

Lection: Luke 2:22-32

This morning I am concluding a series of sermons on the practical side of Christmas. We have discussed Christmas trees, gift giving, decorating and celebrating and now I would like to turn my attention in this final installment to that all important question—the question on the mind of every host or hostess the morning after, the question which touches everyone who put up a Christmas tree or the one who’s been up on the housetop stringing lights or carefully placing baubles and trinkets and all those other favorite things which seem to multiply with holiday magic and then refuse to return peaceably to their storage boxes—just how should one clean up the mess?

And if you want a simple summary of the why of Bethlehem, I would have to say that Jesus was born to help us clean up the mess—not so much by doing it for us, but by teaching us and giving us the strength we need to do it ourselves. He does not come with dust pan and broom, but he does come to sweep out and transform everything in your life and mine that feels miserable, messy and worn out with an invitation to new life and new hope and new birth.

So then, let’s talk about cleaning up the mess. Do you remember Christmas morning when you were growing up? When I was a little boy, Christmas day was a series of messes. At our house, we went to bed early hoping that Santa would come and then at about 5:00 a.m.,

we would begin to make noise, hoping that our parents would wake up and let us run downstairs to open the gifts. Eternity is defined as those moments between when a child wakes up on Christmas morning and when they can make enough noise to get their parents out of bed. We had to wait on the stairs until our parents went down and lit the tree and made sure Santa had arrived and then suddenly the blessed moment came and the flood gate of our anticipation opened and as the bows and paper flew, the first mess of the day was created. And that mess intensified hour by hour as successive waves of grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins arrived and the torn paper and bows went from ankle deep to waist high. And then suddenly, a general clean-up order was issued, and although the kids hated leaving their toys for even a moment, everyone pitched in and miraculously there was much more room around the tree to play.

Lesson one: whenever we try to clean up a mess, the best way to do it is together. Jesus was born to remind us that on this life journey, we are never alone.

And as that communal clean-up got under way, my grandmother always waded out into the sea of ripped wrapping paper reminding us to save the bows and the ribbons. Over the years, some of those bows became old friends, showing up year after year decorating some new holiday surprise. Lesson two, in the midst of every mess there is always something beautiful hidden, waiting to be discovered and

saved and cherished. A child sitting in a pile of ripped wrapping paper may not be able to see the beauty—that's what grandmothers are for—or a wise friend—or a care giver—or the generations of faithful people who have walked this path before. Always search for the bow in the center of the mess. And live your life so that you become a bow saver in someone else's life—that's what it means to share the miracle of the manger.

The next lesson on mess removal is one I learned the hard way. When my sons were young and we lived in Ohio, I reluctantly joined the ranks of the people who do exterior lighting for Christmas. It seemed like a good idea until the second week in January when it was time to take the lights down. I put it off, hoping that the weather would turn warmer—it didn't. There was a brutal ice storm and then another and then snow upon snow right on through February. I ended up unstringing the house the first week in March.

Lesson three: when it comes to cleaning up the mess, now is better than later. If there is someone who needs to hear about your love for them, do it now. If you need to forgive, forgive now. This season with all its gentle and not so gentle emotions opens a window of opportunity and vulnerability for the human spirit permitting us to reach closer to the divine. This is a time for the Scrooge in all of us to become more a saint and the sinner we may have been to be saved by the unconditional love and mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

One more lesson: Several years ago, I was visiting someone's home in March and we were talking and suddenly, I noticed a Christmas ornament hanging on a corner shelf as though it had been forgotten in the mad rush to put away Christmas. I must have stared at it and then quickly looked away, but the woman I was visiting caught me. She smiled and said: "No, I didn't forget. Every year when I clean up the mess, I choose one ornament to leave up to remind me that Christmas is not just one day or one season—but a lifetime. That little ornament is my reminder that Jesus walks with me everyday." Could there be a better lesson to learn?

Now, nobody said that life is easy. No one promised us that our way would not lead to all sorts of places we'd rather not travel. Life often seems to be lived from mess to mess—from pain to pain, from human moment to human moment. But there is more.

To know that the love of God moves within the mess; to know that the peace which passes understanding can touch our hearts with healing and hope; to know that we are God's children called to love one another; is to experience the joy of Christmas every day of the year. In the baby born, there is the promise of life. May that promise touch your heart this new day and in this New Year! Amen.