

ABNORMAL CHRISTIANS
2ND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS – JANUARY 5, 2020
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The magi are up in our Creche on the side altar. They're a day early.

Tomorrow is the feast of the Epiphany, and it's the day when we tell the story of the strangers from a far-away land who arrived in Israel looking for the Messiah, the new King of the Jews.

They knew the way by following a star, which led them, not to a palace, but to the home of humble peasants.

The strangers came to honor this child, God in man made manifest; while child's own king tried to kill him as a threat to his power.

That's the story the Church tells tomorrow. Today is the 12th Day of Christmas, though we will NOT be singing about 12 Drummers Drumming, or even one little drummer boy.

Today's story is about how the density of normality keeps even truly lovely people from leaving what's familiar to live as if everything is different once God shows up on the scene.

Normality – it's something we are taught, carefully taught, from childhood on and it's peculiar and particular to every family, every community, every culture.

It's the Way Things Are. The Rules of Life. The System.

Now, some of the things we're used to do indeed morph and change; the pace of technological advances these days can make our heads spin.

But the deeper systems – especially those that dictate how economies work, which humans are inherently valuable and worthy of having power, and which humans can be oppressed, manipulated and discarded – those systems are deeper than any deep state your favorite conspiracy theorist has alleged.

What's been normal for humanity for thousands and thousands of years?

The prophet Jeremiah was active in Judah 2600 or so years ago.

The biblical writings of his time describe how people faced war after war, dread diseases, anxiety, natural disasters that wiped out entire cities.

Most people were poor, while just a few had privilege and power.

Of course, those with privilege and power had no interest in changing normality, and those without it were convinced they couldn't change it.

That was normal life then, and it's normal life now.

The fact is that we humans, deep down, believe what's normal for humanity is a world of war, disease, disaster, anxiety, poverty and despair.

There is one moment in our culture, though, where a different possibility breaks through the system of what's normal.

It's a time we say we love: the holidays. Christmas.

I usually join the chorus of people who fuss and bother at the merchants who put their Christmas wares out as soon as the Back to School specials end, but I'm even more dismayed at how quickly so many of us

let the Christmas Spirit dissolve like sugar in the rain

as throw the trees on the curb and get back to our normal life of

no parties or presents, no lights or singing or feasts, no visits with family and friends, and for a lot of Americans – no church until the next holiday season.

Nope, it's back to normal.

Why do we so willingly revert to normal on January 2nd every year?

It's like too much peace on earth and good will to all get in the way of what life is really about for us.
So, just as we're taking down the lights,

our church wants us to listen to this merry, jolly reading from Jeremiah –
who's not known for being a very jolly guy –
about what God wants for God's people ALL the time: joy.

Jeremiah declares 5 times in 7 verses

that God's joy is for humanity to be happy, full, safe, cherished.

Remember the definition of joy, divine joy, is when we celebrate
that others have what they need, even if we don't have it yet,
even if that person is our enemy.

Joy is what the incarnation is all about: first and foremost,

God's joy that humanity is getting what we need in the person of Christ.

Jesus, God the Son, left his Father's throne because it brought God joy
to enter into our normal world full of misery caused by our normal systems,
to show us how to be, well, Abby Normal. OK, abnormal.

Jesus' joyful purpose was to bring justice and faithfulness to all humanity,
even though we didn't give it to him, and it cost him dearly to do it.

To share in God's joy, we, too, are to be abnormal,
to look for ways to use our lives to make life better for others.

I know that this is abnormal, because as a kid, I was very NORMAL.

My mother says that, growing up, I had impeccable timing

She'd be doing some chore like bringing in the groceries, cooking dinner,
stuffing envelopes . . . whatever.

Just as she'd brought in the last bag, or put the food on the table,
or licked the last stamp, I'd waltz in all cheery like and say "Need any help?"

Happened every time. That's only one of thousands of examples

Mom could give on how I'm not like God.

Well, except . . . Jesus kind of did the same thing when he was 12.

He caused Mary and Joseph a lot of anxiety by not showing up where expected,
though I'll readily admit that when I disappeared

I was not off debating theology with scholars!

The difference between Jesus and me is that Jesus immediately learned
that it was his joy to be obedient to his parents so they weren't anxious.

At 65, I'm still learning what that might mean, and I'm so grateful
that I still have the opportunity relieve some of my parent's anxieties.

Anyway, Jeremiah tells us that God comes into our normal world

with an abnormal system: one that seeks good for others,
welcoming and sheltering people from the ends of the earth;
the healthy and strong, but also the blind and the lame;
those who are crying, and screaming women in labor.

God's abnormal system ensures that those who are weak will be safe,
with no fear domination and oppression or violence by the strong,
because in the Lord's system, the strong find joy
as they make sure those weaker than they have what they need.

God's abnormal system is for the journey of life to be a pleasure,
a homecoming down a straight road beside flowing brooks.

God's abnormal system is for all people, including the poorest, to be healed,
have plenty of food, and to dance in the streets.

God's abnormal system challenges our normal system,

with the purpose of changing things until what is normal for humanity
is for every day to be like Christmas Day.

So how come we put Christmas Day out on the curb so fast?

I think the answer is pretty simple: we don't really believe.

Remember, to "believe" means to give our hearts.

We don't believe, we don't give our hearts, to a future
where God has delivered on the promises made to Jeremiah.

We don't really believe, we don't give our hearts to,
a life where Christmas changes how we live the rest of the year.

We don't really believe, we don't give our hearts to, the conviction
that God can or should challenge our normal systems,
or that it's possible to have peace and good will on earth all year.

So, just like we shove our festive tree into one dark corner of the year,
we put Jesus back up in heaven until next Christmas,
and then get back to normal as quickly as possible,
going into debt to have more and more stuff so that someone else gets rich,
fighting and destroying each other,
resigning ourselves to the reality that many children go to bed hungry,
and rejecting people because they're different from us.

Both Paul and Jeremiah call us out on that.

Paul insists that people who believe in Jesus believe in God's abnormal system,
and are convinced God's power works in them all the time, in this life, now –
and this power manifests in how believers live out their faith every day.

Jeremiah calls people to give their hearts to God's abnormal system
and to be the faithful remnant: to have faith in God's purpose, to seek joy,
by giving each other help, being mutually interdependent,
rejoicing in creation, and by how they, well, "accentuate the positive,
eliminate the negative, and latch on to the affirmative."

The faithful remnant wants to be abnormal, to be people who, like Jesus,
find joy when every sick person receives healing,
every weak person is given a strong arm to lean on,
every hungry person has food, and every wanderer has a home.

The faithful remnant are not to be unrealistic about life:
from the life of Christ, we know that the shadow of the cross
will fall across God's system every day.

But even Jesus' journey to the Cross was a source of joy to God
as humanity was reconciled to God forever.

When Jesus left his Father's throne at Christmas, he brought us the gifts
of spiritual blessing, of being God's children,
of seeing God's power at work in everyday life.

This gift is a Christmas present we can open every day of the year.

Well, the truth is, we, too, our Christmas decorations will also soon disappear,
but let's have no intention of becoming normal afterwards.

In a world that is addicted to normal, let's follow God's abnormal system,
let's be like Jesus: letting the power conferred
by the energy of God's powerful strength help us seek joy,
to BE Christmas gifts we can give to the world every day of the year.

JEREMIAH 31:7-14

The LORD proclaims: Sing joyfully for the people of Jacob; shout for the leading nation. Raise your voices with praise and call out: "The LORD has saved his people, the remaining few in Israel!"

I'm going to bring them back from the north; I will gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the disabled, expectant mothers and those in labor; a great throng will return here. With tears of joy they will come; while they pray, I will bring them back. I will lead them by quiet streams and on smooth paths so they don't stumble. I will be Israel's father, Ephraim will be my oldest child.

Listen to the LORD'S word, you nations, and announce it to the distant islands: The one who scattered Israel will gather them and keep them safe, as a shepherd his flock. The LORD will rescue the people of Jacob and deliver them from the power of those stronger than they are. They will come shouting for joy on the hills of Zion, jubilant over the LORD'S gifts: grain, wine, oil, flocks, and herds. Their lives will be like a lush garden; they will grieve no more.

Then the young women will dance for joy; the young and old men will join in. I will turn their mourning into laughter and their sadness into joy; I will comfort them. I will lavish the priests with abundance and shower my people with my gifts, declares the LORD.

PSALM 84

How dear to me is your dwelling, O LORD of hosts!

My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.

**The sparrow has found her a house and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young;
by the side of your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.**

Happy are they who dwell in your house! they will always be praising you.

Happy are the people whose strength is in you! whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.

Those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of springs,
for the early rains have covered it with pools of water.

They will climb from height to height, and the God of gods will reveal himself in Zion.

LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; hearken, O God of Jacob.

Behold our defender, O God; and look upon the face of your Anointed.

EPHESIANS 1:3-6, 15-19

Bless the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! He has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing that comes from heaven. God chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless in God's presence before the creation of the world. God destined us to be his adopted children through Jesus Christ because of his love. This was according to his goodwill and plan and to honor his glorious grace that he has given to us freely through the Son whom he loves.

Since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, this is the reason that I don't stop giving thanks to God for you when I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation that makes God known to you. I pray that the eyes of your heart will have enough light to see what is the hope of God's call, what is the richness of God's glorious inheritance among believers, and what is the overwhelming greatness of God's power that is working among us believers. This power is conferred by the energy of God's powerful strength.

LUKE 2:41-52

Each year [Jesus'] parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. When he was years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to their custom. After the festival was over, they were returning home, but the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents didn't know it. Supposing that he was among their band of travelers, they journeyed on for a full day while looking for him among their family and friends. When they didn't find Jesus, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple. He was sitting among the teachers, listening to them and putting questions to them. Everyone who heard him was amazed by his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were shocked.

His mother said, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Listen! Your father and I have been worried. We've been looking for you!"

Jesus replied, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that it was necessary for me to be in my Father's house?" But they didn't understand what he said to them.

Jesus went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. His mother cherished every word in her heart. Jesus matured in wisdom and years, and in favor with God and with people.

SERMON HYMN: *When Jesus Left His Father's Throne*

BLESSING:

The Wisdom of God, the Love of God, and the Grace of God strengthen you to have the faith, heart, and hands of Christ in this world, as you go from here blessed in the name of the Holy Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.