



TOO BUSY PREPARING

I Believe in God... Advent 3 (Mark 1:1-8)



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It was a shabby basement apartment. Too damp for a newborn baby – and way too small, but it was all they could afford. It was a damp, rainy, November afternoon when Carol's Aunt Val and Uncle Dave brought little Liam home from the hospital. They must have been fighting all the way home from the hospital because they were in an argument when they got out of the car that seemed like it had been going on for awhile.

Carol was waiting in the driveway with her four-year-old cousin, Michael, and her parents. They had spent the morning getting that shabby apartment ready for the new baby, and trying to convince Michael that a new baby brother was a good thing. Carol had no idea what her aunt and uncle were arguing about, but she heard her mother muttering something about saving it for another time; after all, they were about introduce Michael to his new baby brother Liam.

Carol was just thirteen when Liam made his appearance in the world. Back then, thirteen was considered a prime age for babysitting. Carol would head over to Aunt Val's and Uncle Dave's every day after school to help out. It was Carol's job to take Liam for a walk every afternoon so Aunt Val could get supper on the table in time for Uncle Dave to get home from work. Carol would pack up Liam in his carriage, whatever the weather, and head for the park. Michael would tag along behind them.

In the weeks following Liam's arrival, Michael changed. He became unusually whiney. He didn't seem to enjoy much in life. He whined about everything. He whined about going to the park, and he whined about having to leave the park. He whined when they told him to be quiet because the baby was sleeping; and he whined when he was asked to help with anything that had to do with his little brother. Carol's Mom said that it was normal; children don't like it much when a new baby usurps their position as 'only child.'

Carol didn't think that was it, but she kept her comments to herself. Carol was convinced that Michael's whining had more to do with his parents' whining than with his new baby brother. Ever since they had brought Liam home, Aunt Val and Uncle Dave had taken up whining themselves. They whined about dirty diapers, they whined about being tired all the time, they whined about the messy apartment, they whined about the crying baby, about how small the apartment was, and about how Michael's whining.

When they weren't whining, they were fighting. They fought about everything. They fought about whether the baby should sleep in their bedroom. They fought about whether Michael go to his room as punishment for waking the baby. They fought about dinner being late; about whether or not Uncle Dave should have to change dirty diapers when he was tired from working all day. And they were always arguing about money. One time they even managed to have an argument about paying Carol that 25 cents/hour for helping out after

school. As it got closer to Christmas they argued about how they were going to pay for Christmas. The more they argued the whinier Michael got.

One afternoon, Carol arrived to find Aunt Val screaming at Michael because he'd been playing with Liam's diaper bag and managed to spill talcum powder all over the living room. When Val saw Carol, she pointed to the carriage and yelled that she'd better get the kids out of there, and not to bring them back until she'd had some peace.

Judging by the state of the living room, Carol figured that a trip to the park wouldn't quite cut it - so she took her little cousins home with her. Carol's Mom told her not to worry, and explained that Val and Dave were just having trouble coping; all they needed was a little peace. Carol's Dad headed over to their apartment and picked up enough supplies so that the little ones could stay over for the weekend.

The next morning Val came by and explained to Michael that he was going to stay with Carol and his Aunt and Uncle for a few days so that she and his Dad could get a little peace. She told Michael that she had opened his piggy bank and brought his Christmas money so that he could get his Christmas shopping done. Carol was put in charge of helping Michael buy Christmas presents for his Mom and Dad -- and new baby brother -- with a grand total of about eight bucks.

Needless to say, Carol wasn't too happy -- she had her own shopping to do and her own limited budget to overcome. She thought she had about twenty dollars to cover her own family and her little cousins. But off they went. Michael and Carol took Liam in the carriage into town to do their Christmas shopping.

Carol figured they could get everything they needed in the drug store. But Michael didn't like the drug store's selection. He kept whining about something he'd seen a few weeks earlier down at Magee's Furniture Store. Carol tried to tell Michael he didn't have enough money to shop at the furniture store. Eight dollars would go farther at the drug store. And he was only four, so Michael had to settle for an Old Spice soap on a rope for his Dad, some really cheap perfume for his mom, and a small rattle for his baby brother.

Michael was not happy with his purchases and wouldn't stop whining about the furniture store. Carol decided that she could do a better job of shopping if she came back to the drug store later by herself so they headed home. But Carol's Mom and Dad had some shopping of their own to do so Carol was left to baby-sit Michael and Liam.

Somehow -- Carol doesn't remember how or when, but she thinks he waited until she was changing Liam's diaper -- Michael disappeared. By the time her parents got home, Carol had convinced herself that Michael had run away. Her Dad assured her that Michael had probably just gone home, and he set off to see if he could find Michael. But Carol had a different idea. She got on her bike and headed straight for Magee's furniture store.

When she got there, Mr. Magee asked her if she was looking for anything in particular. She told him she was looking for a small boy about so high in a red jacket. The storeowner smiled and told Carol that there was a young man who'd been admiring the ornaments at the back of the store for about an hour.

Carol headed to the back of the store and there was Michael, admiring a collection of snow globes – you know, those little ornaments that you turn upside-down and snow starts to fall on the little world inside. Michael had his eye on one globe in particular. In it, you could see a tiny nativity scene, complete with Mary and Joseph, and shepherds with little sheep, and even a teeny tiny baby Jesus. Perched up on top of the stable was an angel.

Michael – being a very clever 4 year-old -- seriously and very methodically showed Carol what happens when you turn a snow globe upside down. As the snow fell on the tiny scene, Michael explained how Mr. Magee had told him that the Angel was a special messenger from God, who brought good news to the whole world. He pointed to the words on the base of the globe and said that Mr. Magee told him that they spelled 'peace.'

Carol told Michael that they said a little more than that. The words spelled 'peace on earth.' Michael smiled up at her and said it was the perfect present for Mom and Dad. Carol explained that the globe was nine dollars -- and besides, he'd already got them some perfectly good gifts.

Michael didn't react the way Carol expected. She expected he'd start whining again, but he didn't. He just looked up at her with sad eyes and insisted that peace was what his Mom and Dad really wanted.

Carol brushed the tears from his face and softly suggested that it was time to go. Michael turned the globe upside down one more time and watched the snow fall on the little family, and they set off for home.

All the way home, Michael couldn't stop talking about the snow globe. He went on and on about what happened when you turned the globe upside down. Carol held his hand explaining to him that they simply couldn't worry about the snow globe. Christmas will be here soon! Come on! There's no time for this. They had to get ready. Christmas is coming.

Sometimes we're so busy out here in the wilderness preparing for Christmas, that we miss it altogether. We're so busy 'preparing the way' that we miss the fact that Christ has already come. Christ is right here -- in our midst -- asking us to turn the world upside down.

And all too often, we limit ourselves to playing the role of John the Baptist. We love to shout, "Repent! Turn back! Prepare the way of the Lord!" We know exactly what's wrong with the world and we're prepared to tell everyone just how to go about fixing it. We know exactly what it would take to set the world right and so we stand shouting in the wilderness.

But we're not called to be John the Baptist. We're called to be Christ. We prepare the way for Christ by being Christ. Isaiah tells us: "The Spirit of the Most High is upon us, because God has anointed us. God has sent us to bring good news to the oppressed; to bind up the brokenhearted; to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of God's favor."

The world has been turned upside down by the powerful, the greedy, the vengeful, the selfish and the cruel and it's not our job to stand around and complain about it. We have been called to set the world right side up. We've been called to work with God to bring peace on earth. It always amazes me how God breaks into our world, not with legions of angels, or fire and brimstone; but as a tiny baby, whimpering in the night, a helpless infant, born into a family soon to become refugees -- with a toddler...

But the story of God's amazing presence in the world, isn't just a nice 2,000 year-old story, it's our story. It's not all shepherds and angels and Magi - it's us. It's not just about any baby. It's about our baby. Isaiah's voice echoes through the centuries, "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given."

Carol's father didn't seem to mind that she gave him an Old Spice soap on a rope even though he'd given up Old Spice a long time ago. Carol's Mom, who never wore perfume, seemed delighted with the tiny bottle of cheap perfume that Carol gave her. Baby Liam didn't even notice the rattle that Carol carefully pinned to his bib. But Val and Dave seemed positively overjoyed with the snow globe that Michael proudly presented to them. Michael carefully and methodically explained what the words said on the base of it: "Peace on earth," and that meant that it wasn't just a present for his Mom and Dad, but for everyone.

That little snow globe still sits on Val and Dave's mantle every Christmas Eve when Michael and Liam and their families arrive to celebrate. The message is the same, Peace on Earth, Good will to all.

Peace on Earth still begins with peace at home. Whether that home is in a lowly stable in Bethlehem or a shabby little basement apartment on the west coast; a mud hut in Afghanistan, or a Manhattan townhouse, or even a split-level in the midvalley. Peace on earth begins when we realize that a Child has been born for us, given to us; and that child is named Emmanuel, God with us. God is with us and we are changed forever by a child in a manger. Peace on earth, peace in your home and peace in your hearts. God is with us. Amen.