

“Did We Almost Miss It?”  
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**Titus 3:4-7**

<sup>3:4</sup> But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,  
<sup>3:5</sup> he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.  
<sup>3:6</sup> This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,  
<sup>3:7</sup> so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

I don't know if the Advent season felt like this to you, but I found it to be a somewhat darker, frenzied, and a more grief-filled time than in the past. There are probably a lot of reasons for this.

- I'm getting older and life isn't always easy and fun.
- Commercialization of the season and the pressure to buy, buy, buy, and do, do, do continues to intensify.
- We as a church family have lost several beloved members recently. In painful and tragic ways.

I found myself praying that I wouldn't miss it. That I wouldn't miss the joy and holy moments of Advent and Christmastide. But then sometimes prayers and hopes like that just seem to make it all the harder to experience those things.

**Can any of you relate?**

During the two weeks leading up to Christmas Day, I picked up an older but heartwarming novel from our church library. At our last gathering for the year, my book club chose to read a Christmas themed novel and at the behest of myself and another

member selected “Shepherds Abiding”. This novel is part of the beloved Mitford Series by Jan Karon and was published in 2003. It follows the story of Father Tim Kavanaugh, a 60-something Episcopal Priest from the mountains of North Carolina. I love this series and have for quite a while, so it was a pure delight to dive back into this world again. In the evenings, instead of just blazing through all those streaming series as a way to numb my mind and heart, I would pull out this book and light a candle and try to have some quiet, holy, season-oriented time. And I came across a passage that I wanted to share with you. The book tells the story of Mitford at Christmastime, but it also features a few flashbacks of Christmases in Father Tim’s past, specifically the year he was 8 years old. Father Tim grew up as an only child and his father was a rather distant figure. But his father loved Christmas. It was the only time he went to church with Timothy and his mother. And he loved working with Timothy to set up the Nativity scene and have the characters placed throughout the house as they all journeyed on their own timelines to Bethlehem. One night, young Timothy wanted to really experience the Christmas story so he dressed as a Shepherd and walked laps around his family’s barn in the cold night air to mimic the Shepherds’ journey to see the newborn baby. His best friend Tommy refused to join him, so he determined to do it alone. His father unexpectedly appeared and asked,

*“What are you doing?” and was “seemingly annoyed to find his son wearing a sheet over his clothes and, worse still, accomplishing nothing of consequence.”*

Timothy explained about the shepherds . . . and suddenly, everything changed.

*“Timothy . . . Something in his father’s voice was suddenly different; his eyes shone with a tenderness his son had never seen before. His father gazed at him for an instant more, then walked up the steps and into the house. He had sat there, numb with a mixture of joy and bewilderment. In one brief and startling moment, he realized that he was, after all, seen—and perhaps even loved. His heart beat faster, and his breath nearly left him.*

*As dusk faded toward nightfall, he prayed again and walked down the steps onto frozen grass that crackled beneath his shoes like dry leaves. More stars had appeared; he looked above the ridge of the barn roof and picked a bright star that he might follow. He had reached the barn and touched its silvery, unpainted wood when he heard footsteps behind him. He whirled around and, in the twilight gloom, saw the figure of his father. "Timothy . . ." His father had walked with him then, neither of them speaking. When he, Timothy, stumbled over a castaway bucket, he instinctively flung out his hand, and his father caught it and held it in his own, and, in the cold and velveteen darkness, they continued around the silent barn, toward the house in which every window gleamed with light.<sup>1</sup>*

Timothy's father could have missed it. That holy moment that would live in his son's heart forever. But he didn't. He seized it. You know, the Christmas story from the perspective of Titus is short. Just four verses long. One could read right over it. One could miss it. It isn't the story from Joseph and the Wise Men's perspective like Matthew's gospel. Or Mary and the shepherds' perspectives from Luke. Or the ode to the word made flesh from John. But it says all we need to know, really. That God is good and loving. That God gave us a Savior to save us and give us hope.

- **What did you almost miss this season?**
- **What might you miss as we continue to journey toward Epiphany?**

Take a moment and think about the characters of the Christmas story.

Mary.

Joseph.

Elizabeth.

Zechariah.

The angels.

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Karon. *Shepherds Abiding*, pp 149-152.

The shepherds.

The wise men.

They each seized the moment when good news was revealed to them. They didn't miss it. It doesn't mean everything surrounding them was perfect. It doesn't mean they didn't have questions or need to talk about things with another person. **Their messy lives didn't disappear, but God appeared in the mess.** Through stars and the movement of babies in the womb. Through angelic messengers and dreams. Through surprising pregnancies and government censuses. And they received it as gift and responded in kind. Luke's gospel uses the word "haste" twice in the story of Jesus' birth. The first time after Mary has been visited by the angel Gabriel and told she will bear Jesus into the world. She goes "with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth."<sup>2</sup> The second time after the shepherds were visited by angelic messengers announcing Jesus' birth. They "went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger."<sup>3</sup> Now haste is not a word we use very often. It actually peaked in popularity in the early 1800's. Shakespeare used it. Martin Luther used it. It means to do something with urgency. It's an old word. But it is an appropriate word for the Christmas story.

And since we find ourselves still in Christmastide right now, it is appropriate for us to use and understand.

I first encountered the word haste when I was in seminary, in a class called "Presbyterian Polity". Sounds exciting, right? In that class we learned all about Part II of the Constitution of the PC(USA) – the Book of Order. In the section on worship, we learned that the Session of a congregation is responsible for "encouraging parents to present their children for Baptism without undue haste or undue delay."<sup>4</sup> I've always been intrigued by that phrase – *without undue haste or undue delay*. You see, moving

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:39-40

<sup>3</sup> Luke 2:16

<sup>4</sup> W-3.0403

with haste...making haste...doing something in haste, can have its downfalls. Doing something in haste can cause you to forget something or leave it behind.

Just think of the McAllister family in the classic Christmas movie, “Home Alone,” and their mad dash to the O’Hare airport in 1990 after their alarms malfunctioned – they left Kevin behind. It can also cause you to be careless. Just think of the McAllister family and their mad dash to the O’Hare airport in the 1992 sequel – they didn’t notice Kevin got on the wrong plane, ending up in New York rather than Florida. But doing something with haste can also have its benefits. It can help you not miss out on something special. It can cause you to be more efficient or timely. For instance, baptizing an infant without “undue haste or delay” might mean that you baptize that child at just the right time. When he or she is all smiley and cute and can hold their head up. Happily able to sit in a parent’s arms without feeling like a block of concrete. Easily transferable to a pastor’s arms and unable to take off running down the aisle. When you, the parents, aren’t complete sleep-deprived messes. What I really like about this phrase in the Book of Order is the responsibility it gives the church and the grace it gives parents. There’s nurture there. There’s freedom there. Kind of like God announcing the appearance of our Savior to Mary and Joseph, the Wise Men and shepherds. God didn’t say that they had to respond in a certain way or on a certain timeline. God just made known to them the good news. They chose to respond in the ways that they did. And God was with them in it – guiding, nurturing, making space, opening hearts.

A neighbor of mine, Martin, died on December 19<sup>th</sup> following a cancer diagnosis a few months ago. He and his wife were college sweethearts and have lived in their house their entire married life, nearly 60 years. They moved in shortly after they married and raised their family there. Because Martin was an engineer, everything about their home is neat and everything inside and outside has its place. They have a perfect and neatly kept long and smooth driveway where all the neighborhood kids are always welcome to scooter away from the traffic. All day on the 19<sup>th</sup>, we knew that Martin wasn’t doing

well and that he probably wasn't going to make it through the day. Our neighborhood text chain updated us every few hours as to how he was doing. We finally received the news that he had died peacefully around 5pm. As that news was shared, we wondered what we could do for his wife, Martha, in her time of deep grief. And someone came up with the idea of luminaries. Our neighborhood had set out luminaries the night before and many people hadn't thrown them away yet. So, we set about gathering the leftovers. I found a pack of tea lights in my closet, and we went to work. In the cold, dark evening we replenished candles in used luminaries, un-wrinkling the bags that looked a bit used, and placing them along that long driveway and perfectly kept curb. Warm lights welcomed Martha home on her first night without her beloved husband. It didn't take us long to do this at all. It didn't cost us any money. But it was our gesture of love to someone who had lost the love of her life. And we did it with a bit of haste so that the lights would be aglow when she arrived home.

We could have missed it. The opportunity to bring our neighbor a bit of comfort in a time of deep grief. But by God's grace and the power of a text chain, we didn't. I could have missed it. I had supper on the stove, and it was cold outside. But I saw my friend's text with the idea of the luminaries, and I quickly texted back, "I'll help you." I'm so glad I didn't miss it. Because it was a holy moment in a season of chaos. It was a moment when neighbors came together to do something kind for someone else. It was a moment to slow down and appreciate what was all around me.

**What did you almost miss, but didn't?**

A quiet moment beside your twinkling tree?

A candlelit hymn?

A snuggle with your children?

Time with your parents?

An opportunity to give so that someone else's holiday season would be more full?

A meal shared with friends?

Here's the good news, friends – it is still Christmastide and you can still claim those moments. Because our savior has appeared, and he has saved us. Not for anything we have done or left undone, but because of his rich mercy. There is grace and freedom, and God is with us along the way. We can seize the holy moments of our lives. We don't have to miss them. I don't know what your Advent was like. Or what your Christmastide has been like up to this moment. But I do know that I can never be told the good news of Jesus' birth too many times. I can never be reminded too much that through the birth of this baby in a manger, through this ordinary and miraculous story of a star in the East and angels singing to farm workers in the fields, through an unplanned teenage pregnancy and a much prayed for, later in life pregnancy, through a government census and a trip to back water Bethlehem,

I have become an heir to the hope of eternal life.

You have become an heir to the hope of eternal life. We have become heirs to the promises of God that are real and true and right here, right now for us.

We didn't almost miss it. We can seize it right now.

Thanks be to God. Amen.