

Sermon *The Perfect Christmas*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 12.24.24

One of my favorite Christmas movies is National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation. The main character, Clark Griswold, invited his whole extended family for the perfect Christmas. Was it perfect? Not even close – he got trapped in the attic, burned up the Christmas tree, and was nearly arrested for kidnapping. It wasn't perfect but it was memorable (and funny).

We tend to get caught up in looking for, or creating, perfect things. I did a dictionary search for phrases that being with the word perfect. Here are some: a perfect world, letter-perfect; if you are in school, there is perfect attendance. We're celebrating the birth of Jesus, how about the perfect baby. In baseball, there is the perfect game. In relationships, some search for the perfect match to the perfect man or woman, so you'll become the perfect couple... after having the perfect wedding at the perfect place at the perfect time. How about at Christmas, do you look for the perfect gift? Do you make the perfect dish from the perfect recipe?

I have a lot more examples – the perfect storm, perfect fit, perfect circle – but I think you get the point. And yet, I don't think there is a perfect couple; I've never been to a perfect wedding; nor do I have the perfect recipe for anything. But I do know about taking what has been given and doing the best with it – that goes for weddings, sermons, relationships, parenting, and yes, even Christmas services. There was a time in early October that I wasn't sure we would even be able to have a Christmas service in this beautiful church on Longboat Key (or that there would even be a Longboat Key after the hurricanes). But here we are. We made it; thanks be to God. Is it perfect? No. But, we are celebrating Christmas on Longboat again this year. If anything, this past hurricane season taught us something about doing the best with what we have been given. For some in the congregation, they are hoping to get to the "white box" – where the interior of the home has sheet rock and everything is ready to be painted. And, for some, their home will never be what it was. Whatever we thought would be the perfect Christmas; it's changed. We are now doing the best we can with what we have and we are giving thanks and rejoicing.

Speaking of rejoicing, our tradition is to go to the Columbia restaurant on St. Armands circle after the Christmas Eve service is over. The Marshall family is rejoicing because we are going again. It's remarkable, they had feet of water swamping their restaurant – twice – in less than three months ago and here they are, ready to serve their guests a wonderful meal. Is it perfect? Is the restaurant fully restored? No, but, they are doing the best with what they have. And, we rejoice and give thanks. I also have a hunch that we will appreciate it more this year than in years past.

Perfect. I think our searching for something perfect comes from our incorrect translation of a passage from the Gospel. Have you heard this: Be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect. It is from Matthew's Gospel who is quoting Jesus. It was originally written in Greek. The Greek word – teleios – has no direct translation in English. From the Greek to English dictionaries that I have referenced, the word is best translated as completion or wholeness. We could read that passage like this: be complete or whole as your Father in Heaven is complete and whole.

Instead of searching for the perfect Christmas, let me ask you this: what makes Christmas whole and complete for you?

For the Marshalls, wholeness and completeness for us is being together on Christmas. It involves us participating in worship together. Sharing a meal together. Exchanging gifts. Sharing stories and making new memories – this is what a complete Christmas looks like. Is it perfect? Yes, in its completeness. Before the service, our All Angels Quartet – Kevin and Ethan on clarinet and Elijah and me playing our trombones – serenaded you all with Christmas carols. Was it perfect? Nope, not even close. Was it fun – yes – and it helped make our Christmas celebration whole and complete.

I used to think that Joseph was stressed out and ashamed of what we call the manger scene. If I were Joseph, I'd be embarrassed that there was no place in the Inn for the child Jesus to be born. But this year, after all that we've been through this year, I think differently about Joseph. I think now that he was complete and whole with the event. He literally did the best he could with what he was given. Through no fault of his own, the governor of the region called for a census to be taken and that required him to travel back to his hometown – Bethlehem. In my mind's eye, Joseph left after High School graduation (after he finished his apprenticeship) and had not been back. He went to work in Nazareth because that's where the good carpentry jobs were. I think he made for himself a good life. He fell in love with Mary. Suddenly, he had to drop his projects, leave his clients hanging, and travel haphazardly to Bethlehem to be counted. And, Mary was pregnant! The best he could do was find a stable and an unused trough for animals to eat out of as a crib. It's not perfect. I think he was relieved, not ashamed.

The same goes for Mary. I don't think she was embarrassed or ashamed of what Joseph could provide. She too saw he was doing the best with what he had. In my mind's eye, I see Mary telling Joseph, "It's okay Joe; we're not stranded outside, or still on the road from Nazareth. It's the best we can do with what we have."

For this Christmas, are you looking for it to be perfect? Or, this Christmas, are you looking for completeness and wholeness. My prayer for you and your family this Christmas season is that have wholeness with tidings of joy from God and that you find peace and completeness with what you have been given.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.