

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2009, based on Luke 2:1-20.

The Year I Cancelled Christmas

It was the mid-1980s, and I was the pastor of a 400 member congregation in north central Iowa. I lived 50 miles from the Minnesota border.

It was Christmas Eve. So I drove from my home on the edge of town about 1 1/2 miles to the church to look over my sermon and get ready for our 5:30 Christmas Eve service. This church had the custom of having an early Christmas Eve service right after the stores in town closed.

About 11am, my wife called to say that I should come home because it was snowing hard at our house. Sure enough, I looked out the window and saw how hard it was snowing, and the wind was starting to blow too. It was difficult to get home through the snow and wind and the forecasters were beginning to talk about blizzard conditions. The snow was really starting to drift and blow and visibility was terrible. By 2:00 p.m., calls were coming regularly about whether to do our service. The local radio station was reporting churches that were cancelling their services. By 4:00p.m., I cancelled our Christmas Eve service. No Christmas Eve services in that town that year.

But the congregation has made arrangements to broadcast our 5:30 Christmas Eve Service live on the local radio station. So the station called and asked what we wanted to do with our hour? They told me that they could patch me into the system over the telephone. It was our hour to use. So at 5:30 on Christmas Eve, I went on the radio live from the living

room of the Zoelzer home. Fortunately, I had brought a bulletin and my sermon home with me.

Over the radio, I introduced myself, greeted everyone in the name of Jesus Christ, read scripture and prayed, gave my Christmas Eve message, and then wished everyone a Merry Christmas. People told me later that it was comforting to hear a familiar voice while they sat closed in their homes during a storm.

Now normally, that would have been the end of the story. But Christmas was on a Sunday that year, and we had previously decided to have a Christmas Day service with communion. By 10pm, the winds were starting to dissipate. So we decide to try to do it.

The next morning before first light, I opened my garage door to 3 and 4 foot drifts in my driveway. I didn't have a snow blower. So I started shoveling. Luckily, after about an hour, a neighbor noticed what I was doing. He called to say that the wind that had dumped the snow in my driveway had blown most of the snow from his. So he offered to come pick me up in his pickup truck.

About an hour later I crawled over snow drifts and got in his truck. It was a strange trip. Roads that were usually so familiar were now covered with high drifts with may be one lane to drive through. Roads in town were starting to be cleared and by 10am, 18 people showed up for Christmas Day services. Counting me and the organist, it made 20.

We had our Christmas service, we had communion together, and then I went to the back to shake hands. Now normally on a Sunday we would have had a coffee hour. But since it was Christmas, no fellowship

time was planned that day. But as we gathered in the back of the church, no one wanted to leave. Everyone wanted to talk about what had happened to them in the last 24 hours. As I listened, I discovered that the group divided into 2 groups – one group was mad because they were stuck in town before they could go to family for the holidays. The other group was mad because the weather had prevented others to get to their home and they were alone for Christmas. Everyone was tired and stressed.

Finally, someone suggested that we go downstairs and put on the coffee pot while we talked. After all, these were by and large Norwegian people. Everything works better with coffee if your Norwegian. So we went downstairs, put the coffee on, and leaned against the counters while the coffee brewed. All of a sudden, while we stood there, I got this warm feeling of God in the room. It had been a stressful 24 hours, and there was still much snow to move and we all felt stranded. But for that moment, we stood in Christian fellowship. And I had this overwhelming feeling of God with us.

Like shepherds, wise men, and a young couple in an animal shelter, we found ourselves thrown together because of baby, and I realized that at that moment we were together because Jesus made a difference, and all seemed calm. We had no idea that this would be our Christmas, but it came just the same.

A year ago, I had no idea I would be leading worship in Flossmoor, Illinois on Christmas Eve. You had no idea either. All seems different except for an abiding story of God with us and God around us in the birth of the hope of the world in Jesus. Every year we try so hard to control,

manage, and orchestrate this holiday, but every year something gets in the way. Only when we surrender to the power of "God with us" do we understand the joy of "a little child shall lead them" and the news that faith and trust in God brings out our better nature to not only believe in but trust in God's reality for all of life! It is the presence of the living Christ that makes all the difference. Merry Christmas everyone! And may the peace of Christ be with you! Amen.