Perhaps, much like Mary and Joseph, Luke is forcing us to turn back around, to make our way back to the manger and, just as Jesus was doing in the temple, to sit down calmly amongst the hay, and to let it itch and irritate our skin just for a bit as we listen intently and ask thoughtful questions.

Perhaps Luke is attempting to move us out of our decrees of "this year will be different" and deliver us into the doldrums of

daily existence, to reorient us back to the realities and rhythms of real life, to situate us in the everydayness of our human life.

Because if I'm honest—and I think if we're all honest—we do actually love that we've skipped so far ahead in the story. It is so very enticing. It is so very easy, so very tempting, to race from the manger to get to more of the good stuff, to get to the ministry and to the miracles of Jesus.

It is so very enticing. It is so very easy, so very tempting, to skip over the hard stuff of life. And it is so very comforting to know that when we walk into the grocery store this week the Christmas candy will be shoved to the side, relegated to an awkward corner with prices slashed. And there, placed prominently in that beloved center aisle, will be the next manger, the next mountaintop. Valentine's Day! St. Patrick's Day! There might even be an Easter basket or two.

But thankfully, Luke doesn't let us get away that easily. We've turned around, and after a long day of awkward, intense, and uncomfortable travel together, we are left collectively searching. We are challenged, like Mary and Joseph, to come face-to-face with those places and spaces in our lives which are causing great pain and grief and anxiousness, those areas in our lives that are piercing our souls.

We are challenged, like Mary and Joseph, to come face-to-face with those places and spaces in our lives which we treasure deeply in our hearts, those areas in our lives which bring us deep joy which truly deserve our undivided attention.

You see, Luke has masterfully and meticulously moved us into the mundane and the monotonous. Luke has halted our haste. This year will be different because we have hushed the hurry of our lives and our hearts. We have taken a seat to actually hear our hearts beat. And in so doing, we can actually sit still for a moment to listen well and to ask thoughtful questions and to be careful observers.

In our haste to get from manger to manger, from mountaintop to mountaintop, we can forget and lose sight that so much of our life is made up of the mundane and the monotonous. We can forget and lose sight that while we desperately need the manger every year, we also desperately need the monotonous every year that gets us to the manger and gets us back to where we came from.

After all, that's where we find hope, peace, joy, and love, right? Because every year Advent shows up. Every year we wait and anticipate together. Every year we light candles.

Every year we sing those familiar songs. Every year Christmas comes again.

Every year hope, peace, joy, and love arrive, right? The quick and fast answer is "YES! Yes, of course they arrive!" But the more mundane, the more monotonous, the more meticulous, and, I would argue, the more faithful response is to say, "Yes, yes, of course they arrive, but we must sit down long enough with each other to experience them together."

Because, friends, to move into the mundane and the monotonous means to stay in the manger long enough to start to smell the stuff of life that isn't always so appealing. To sit in the monotony means to be willing to acknowledge that hope is often accompanied by despair. To sit in the monotony means to be willing to acknowledge that peace can often feel fleeting when our home lives are hostile, and our neighborhoods are neglected, and the world is at war. To sit in the monotony means to acknowledge that this "season of joy" can more often feel like a season of deep and perpetual sadness as endless reminders of pregnancy and childbirth and parenthood often reopen old wounds while creating new ones. To sit in the monotony means to acknowledge that love is often only accomplished through the rhythms of rupture and repair.

In his classic text, *Orthodoxy*, G.K. Chesterton wrote these words: "Perhaps God is strong enough to **exult in monotony**. It is possible that God says every morning, 'Do it again' to the sun, and every evening, 'Do it again' to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them."

When we take on a posture of monotony, when we sit long enough beside one another at the manger, when we monotonously travel back and forth together, we join God in the exultation of the monotonous as we "do it again." And again. And again.

This year will be different. Every year will be different. But not because we are more organized or started our shopping earlier or better managed our calendars. It is because this year—and every year—we commit to do the monotonous and the mundane and the meticulous together.

We'll show up every Sunday and worship together. We'll pray together. We'll serve together. We'll share meals together. We'll learn and we'll laugh together. We'll sing together. We'll eat far too many donuts and consume too much coffee together. We will certainly annoy and irritate each other.

We'll cry together. We'll be devastated together. And we'll be hopeful together.

There will be baptismal waters to splash in together. We'll be sustained and nourished through the bread and the cup. And we will make so many mistakes and we will hurt each other and then we'll show up here on Sunday, acknowledge just how human we are, and then look each other in the eye and pass the peace and love of Christ to each other.

When we take on this monotonous posture and pace, listening and learning just as Jesus did, we listen and learn about the rhythms and realities of each other's lives. The meticulous and the mundane become the grief and the gladness we share alongside each other. And as we do, we enter into the breaches and the beauty of each other's lives, and we let our communal chorus be a collection of melodies made up of holy monotony. Thanks be to God. Amen.