

Text: [Isaiah 61:1-4 \(CEB\)](#)
Date: December 3, 2023
Title: “Keeping Christmas Real”: Keeping Christmas Series, Advent 2
Theme: Keeping Christmas real means being willing to lean into both the promise and the challenge of Christmas.

1

What do you do when “Joy to the World” seems to include every person but you?

What do you do when you’re not “Have(ing) Yourself a Merry Little Christmas”?

Every single one of us will experience a year, a few years, or a season of life where Christmas feels less than joyful

I think we should name that as a reality and normalize it

Because that’s real - something nearly everyone, at some point, is going to experience

When we are wrestling with loneliness

Or anxiety about health, or money, or family

When we are mourning the loss of relationships, friendships, or meaning in life

Have you ever noticed that a lot of Christmas songs are more than a little melancholy?

Including – ironically – “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas”?

The vocalist never really sounds like they’re having one themselves, do they?

I literally just had the experience this week of talking to someone I know, and asking how their Thanksgiving was

And they were honest...

“It was hard. It was hard.

We lost our daughter last year and so these holidays are really tough.

It’s hard to find the joy.”

2

We ALL go through these seasons
And if you haven't, you probably will
Because this is what it means to be human
Sometimes life hurts, even at the holidays

I want to say that first, so that if that's what you're experiencing right now,
you know you're not alone
That's one of the most diabolical lies our brains tell us in situations when
we're in pain
That we're alone in what we're feeling
That *everyone else* is happy but me
It's only me who feels sad right now
I'm the only one hurting

We walk around thinking that no one else knows what it's like
That no one else understands

But I hope you'll hear me: it's not true
Someone does understand – and not just anyone
But the One who made us

Because the meaning of Christmas is precisely this:
That God became human
“The Word became flesh and lived among us”
THAT's the reason for the season
For us to celebrate that fact

So it's NOT true that no one understands
It's not true first - because there are people all around us who are having
this experience right now
And second, it's not true because Christmas is about God being willing to
enter into the human experience in all its fullness, to know exactly
what it's like

3

And perhaps that's why, when Jesus preaches his first sermon at the
synagogue in Nazareth, where he grew up
According to Luke 4, he chooses the passage from Isaiah we read today to
take for his text:

"The Lord God's spirit is upon me
Because the Lord has anointed me
And sent me to bring good news to the poor,
To bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim release to the prisoners,
To announce the year of the Lord's favor,

To comfort all who mourn,
To exchange the ashes of sadness for a crown of joy,
And to give the mantle of praise in place of a spirit of discouragement"

In Isaiah's time, this passage looked forward to the coming of a Savior
Who would free Israel from its captivity in Babylon
And in Jesus' time, the people longed for a Savior who would free Israel
from the yoke of Rome

That's the beautiful thing about the scriptures:
Their promises are not meant just for one time, or one place, or for one
people
But rather for all times, and all places, and all people
The cycle of promise and fulfillment continues right up to this day
When we are longing for God's peace and hope

And Isaiah presents this hope
Both a promise
And a challenge

4

Here's the promise – again, listen -

Good news for the poor
Healing for the brokenhearted
Freedom for the prisoners
Blessing for those who think God has forgotten them
Comfort for those in mourning
Joy in place of sadness
And **garments of praise** instead of funeral clothes

The promise is that if you're in one of those seasons
Where you're hurting and you feel alone
God already has a plan to bring you through it:

Good news
And **healing** and **freedom** and **blessing** and **comfort** and **joy**
Praise and not discouragement

You may be convinced that Christmas is not for you
That it's only for the joyful people
But nothing could be further from the truth
Christmas is precisely for you

Because Jesus didn't come to bring **more** joy to those who already have
plenty
Jesus came to bring **GOD'S** joy to those who have none

He stepped into this world to remind us that however much our brain says
we're alone in our pain,
That's it's simply not true
So the scripture today is a promise

5

The scripture today is also a challenge
For those who find ourselves in seasons where we ARE able to enter into
the joy of the season

When we **are** able to sing the carols at the top of our lungs
And bake all the cookies
And put up all the lights and
trim the trees and hang the stockings

The challenge for us is to share God's gift of hope with someone who
needs it this year

To be the one God uses to bring good news
Healing and freedom and blessing and comfort and joy
Praise and not discouragement

So I want you to consider this week:
Who is it in your circle that's hurting?
Who is it that needs to know they're not alone – that God is with them?

Take some time to share some joy with them
Bring some cookies, bring a meal, send a call, call or visit
It doesn't need to be complicated
Simple acts of human connection are at the heart of Christmas

You'd be surprised how much just showing up means to people
I mean, God just showed up on Earth, and we're still talking about it 2000
years later

So, let me bring this to a close
How do we keep Christmas real?
First, let's be honest about it and let people around us be honest about it
too – all of us have seasons when Christmas is hard
Those are the times to lean into Christmas' promises

But when we are feeling the joy?
Those are the times we lean into Isaiah's challenge to share it with
someone else – to take part in all God did by stepping into our world

I'm not talking about sharing our joy in a way that guilt the other person
into putting a smile on their face
But in a way that demonstrates love, and care, and understanding

This is how we keep Christmas well.
Amen.

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