

## A TIME FOR FOOLISHNESS

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Ecclesiastes 3:1-8  
First Corinthians 1:18-25  
Luke 2: 15-21

Webster's Dictionary defines foolishness as behavior characterized by a lack of good sense, judgment or discretion. Being absurd or ridiculous or silly. In that sense, our celebrations at the beginning of a new year are times for foolishness, so let's begin this morning with a bit of New Year's silliness. Here we go.

— A New Year's resolution is something that goes in one year and out the other.

— I remember 2022 like it was yesterday.

— An optimist stays up until midnight to see the new year in. A pessimist stays up to make sure the old year leaves.

— Finally a new years' prayer:

Dear Lord. So far this year I've done well. I haven't gossiped, I haven't lost my temper, I haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or overindulgent. I'm very thankful for that. But in a few minutes, Lord, I'm going to get out of bed, and from then on I'm probably going to need a lot more of your help. Amen.

That was my attempt to wake us all up this New Year's morning. Now to the message for the day.

We are still in the Christmas season. The Twelve Days of Christmas is not just the title of a well-loved carol. The Twelve Days of Christmas are an important period in the Christian calendar, beginning with the celebration of the birth of Jesus on December 25th and concluding on January 6th, the Feast of Epiphany, when the miracle of God's coming into our midst as a baby in a manger is joyfully proclaimed in all its glory.

William Shakespeare wrote his play *Twelfth Night* to mark the close of the twelve days of the Christmas season. It is a raucous comedy where nothing is at it seems. The Bard, as we shall see, was on to something in placing his tale of foolishness, when our assumptions about the way things should be are overturned, at the end of our

twelve day celebration of Christmas.

There is the kind of silly, inane foolishness manifest in New Year's celebrations. We've tried a little of that this morning. There is also a gentler kind of foolishness, evident this time of year, that comes to my mind when I think of a prank my father played on us one Christmas when I was seven or eight years old. Every year my Dad would try to fool my brother and me, by telling us, after we had opened a few of our presents, that there were no more gifts for us. In particular, the presents we had most been hoping for were not under the tree. My brother and I would try our best not to show disappointment, but invariably it would show through. Then, with a twinkle in his eye, my father would say, "Well, maybe there's one more present for each of you," and bring out the gifts my brother and I had most wanted. This particular year, however, there were no presents under the tree on Christmas morning, not one, just a few things in the stockings Santa had filled. My Dad, who was a Presbyterian minister, told us that he had gotten busier than usual on Christmas Eve and the stores had closed before he could pick up our presents. We would have to wait, he said, until the day after Christmas to receive any gifts. Dad was so convincing that I believed him. I tried to console my brother, but he chastised me, as only older brothers can, saying, "Oh, come on, Bill. You know he's just trying to fool us, like he always does." Indeed, the smile soon came to my Dad's face and our presents, including the ones we most desired, suddenly appeared. The lesson of my Dad's annual charade. To make sure we understood, he would invariably tell us, that sure, it's fun to get the presents you hope for at Christmas, but that it is not what is most important. There is a greater gift God has for us all, and we receive it only if we come in faith to receive into our hearts the Christ child born in the manger.

I've mentioned now two kinds of foolishness evident this time of year, the silly type that often appears in our New Year's celebrations; and the gentler variety in which our expectations are upset in order to teach us a lesson about the true meaning of Christmas.

There is a third type of foolishness, and it is to be found in the Christmas story as told to us in Scripture. Again, foolishness is acting in a manner contrary to good sense or judgment. There are a number of examples of such behavior in the account of the

birth of Jesus. Take Mary, the teenage mother of Jesus, for example. She's foolish enough to believe some stranger who tells her that even though she's never been with a man, she is pregnant with a child who will be the savior of all. As readers of the story, we are told the stranger was the angel Gabriel sent by God to deliver this unbelievable message, but there is no evidence in the text that Mary knew his true identity.

Remember, in the Bible God's emissaries often appear as ordinary people, not with the gossamer wings of Christmas pageant angels. Only by faith does the person who sees the angel know that he or she is a messenger from God. It was Mary's faith that enabled her to recognize the stranger as one sent by God, believe his message of a miraculous birth, and to say in response, "Here I am, let it be according to your word."

Then there's Joseph. What a fool he was, when his behavior is measured on worldly standards. When he learned Mary was pregnant and he was not the father, the laws and customs of his time directed Joseph to condemn her and have nothing further to do with her. Indeed, the story tells us that although Joseph did not want to humiliate Mary publicly, he was ready to dismiss her quietly. But something extraordinary happened that caused Joseph to ignore good judgment and common sense. Like his namesake, the Joseph in Genesis, he listened to a dream. A dream that told him to take Mary as his wife, that she had conceived by the Holy Spirit and the baby in her womb was none other than the child prophesied by Isaiah: Immanuel, God with us! So Joseph took Mary, suspicious pregnancy and all, as his wife.

And what about the shepherds? They foolishly violated the basic rule of shepherding. They were supposed to keep watch over their flocks at night, and instead they went on a road trip to Bethlehem, probably leaving their sheep unguarded. Can you imagine one of the shepherds explaining to the owner of the now scattered sheep he was supposed to be tending that he had left them alone and gone to see a newborn baby in a stable? The foolishness of the shepherds may very well have cost them their jobs. And to make matters worse they went around telling everybody what they had seen and been told, how the baby in Bethlehem was the long awaited Messiah, the Savior of all. Hadn't they heard about the paranoid King Herod in Jerusalem, just a few miles away, who savagely suppressed those who challenged his power? How foolish can you be to defy ruthless power ... in any age? This is the last we hear of the

shepherds. We don't know what happened to them. Their story may not have had a happy ending.

The wise men who came from the East, following the star, knew all about King Herod. He sent them to Bethlehem with instructions to find the new born child and report back to him. Like Joseph, they had a dream, and like Joseph, in faith, they believed it. Their dream led them to disobey a direct order from a tyrannical ruler. Most would call that a very foolish thing to do. But, like Joseph, placing their faith in a dream, they took the risk of not betraying the place where Jesus was born and went home another way. As with the shepherds, we are not told the fate of the wise men. Did they make it home or did their foolishness cause them to be apprehended by Herod's hooligans?

For us the Christmas story has become quite predictable. Joseph leading Mary who rides on a donkey. No room at the inn. Baby in the manger. Shepherds see angels, go to Bethlehem. Wise men bring gifts. Unwrap the presents. Write the thank-yous. Resolve to go on a diet after eating too many Christmas goodies. Soon it will be all over. Take down the tree, put away the decorations, and we'll do it again next year.

But if we pay close attention, we'll realize that the Christmas story is not predictable at all. It's anything but. The story of the birth of Jesus is about what is not supposed to happen. Virgins like Mary who have not been with a man do not get pregnant. A good, moral young man like Joseph isn't supposed to get hooked up with a teenage, unwed mother especially when he is not the father of her child. Shepherds who want to stay employed don't leave their flocks unguarded at night. Wise men who want to stay alive don't disobey kings, especially vicious, diabolical ones like Herod the Great. And the one God, the almighty creator of heaven and earth is not supposed to come into our midst as a weak, innocent baby.

The question we need to ponder as we move toward the end of the twelve days of Christmas is whether we are willing to look deeper than the predictability Christmas has become to be touched anew by its amazing, mind-blowing truth. Those in the Christmas story who responded to the good news of the birth of the Christ child with faith found themselves behaving in ways others undoubtedly deemed foolish.

Similarly, if we respond to the Christmas story with true faith, we just may find ourselves taking risks people with good sense consider foolish.

Sometimes God's foolishness means acting contrary to accepted norms. Sometimes it means taking action when you would rather be a passive bystander. Sometimes it means loving not only your neighbor but total strangers as well. When we let ourselves be transformed by the foolishness of Christmas we don't know where we'll end up, but with faith we know God will lead us in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

My wife, Sue, found and passed along to me examples she found of God-inspired foolishness in our time. They occurred during the recent holiday blizzard that devastated Buffalo, New York.

Twenty-seven year old Jay Withey found himself stranded during the blizzard in his truck. At first he waited for help. None came. Two other motorists knocked on his window and he let them in. They spent the night huddled in his truck, but when help still had not come by morning, and he had run out of gasoline, Jay set out. He tried several houses but was turned away. Then he took action contrary to accepted norms. He risked a charge of burglary by breaking a window in a school. When he was inside he broke into the kitchen to find food and water. Then he did what could certainly be deemed foolish. He went back into the raging blizzard again and again to guide 24 others, strangers all, who were also stranded into the school. Jay said, "I just kept walking and I walked until I cried and I couldn't walk any further." When he finally left the school he left a note apologizing.

Another Buffalo resident Mark Johnson, ignored an order by Buffalo's mayor to stay off the streets during the brutal blizzard. It was an understandable ruling. But Mark took action anyway, breaking the mayor's order. He got into his SUV and began responding to calls for help, taking much needed medicines and other essential supplies around the city to people he did not know. He said he was motivated and inspired by a dear friend who had been killed in the senseless violence all too common today.

Foolishness? You could call it that, and many will if we start acting like Mary or Joseph, like the shepherds or the wise men, taking risks because through faith we have experienced the life transforming miracle of the birth of the Christ-child. Let us call it

what it is, as the Apostle Paul described in his first letter to the Corinthians. What the world deems foolishness, we know to be the power and wisdom and love of God for all those who believe.

Like the shepherds, let us risk going unto Bethlehem to see the baby who is the Savior, who is Christ the Lord, and like the wise men follow the star to the new born king. Like the shepherds let us take the risk of making known what we have seen and been told.

And like Mary, in this new year let us treasure all these words and ponder them in our hearts.

And let us be inspired by the good Samaritans who showed God's love even to strangers during the blizzard in Buffalo just last week.

The old preacher whose sayings we find in the book of Ecclesiastes famously said, "For everything there is a season, and a time for everything under heavens." To his list of times and seasons, let us add, for it is true, there is a time for foolishness, for God's foolishness, which we come to know through faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord, who came into our world as a baby, proclaimed the good news of God's coming kingdom, died on a cross and rose again that we might have a truly abundant life.

To Him be all praise and glory. Amen.

Let us now rededicate ourselves anew to live in this new year as the followers of Christ God calls us to be, loving others in word and deed as God loves us. Let us pray.

#### Prayer of Dedication

Gracious God from who all good gifts come, especially do we praise you for the gift of your son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As his disciples here gathered we dedicate ourselves, our time, our talent, and our resources, in his service, in this new year. In Christ's name. Amen.