

“Perfectly Imperfect”

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It was about three days before Christmas when we first saw the little stray puppy at our back door. She had come across our dog Lucy’s bowl of water. She had wiry, jet-black hair. Part Labrador Retriever, it seemed from the looks of her. Beyond that, let’s just say that her lineage was mixed and indeterminate. We posted signs around the neighborhood, thinking that someone would claim their lost Christmas puppy. But no one did. As a kind neighbor said, “It looks like you all have another dog.”

It was Molly’s idea to name her Gladys. We had been reading Barbara Robinson’s book The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, and this little dog did seem to be a little bit angel... and a little bit Herdman. And though her arrival was mostly good news, she still made us a little nervous. So it seemed perfect, naming our stray puppy after Gladys Herdman, the Angel of the Lord.

At the time, we had no idea how perfect that name would be. Whatever had happened to her out in the woods in those early weeks, Gladys would always have the soul of a junkyard stray. But she could also be a goofy, clumsy, happy Lab. Her whole life, she never trusted anybody except the four of us and our Golden Retriever Lucy. But we were all she needed. She was intensely loyal, and she loved us fiercely. And, in the end, it was meant to be. Perfectly imperfect.

Kind of like the Christmas story. We have a way of cleansing the scene in our hearts and minds. Luke helps, because the language is so peaceful and bathed in light. It is easy to picture a cool, clear, starry night on the hills outside of Bethlehem... sheep gently and quietly grazing... and baby Jesus softly and contently cooing in the hay. But it could not have been that perfect. Hay is scratchy and babies cry. Barns smell and sheep do, too. There is only so much you can do to dress up a stable, or cave, or whatever it was. No one would choose that over a nice warm room in the inn.

I expect Joseph was still working through some things. He was planning to split when the whole pregnancy thing came up. But that pesky angel came to him and told him otherwise. He was doing his best to do his part, but it was complicated.

So was the whole idea of this baby being the Messiah. Scripture was clear that the Messiah would be a conquering hero who will crush our enemies and set us free? We are supposed to believe that this fragile little baby, born in the humblest of places, is the hero we need? That can’t be right.

The Messiah is said to be a mighty warrior, skilled in battle. But this one comes as the Prince of Peace, preaching grace and forgiveness. That can’t be right.

The Messiah is described as a mighty king, one to which every knee will bend and every tongue shall praise. This little guy in a manger, born in squalor and poverty to two nobodies from nowhere-ville? He is supposed to be our great hope? That can’t be right. There are just too many imperfections in this story.

Or could that be the point? As philosophers have said, we would never know what light is like without a little darkness. The same is true of perfection. How would we



ever know what true goodness is like, if we do not experience some things that are not so good? How will we understand God's divine perfection unless and until we observe it through the lens of our human imperfections?

You see, there are two parts of the good news brought by the angel – good news of great joy that is for all people. The first is that God's perfection – everything that is good, and right, and faithful -- has broken into this world to show us what true love really looks like. Christ has come to shine light into the darkness, and there is nothing this world can possibly do to extinguish or diminish that light.

Which leads us to the second part of the good news, and that is that our imperfections do not change this story. And that is good news, because no matter how hard we might try to overcome our imperfections, they have a way of persisting. Each year we all go into Christmas with the best intentions. We will plan the perfect holiday outings and prepare perfect holiday meals. We will have perfect pitch and timing when we go caroling. We will find the perfect present for everyone on our list, and every wrapped present will have perfect creased corners.

We all tried. And we all failed. Because we are not created to be perfect. That's why the Bible reminds us, repeatedly, that we are made of dust and dirt. We are basic, everyday jars of clay... humble vessels full of impurities, fragile and easily broken. But the message of Christmas is that all of that is OK. None of those failings, none of our problems, change God's love for us. A perfect love is offered to imperfect people. That is Christmas in a nutshell – the perfectly imperfect story of the family of God.

And yet, the doubt persists, does it not? All of us struggle with this, to some extent. The nagging concern that the Christ we meet in scripture – humble, loving, gentle, and merciful – is supposed to be the chosen one who will right every wrong, smooth every path, fill every dark valley and flatten out even the highest mountains we have to climb? In this dark world, with all that is wrong? That can't be right.

But I believe that most of us, perhaps even all of us, hope that it is right. All of us are drawn to the promise of Christmas... that, in this imperfect world, love will win out over hate. That God's perfect light refuses to quit and refuses to die. And for reasons beyond our human understanding, God refuses to quit on us. Even in our imperfections, God remains intensely loyal. God holds us fast with a fierce love that will never let us go.

Isn't that what we all want to know, what we all need to feel? To know that there is a force in the universe that is intensely loyal and committed to us, no matter what? That we are held by a feisty love that will never let us go? That there is a light that can shine in any darkness, and never be extinguished?

Here's the news of tonight: that light lives in you. You may forget that it is there. You may doubt that it is there. You may lose touch with it for long periods of time. But the light is there. Always has been. Always will be.

And this is also true: you are wrapped in a love that has latched onto you, and is holding onto you, like an angelic junkyard dog. An intensely loyal, feisty love that will never quit, and never leave you stranded.

The world will always give us reasons to say, "That can't be right." But then along comes Gladys, the Angel of the Lord, whose voice can always be heard over the din of that doubt: "Hey, unto you a child is born!"

Amen.

