

Start Timer!

Merry Christmas!

It's good to be here. I almost thought I would not make it today because I came down with a really bad flu. But, thanks to be God who gave me strength!

When I was in high school, the Korean church that I was going to had a joint Christmas Eve candlelight service with a predominately white church whose facility the Korean church rented from. It was a beautiful church with an extremely high platform for the preacher to preach from. It was a beautiful service, with a grand procession with ministers wearing full regalia and the full choir following. There were about 600 people at the service (even though their usual Sunday attendance was only about 50), but only about 20-30 came from the Korean Church. The white preacher preached a gentle homily for about 5 minutes. Then, the Korean pastor came up to the platform and started to preach in Korean passionately as if the whole crowd was Korean, and yelled and screamed into the microphone like he usually does when he preaches in the Korean church, and went on and on for about 30 minutes. I remember just sitting there as I saw bunch of white people feeling stuck in their seats, pretending to be interested in what he was saying, and not knowing when he was going to stop. I was sitting there feeling really awkward that he's yelling and preaching for so long. This was my early experience in multi-cultural worship, and it happened at a Christmas Eve service. As I remember that worship, I usually can't stop laughing at what happened. It is one of my most awkward and funny memories of Christmas worship.

I love so many things about Christmas: Christmas Eve when we used to get together with my family, Christmas carols—I love singing Christmas carols, decorations- Christmas tree and lights. I have these nostalgic memories of White Christmas when Grace's family used to live in Minnesota. I haven't had a White Christmas for a while.

We all know that Christmas season has been turned into a commercial circus. So much of Christmas has become about buying and buying. It makes the economy go around. And that creates a lot of financial stress in our lives.

One good thing about Christmas is that we spend more time with family. But, many of us have broken relationships with family. It creates a lot of stress. While Christmas is a jolly time for many, it is also a difficult time for many.

A lot of people feel lonelier. Suicide rate actually goes up. There are more natural deaths. A lot of people are stressed over the holidays.

You know, we are not the only ones stressed out over the Christmas holidays. Joseph and Mary were also stressed out over the birth of Jesus. And I think what they experienced during that time and how they were comforted might also give us some comfort as we struggle with our stresses. **[Slide 1]** So, the sermon title today is **“Peace for the Stressed Out.”** Let’s read the story and see some of the things that might have stressed them out.

[Slide 2] Let’s go to Luke 2:1-20:

¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

[Slide 3] ⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

[Slide 4] ¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

[Slide 5] ¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the

shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

[Slide 6] I. The Stress of the First Christmas.

Let's look at some of the stresses Mary and Joseph experienced.

Think about the stress of living under a brutal empire, the Roman Empire.

Because of the decree of the Caesar Augustus, they had to go all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem while Mary was very pregnant. This census was not just for population study. The purpose was obviously to collect taxes. So, Mary and Joseph dealt with stresses related to oppressive government that required unreasonable things from them. I know some of you feel a sense of oppression from government and society. I want you to know that Jesus was born into oppression, and his parents felt that it very personally.

Think about the stress of living under cloud of social condemnation. We know that the Holy Spirit caused Mary to be pregnant before while Joseph and Mary were only betrothed to one another, when they were only engaged. There would have been a lot of questions and roomers about Mary's pregnancy in a little town like Nazareth. It's not just Joseph, it would have been Mary's parents, family and the whole village who would have questioned the timing of her pregnancy. That would have created a lot of stress.

Think about the stress caused by the pregnancy. When you are pregnant with the first child, you are especially stressed. The second and third are a breeze. ☺ Then, to walk about 100 miles to register in Bethlehem is very stress inducing.

And then, when they get there, Mary goes into labor. Joseph is probably frantic looking for a clean place for Mary to give birth. Of course, there is no hospital. They couldn't even find an inn. The only place they can find was a little cave where they kept animals. Imagine the stress Joseph and Mary felt.

During my Sabbatical last year, my family and I went to the Holy Land. While we were in Jerusalem, we decided to visit Bethlehem, which was only about 5 miles away, but it was in the West Bank, an Arab area, beyond the wall that Israel built to keep out the Arabs. People told us that we should go on a professional tour to get to the

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birthplace of Jesus because it is complicated. I thought it's only about 5 miles away and we can just take a bus because it was like 10 times cheaper than going on a tour. So, we took a little rundown bus, and it dropped us off in West Bank, a few miles short of the birthplace of Jesus. We somehow figured out how to get there, but we found out that there may not be any more bus going back to Jerusalem because it was a holiday for both Muslims and Jews. And taxi drivers in West Bank can't cross the border to get to Jerusalem even though it was only a few miles away. So, the taxi driver told us that our only option was for him to drive us to the check-point and we can grab a bus or taxi on the other side of the check-point. When we got to the area near the check-point, it was chaos; he told us to get out of the taxi and walk; we followed him through a pretty chaotic area to the check-point which felt like an entrance to some sort of refugee camp. It was wild. When we made it to the other side of the check-point, there was no taxi or bus because of the holiday. They had some private drivers willing to take us. I realized that I don't have much cash to pay; so, I had to do some negotiation to get one of these questionable cars to take us back to Jerusalem. This whole visit created a lot of stress since I had the whole family with me. That's my visit to Bethlehem story. It was really stressful. Obviously, this was nothing compared to the stress that Mary and Joseph faced. She was pregnant, and walked over 100 miles, and went into labor, and they couldn't find a place to give birth. The only place they can find is a place where animals stay. It would have been disgusting, smelly, and I am sure, not something that Mary imagined for her first son. Then, for them to have nothing but a feeding trough to lay the baby Jesus to sleep. I remember Grace and I shopping for the Kaetlyn's crib. It was a beautiful walnut crib. Nothing like that for Jesus. Think about it. The Holy Spirit made her pregnant. She was told that she was going to give birth to the long promised Messiah. I think it would have been natural for Mary and Joseph to feel like God was going to take care of them. Then, for all these things to happen. It would have made her question the whole thing.

Then, if this is not enough, they learned that King Herod is after the baby Jesus. He ordered babies in Bethlehem to be killed. An Angel told Mary and Joseph to run

away to Egypt to escape Herod's terror. They couldn't even go back to Nazareth. They had to live as a refugee and immigrant in a unfriendly country.

I know we all face a lot of stress in life. For some of us, it is financial. We just don't have what it takes to make our ends meet. Maybe that's how Joseph and Mary felt when they had to pay taxes in Bethlehem. I sometimes wonder if there was absolutely no room in Bethlehem or whether there was no affordable room in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph were poor. We know this because when they went to Jerusalem to give an offering, they gave the offering that the poorest people were allowed to give. They didn't have much. They didn't have any kind of social security system. No welfare or General Relief. They lived in the constant stress of not having enough.

I know we sometimes feel like the system is not for us. The government is not for us. Well, Mary and Joseph can identify with us. They were oppressed by the system, not only the Roman government but also King Herod. They ended up as a refugee, an immigrant in Egypt. Remember, Egyptians didn't like Jews. Jesus grew up as an oppressed minority in a powerful country that didn't like Jews.

Sometimes, we get stressed by things that happen that we can't control. Losing control of the circumstances causes so much stress; but, things happen regardless of what we do. We can't keep everything in control. And that's stressful. Think about Mary and Joseph. They suddenly had to go on this trip. They were tired from the journey. She goes into labor. There is no room. They had to give birth at a place no designated for birth. They had to run away to another country. And by the way, they had to punt the wedding. It seemed like the circumstances of their lives were out of control, and therefore stressful. Do you feel like the circumstances of you life is out of control and you are living in constant stress?

[Slide 7] II. How God Responds to Our Stress.

What can we learn from this story about how God responds to our stress?

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God didn't protect Mary and Joseph from the stress of walking to Bethlehem, the stress of paying taxes they couldn't afford, the stress of going into labor at a very bad time, the stress of not finding a clean room to give birth, and the stress of having to run away to Egypt and start a new life in a strange place.

I know we all want God to change our circumstances immediately so that we could avoid the stresses that we feel in our lives. We have a vision of what a perfect life might look like, and we ask God to make that happen. Lord, give us money. Give us a home. Give us health. These are perfectly legitimate things to ask God for. But, God doesn't always answer our prayers. I am sure Mary and Joseph prayed for protection, but their circumstances didn't all change for the better. They were called by God to give birth of the Son of God, who God loves, and God didn't make things perfect for them, at least in the perception of human beings. Here is one important lesson to learn: Just because God doesn't change a bad circumstance in our lives doesn't mean God doesn't love us. You have to remember, God loved Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Yet, he made them endure some of these hardships. I believe that God has a purpose for allowing these things to happen. I don't know what they are. But, it is important to continue to trust in the Lord.

Yet, God didn't just leave them alone to endure the hardship. God provided some graces to help them.

God told Mary and Joseph to run away to Egypt to be protected from King Herod. Even in midst of suffering, God guides us.

And not only does he guides us, God gave them what they needed for the journey that he was calling us to. God knew that Mary and Joseph were going to need resources for the journey; so, he sent magi with expensive gifts from the East before the journey. This was something very unusual. Magi were not Jews. They were most likely Persians. The word translated as Magi is the same word that is translated in other parts of the Bible as sorcerers, meaning that they practiced black magic, which God told Israelites not to practice. For some reason, God used foreigners who lived a sinful lifestyle to provide for baby Jesus during their life as a refugee immigrant in Egypt. The point I am trying to

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make is that sometimes, God's providence comes from unexpected places. God is always working outside of the box. But, he gives us what we need for the calling he is making in our lives. I am not saying that God always does that. Sometimes, God calls us to endure. I think there are a lot of issues related to why this happens. It would be too much to go into this on this sermon. You might want to go back and listen to a sermon I preached on March 20 of this year entitled, Unanswered Prayers, in the Prayer-FULL Life series.

God knew that Mary and Joseph needed encouragement to be able to endure the hardships they were going to endure. So, he had his angels tell some Shepherds nearby that the Messiah, the Savior has been born, and God had a great company of heavenly hosts sing to the Shepherds "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." The angel told the Shepherds, "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." The angel told the Shepherd to go and tell Mary and Joseph what they saw. And this is exactly what they did. They found the baby laying in a manger, and told Mary and Joseph what they saw. And verse 19 tells us: "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Even in midst of the hardship, God delivered a message to Mary and Joseph saying, I am with you. The call that I made on your life about 9 months ago was not a fluke. I am going to fulfill my purpose through you. She pondered the good news of Jesus in her heart, and that became the strength of her life.

Paul said in Philippians 1:6, "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Sometimes, we don't feel like we are making much progress. Remember, God is going to finish what he started in you. Don't let hardship get you down. Don't let bad laws get you down. Don't let difficult relationships get you down. Don't let financial struggles get you down. As Mary pondered the good news of Jesus in her heart, ponder the good news of Jesus in your heart. Mary allowed the message of God, the gospel, to become a source of her strength. Allow the gospel, the good news of God, to become a source of strength in our lives. The good news tells us that God has come to us (that's what Christmas is about), that God is working in us and in the world, that God has given his life for us, that God

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loves us, that God is working out his purpose in us and in the world, and that God is calling us into his mission and purpose. The good news is not that God is going to bless you with material things and give you worldly success, and prevent suffering from your life; the good news is that God is with you through the suffering, and invites you into his mission.