

So, it was this very night almost ten years ago now: I was in Dallas, Texas, in the midst of my internship year in seminary. Only a few months before, some friends of mine helped me move in with the crisp 112-degree heat, that I can only hope is the warmest welcome I will ever receive in this lifetime. But, come Christmas Eve, sleet had shown up on the streets of Dallas-Fort Worth. Come the afternoon, as I was driving in for our first worship service, snow started falling. By the time we finished singing Silent Night by candlelight hours later, ice was just starting to settle in for the Metroplex.

Now, my plan that could not possibly have been affected by winter weather in Texas of all places, was to get on a plane at DFW for a layover in the hustle-and-bustle of Hartsfield-Jackson in Atlanta, before flying into Columbus to get to the family farm in time for the usual Christmas festivities. Nevertheless, the first flight was delayed, as to be expected. After all, Dallas-Fort Worth isn't exactly prepared for such anything-below-32-degree conditions. Not a problem, there was a long enough layover at Hartsfield anyway. Get on the plane: the plane doesn't

move for what feels like an eternity and then some. The entire Metroplex had been defeated, yet again, by water-frozen-over.

And, obviously, those road crews along with the air traffic control personnel and the lack-of-guts pilots, and, heck, even the flight attendants and the ticket agents were part of this massive conspiracy to completely ruin Christmas, as the connecting flight was, of course, missed; and I had to spend the majority of the holiday around complete and utter strangers to my life (as if *they* could not possibly relate to what I was going through that God-awful day). Because, again, obviously, Christmas cannot possibly happen unless everything goes according to plan.

Unless all the right people are gathered under the same exact roof as years before, and chestnuts are roasting on an open fire with all the other various items on the family menu set on the rugged kitchen table, and stockings are dug through and presents are unraveled in a certain order of seniority, all with the backdrop of a white Christmas dreams-fulfilled (except, just to be clear: leave out the sleet/ice combo). It just cannot possibly be Christmas any other way.

However, I have this feeling, that, no matter how stunningly beautiful and just absolutely perfect we think it was in Bethlehem that, o, holy night, long ago; I have this feeling Mary didn't think so that much. Granted, her life plans had already been drastically altered when Gabriel came around and told her, "Now, don't get frightened or anything, no pressure at all, but...you're about to deliver the Savior of the whole world." That's bad enough. But what becomes far worse is having to leave her family behind; not to say they were perfect circumstances in Nazareth by any stretch of Mary's imagination, but it was home, nonetheless.

When she gives birth, her mother is not there to help Mary through her first childbirth. The first people to arrive on the scene are not trained medical personnel to check to make sure the Savior of all the nations is healthy and all, not to mention the just-endured-arduous-labor mother. It's not even Elizabeth or other close relatives to simply hold her hand in loving reassurance. Instead, it is complete and utter strangers, who cannot possibly understand what she just went through.

However, they have this just as deep and heart-felt of empathy for the craving Mary, her family, Nazareth, Galilee, the world: all of whom had been waiting far, far too long for what was, now, right in front of their very eyes. Mary, the shepherds, and countless strangers were not so much strangers after all: they were of the same broken humanity, the same wondering of where this God could possibly be in their life, the same craving for something more than any of the prophets could possibly put into words.

There it was, brought to life in far-from-perfect circumstances, in the hustle and bustle of Bethlehem, in the world just as filled with chaos as ever before and ever since. And, still, God decided to show up right there and then. God did not arrive on the scene of perfection. God came in the brokenness, in the scared-out-of-her-mind teenager, right in front of unkept and unwanted shepherds.

So, come to think of it, it was the work of complete and utter strangers to my life, who still managed to get me to my home state that rather not-so-pleasant of Christmas days. Come to think of it, as the story so goes, when Mary ponders the God-things in her heart, the

answers do not come from her family, or the wisest or sagest of men; but through the strangers of shepherds, who weren't so much strangers, after all. They were, actually, quite close to her in the same desperation, in the same hope beyond hope, in the same imperfect humanity still loved by God beyond their wildest imagination. She was searching for home, all along, but it turned out not to be Nazareth; but right in front of her very eyes: the home of God's own heart in Jesus Christ.

And, it just so happens for us, that such God-things on Christmas or any day, for that matter, are not reserved for childhood homes or sanctuary fortresses; it just so happens to be right inside of us all along, for all eternity. And the best news of all this night, is that nothing that happens in this life can ever take Him, our Savior, away from the very cradle of our heart. Thanks be to God indeed! Amen.