

Christmas Will Come
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Sometimes I think all I really needed to know about Christmas I learned from The Muppets.

The Muppet Show and the Muppet specials including the Muppet Christmas special were a television hit in the late seventies and early eighties. The show featured a large cast of puppets with larger than life personalities, quirks and opinions: the diva singer Miss Piggy; the gentle-hearted but often exasperated Kermit the Frog; the not very funny standup comedian Fozzy Bear. It included Dr. Teeth and his band, the two hecklers Waldorf and Statler, as well as a rotation of human guests from John Denver to George Burns.

The Muppets taught me:

- that in every family there are Miss Piggys--divas, demanding, critical and loud—and that they are loved, too.
- that if Gonzo, a sort of penguin crossed with a vulture, could have a passionate love for a chicken, then perhaps what matters is not who you love but how you love

And I learned that peace and love and hope are not just things talked about at church, but that this rag-tag group of irreverent, off the wall, sometimes wrongheaded Muppets cared about those things, too, and talked about them and acted them out in the midst of their zany adventures.

Joseph begins an unexpected adventure in today's text. Here he is. A regular man engaged to a young woman and ready to get married and start a life together. Likely he has been waiting for quite a long time. But then he learns that things are not going as he thought. His fiancée is pregnant and not by him. Scandal looms and he decides to divorce Mary quietly.

But then, an angel comes in a dream and asks him, "Joseph, do you dare begin this journey, this different path that God has set before you? Do not be afraid." And so Joseph bravely chooses to embark on this different path, to trust in God and the Great Love that he believes in.

The Muppet Christmas Album, long a favorite in my family, is a combination of some creatively reinterpreted traditional carols as well as some new songs that speak to the depth of longing at Christmas time. That to be a Muppet is to long for peace: peace at home, peace in the world... Just like the rest of us.

One song called the Carol of Peace expresses it this way:

The garment of life, be it tattered and torn,
the cloak of the soldier is weathered and worn.
But what child is this that was poverty-born, the peace of Christmas Day...
The hope that has slumbered for 2000 years,
the promise that silenced 1000 fears.
A faith that can hobble an ocean of tears, the peace of Christmas Day...
In the midst of grief and trouble and loneliness and weariness, hope comes, a promise is fulfilled, and peace, blessed peace, the gift of peace, is ours. In this moment and as we live out the message of this moment, this holy birth, in our lives.

But what does Kermit the Frog know about the real world/?

Well, it's not easy being green—scorn, ridicule, bullying sometimes follow.

How is Animal, the wild and dangerous drummer for the Muppet band relevant?

Though he is unpredictable, though scary and difficult, he is included. There is a place for him and he is loved inside the circle.

What about Sam the Eagle, always preaching doom and gloom? He has a voice. He is heard.

You may ask, but isn't it all warm and fuzzy feelings from warm and fuzzy puppets?

I think no. Behind the silliness and the fluff is a real message of hard love, of inclusion of difference, of grace for pompousness and arrogance and incompetence that is large enough to include me and my foibles. And a message of love so large, so big, so strong, that love came in human form, in the child Jesus, whose life was one song to hope and change.

In watching this group live out love, albeit imperfectly, yet somehow find the true meaning of Christmas and faith that leaves all the shopping, presents and stuff behind, and focuses on relationship and forgiveness and love, a deep yearning and longing in me was met, one that reflects the deepest hope and desire within us.

Joseph had a longed for life. He had an idea of a perfect family, the ancient Palestine version of the white picket fence dream. And yet faced with imperfection, faced with change he was not quite ready to handle--who would be?--Joseph chooses to live out his life in faith and belief.

We count on Christmas to remind us that love and peace are not just words but possibilities. Not just possibilities but realities. That peace on earth is attainable. That love for all is how we are meant to live. Christmas and its magic gives us the ability to re-dream the dream, the retelling of the story of how Jesus was born and would grow and become the man who teaches us and leads us in lives of joy and sacrifice and hope and justice.

Preparing for Christmas reminds us not to give up, not to give in, not to sit on the side of life's road wearied and hopeless. But to seek out the presence of God in stranger and friend and even muppet alike. No matter what the circumstances.

In the UCC church of my childhood Christmas Eve was beautiful. The old white steepled church with the plain New England style interior was transformed with candles in the windows, roping and wreaths and on the ends of the pews tall metal candle holders attached to the pews that on that one night held lit candles aloft in the darkened sanctuary.

One year my family prepared to go to church. It was a cold Christmas Eve night and my parents, my brother, my grandparents were all arriving at the church after much arranging and rearranging in the car—who had to sit in the middle, who had to sit in the middle last time... We were running late, and thus we arrived just a few minutes before the service.

So we were ushered to the front.

My grandmother was horrified and she muttered all the way down the aisle. My preschool brother dawdled along the aisle. My mother was exasperated and stressed.

Finally, we arrived at the next-to-the-front pew. We began to file in and “Crash!” went my father right into the metal candle holder. The candle went flying, wax rained down on us, our

neighbors, and the lovely velvet covered pew cushions. There were cries of surprise and ushers rushed over to survey the crash scene.

Everyone was actually all right. We then slunk into the pew: mom mad, dad embarrassed, grandmother beyond belief, my brother and I torn between thinking we would die of shame and stifling the urge to laugh.

How would the magic of Christmas come in the midst of this mess? We were a domestic disturbance all our own. But the service started, the hymns and carols we knew by heart, the story told again—a child born, Emmanuel, the shepherds, the angels songs, the promise, the old, old promise that God is with us and peace will come, love will come, hope will see its deepest desires met. And Christmas came that night.

Christmas continues to come. In my family that disastrous evening is now a family legend gleefully trotted out every year--told twice actually, once as we spend Christmas with my mom, and once in the company of my dad. You see life is not perfect; we live a blended family Christmas schedule.

But the story is iconic. That in the midst of mess and pain and stress and family and too much to do, Christmas came. It came to our struggling family. It came to Mary and Joseph's struggling family. It can come to you and to me each year as we wait and prepare:

- Peace is possible.
- Love does heal and hold us all together—friends, strangers, enemies, blended families alike.
- The garment of life, be it tattered and torn, shall find the peace of Christmas Day.
- the deep joy that can be ours, ours in the change and challenge and love that Christ brings.

This is the challenge to love and peace that I learned from Kermit and Fozzy and Miss Piggy and Rolf. A challenge to hope and justice learned in the conflicts of family and nations.

A promise that joy shall be mine, and shall be yours, as we wait for Jesus to come.