

CHRISTMAS EVE MESSAGE

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2023

Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

At 4:00 pm on May 24, 2007, I went with my very pregnant sister to her weekly doctor's appointment as the arrival of her second child neared. We were in the final countdown, a couple weeks away from the due date for my niece, Morgan, and I was more anxious than my sister. Morgan's actual due date fell when I would be out of state on a trip I had to make. I couldn't stand the thought of not being here, especially since I was invited to be in the room for her birth. And so, I had been praying and hoping Morgan would arrive early.

My sister's appointment was routine, but Morgan seemed content where she was. It was not time yet. The doctor told my sister to get dressed while we waited for the urine test results. A few moments later, the doctor returned with the results and said, "Well, it appears your water has already broken. It's time to have this baby!"

I asked in shock and with great hope that I had not heard wrong, "Now?"

"Yes," she said. "Now."

I was more emotional than my sister. I was crying, elated that my prayers had been answered!

We went home, gathered her things, and made all the calls and arrangements, hearing often on the other end of the phone from her husband and grandparents, "NOW?" and responding, "Yes, now!" We returned to the hospital, and things moved swiftly after that. Just a few hours later, Morgan was born.

There is something about a child entering the world that often causes us to ask, "Now?"

Just down the hill from us in our gym is the Jefferson City Room at the Inn. This overnight facility provides shelter, meals, and support for people in our community experiencing homelessness. As we gather here tonight, around twenty men and women are settling in out of the cold and rain, among them a couple expecting a child any day now.

Before we opened Wednesday night, the mom-to-be told me her doctors said the baby would come any day. I told her she needed to hold that baby in until after 11:30 pm, when my shift ended. I did not want a NOW moment on my watch. But sometime soon, there will be a "now" moment for that couple, and when that child arrives, the family gratefully has a place to reside other than Room at the Inn, thanks to the Salvation Army.

No matter how hard we try to prepare for its arrival, the birth of a child can still surprise us and catch us off-guard.

The world wasn't ready for Jesus' birth. They had been hopeful for many generations for a Messiah, but the waiting had been long. But finally, the time had come.

Somewhere after arriving in Bethlehem, a very pregnant Mary reaches out and grips deeply into Joseph's forearm.

"Now?" Joseph asks.

And she gives a silent nod, her eyes confirming, "Yes. Now."

As I was imploring the pregnant mom at the shelter not to sneeze or cough in case it caused her baby to come; another baby was arriving into our world at SSM Hospital – sweet Jayne, born to members of our congregation.

On Thursday, I stopped by the hospital to greet the newest part of our beloved First Baptist family. When I walked in, I watched the Christmas story unfold before me.

An overjoyed and weary mom sat in her bed. An overjoyed and weary dad sat on the couch. Next to the dad sat his mom with little Jayne in grandma's arms, nestled in, with a little pink beanie cap and pink fuzzy ball atop her sweet head.

I watched this family glow as they marveled at the newest addition to our world and their family. The littlest of now four precious daughters.

Across their faces, you could see a radiant love seasoned with a little bit of healthy reality about life now as a family of six. With some expected reluctance to share this new gift, Jayne's grandma placed her in my arms for a few pastoral moments. Jayne snuggled in, opening her eyes and stretching her tiny arms. Around 24 hours earlier, the doctor said it was time to bring this gift into the world. Her parents said, "Now?" Yes, now.

As I held Jayne, I whispered to her that her church family loved her and couldn't wait to watch her grow. We commented on who she resembled, all of us agreeing that she looked most like herself. I wondered who she was and who she would come to be. And I told her she was loved more than she could ever know.

The grandma holding her precious granddaughter was the picture of God, deeply in love and full of joy.

And that child in her arms is you.

The way that grandma looked at her little granddaughter is how God looks at you, with abundant joy and love. Perhaps you're thinking God can't look at me that way. I'm far from the innocence and goodness of a baby. But friends, that grandma's love wasn't conditional or dependent upon the baby's innocence. It won't waver at the first smelly diaper or the first time she tells a lie about getting into the candy when a bit of chocolate in the corner of her mouth says otherwise. It had nothing to do with what the baby did or did not do. That grandma's love is based on one thing: that is her

granddaughter. She belongs to her family. God's love for us is the same. It isn't based on us, what we do or don't do. It is held firmly and without condition by God for us for one reason: we are God's. We belong to God's family.

In that hospital room turned manger scene, I watched God hold the world in God's hands.

Preacher Will Willimon was asked to summarize the gospel in 7 words or less. His response: "God refuses to be God without us." On Christmas, we hear the story of God's abundant joy and love for God's people. So much so that God wants there to be no distance between us. God wants nothing more than to be with us.

And so, God decided to come into the world. Not as a world leader or military general. Not as a high priest or wise sage. God comes as a baby.

Beloved friends, in this season of expectation and anticipation, a season that both delights and exhausts, a season that carries both joy and grief, we are reminded once again of the only gift we need. Jesus Christ. Emmanuel. God is with us. God is with you.

With Mary and Joseph, with those in their cots down the hill at the shelter, with sweet Jayne and her family, with millions around the world in the rubble of wars, our hearts dare to wonder tonight, "Really? God is with us...now?"

And God leans down very close and whispers in our ear, "Yes. Now."

*This sermon is greatly inspired by a sermon preached by Jonathan Davis on December 24, 2018.
<https://jdshankles.wordpress.com/2018/12/25/monday-december-24th-2018-yes-now-a-christmas-eve-sermon-on-luke-21-20/>