Luke 2:25-40

“Christmas is for Real People!”

A small country church was having their yearly Christmas Cantata, or Choir concert. Part of the ritual of this particular church was that the choir processed in or marched in singing “O Come, All ye Faithful” and at the end of the service recessed or marched out to singing “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” Now this particular church was an older building, and in many older churches there is in the center aisle a large heating grate where the furnace can force warm air up into the sanctuary.

As the choir was marking their way up to the choir loft singing “O Come all ye Faithful”, they marched over this large heating grate in the aisle. Their march was timed to space the singers out at intervals of three pews distance. Just as the last woman, or alto, was making her way forward, she got onto the grate and stepped on it. Unfortunately, she had bought brand new shoes for the occasion, and these shoes had pencil thin heels.

As you can guess, her heel went into one of the holes in the grate. She shook the heel hard several times but could not shake the shoe loose. At the same time the man behind her was closing fast, so without losing her cool she slipped out of her shoe, and proceeded to limp up the aisle.

The man coming up the aisle behind her, looked down and realized what had happened. He knew that if he left that shoe there, it would cause the congregation to break into laughter. Thinking quickly, he reached down, grabbed the shoe, and gave it a strong twist. To his amazement, the entire floor grate came up with the shoe. He went into a mild state of shock, and in a stunned state of mind continued to march up the aisle, with floor grate and the shoe.

You guessed it! The next man fell into the hole. What, a wonderful parable about our experience at Christmas. How often have we fussed, and worked, to make the very perfect Christmas only to have some accident, or event ruin everything or cause chaotic confusion in our celebration. The dog takes the turkey, or in my parent’s case, the dog eats the chocolates wrapped under the tree.

A snow storm hits, and your expected guests cannot make it. And I am sure if I went through this congregation this evening most of us could make us howl with laughter, at what are in hindsight funny incidents. The first Christmas was anything but perfectly planned. Mary and Joseph would have preferred that census be put off until a more appropriate time, but that’s governments for you; always making life inconvenient.

I am sure Mary would not like to travel the hard journey to Bethlehem, being so close to her time to delivery. In fact, I read something interesting recently where an obstetrician was speculating that Mary may have delivered a bit prematurely due to the rough traveling and stress. As all parents know, especially mothers, babies have their own time table, and come whether we want them to come now or not.

Talk about inconvenient or imperfect. Mary, a very young mother, probably about 14-15 years old, having her first child, away from home, and no relatives to help her; delivers a baby in a strange town. Not only that, she has to deliver her first born in a stable, among animals, and the dust, and the smells of such a place. Why; because there were so many people in town for the census in Bethlehem, and there was no room for them in any inn.

I know Mary had received word from the angel that her baby was the Messiah, God’s only Son, but in the midst of labour, and the inconvenient place to deliver, Mary must have shown a bit of disappointment. Actually, I would not be surprised if she was very disappointed, if not angry at their predicament.

The birth of a baby, is supposed to be a happy event, and I know we are thrilled at Christ’s birth, but Mary and Joseph were alone. No parents, no adoring aunts and uncles, no interested and celebrating neighbours. Not even her cousin Elizabeth is able to comfort her, as she is nursing the newly born John the Baptist. The only attention this birth gets is from a group of shepherds, who were strangers to Joseph and Mary.

Add to that fact that shepherds, in Mary and Joseph’s day, were not revered as the best examples of an upstanding citizen. A perfect Christmas; how can we ever hope to have one, when the very first one was an experience of inconvenience. The reality of our lives is that if your Christmas is anything but perfect, because of imperfect relatives, imperfect scheduling of dinners, and imperfect gifts: then you are in good company.

The whole point of the circumstances of Jesus’ birth is to tell you in bold and clear images and words, that the perfect Son of God came to imperfect people (that includes you and I), and in imperfect circumstances. Jesus’ arrival is a declaration that God: knows our needs, knows our struggles, knows our hopes and dreams, and he knows it all can get crushed by worldly imperfections.

Despite this, Jesus still came right into the very heart of it all. Right into the most inconvenient, to the most ill prepared, most inappropriate place to have a baby; that’s where he came. Why? Well, to tell us something important, something life affirming and life giving. That as imperfect as this world is, and as imperfect as your Christmas is, you can still have the most perfect gift of all.

Now, I hope I don’t spoil the surprise for most of you but, did you know that our desire for the most perfect gift at Christmas has led to an interesting phenomenon. Most of you will likely tomorrow, or when you gather with your families, receive at least one gift card. The growth in gift card sales in Canada and particularly in the US has sky rocketed. In the US for example in 1996 when these cards were introduced, about $1 billion were purchased.

This year it is expected to reach well beyond $70 billion. Why? Well they are: convenient, perfect for the hard to buy for person, easy to mail, and not fraught with too much hassle in trying to decide what another person would like. But here is the real surprise for me; in fact, I found it shocking.

Retailers report that on average, 10% to 20% of gift cards sold each year are never redeemed. The stores love that fact because; well that’s ten to twenty percent free money in their accounts. The reasons for this are many, including: lost cards, expired cards, the receiver did not find anything in the store they liked, or had the time to use them. Add to this the number of cards that are never completely used, like someone who buys a $45 items on a fifty-dollar card and never uses the last five dollars.

These gift cards are supposed to be the most perfect Christmas gift, and yet ten percent of us don’t even bother to use them. Well actually, Jesus is the most perfect Christmas gift given to us all. He is a gift that reaches down from eternity into the imperfections of life and brings us hope and salvation. So, why do we refuse to make use of that gift? Why do we every Christmas, say thank you God for Jesus, and then pack him away until next year?

Maybe we are afraid of what this gift means. Maybe if we receive this gift fully, we are going to feel obligated to change our lives in some way we would prefer not to. So, we smile, we sing the carols, but we refuse to let this momentous gift impact our lives and hearts.

If you truly want an answer for the harsh realities of your imperfect life, if you want something pure and holy in the messiness of your daily grind; then you need to understand and finally accept the truth that the angel’s song to the shepherds is meant for us today, as much as it was for the people two thousand years ago. “Unto”, who was Jesus born? “Unto you!”

That’s right! Unto me and you. Unto those of us who have imperfect families, imperfect jobs, and imperfect neighbourhoods; Jesus came. He came to those who never seem to have life’s events timed perfectly, who always seem to be at the mercy of forces out of their control; like a census. He came for you and me.

You want a perfect Christmas then receive the perfect gift. Isaiah called him, “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace”. But you can call him Jesus, which is the name above every name. For he is the perfect answer to our imperfect lives.