Pulling off the perfect Christmas. I don't know about you, but I feel the pressure to do it every year. The people in the Christmas movies and the TV commercials always seem to get it right. There they are, gathered in a loved one's perfectly decorated home, dressed in their holiday velvet and silk, nibbling on homemade cookies, basking in the glow of a roaring fire. You get the sense that there is nowhere else they would rather be than in one another's company, sharing the Christmas joy that seems to exude from their very pores. In those perfect pictures of Christmas, nothing ever goes wrong. There are no lopsided trees, tired-looking parents or cranky children, no unappreciated presents, no dinners in front of the TV. No one is missing from the celebration because they had to work, or the airfare was too expensive or they haven't spoken to some other member of the family since the election.

So, are you ready for Christmas? If we go by the criteria pushed on us by the media and by our own unrealistic expectations, most of us would have to answer “no”. But what if we decided to measure our readiness another way? What if being prepared for Christmas has less to do with cleaning house and baking cookies and more to do with what God has done and is doing for us through Jesus? Our gospel lesson takes us back to the preparations for the very first Christmas. You can read this passage a hundred times and not find a hint of the perfect Hallmark holiday. Matthew focuses on Joseph and the role he played in the coming birth of Jesus. Joseph was an honorable man; he wanted to do the right thing but he knew Mary's baby was not his. In those days, being engaged involved a legal contract to marry. The only way to get out of an engagement was essentially to divorce the other person. Joseph had the option of divorcing Mary quietly without accusations or public humiliation, and he seemed inclined to do just that until he was visited by an angel of God in a dream. The angel asked Joseph to go beyond what was required of him – to accept that Mary had not broken their promises to one another, that the child she was carrying was a gift from God. If Joseph were to stay with Mary he would be part of something holy – God coming to earth in human form. Joseph showed incredible faith in accepting the word of the angel. By obeying God's messenger, Joseph was preparing the way for a son to be born to him and the Lord to bring salvation to the world.

That first Christmas, Mary and Joseph were on the road, not even in their own homes. They had no holiday guests for whom to prepare They didn't exchange gifts, didn't put up a tree or cook an elegant meal. On that first Christmas, they were just a frightened young woman and a frightened young man, willing to let their lives be turned upside down so the Savior could be born to all. “You are to name him Jesus,” the angel told Joseph in his dream. The angel referred to another name, which was passed down from the stories of Joseph's ancestors. “The virgin shall conceive and bear a Son and they shall name him Emmanuel.” In Hebrew, Jesus means “God saves,” and Emmanuel means “God with us.” In Jesus, the whole world has God's promise to be with us always, through every page of every chapter of our lives – in good times and bad, when our faith is strong and when it is weak, when we are obedient to God and when we rebel, when we come into the world and when we leave it. In Jesus, we have God's promise to save us from our sins. We face the reality that God's salvation is a double-edged sword. When we disobey God, we feel the pain of that sword as we live every day with the messes we have made of our lives. We also learn the power of God's forgiveness and we cherish God's gift of second chances and third and fourth.

Are you ready for Christmas? I can tell you that the Motley house looks and smells very different than it did last year. Last year, Billy and I had a sense that this would be my mother's last Christmas. Mom loved the holiday season so we pulled out all the stops last December. A tree in every room, lights and candles, outdoor decorations, a trip to an English tea at the Palisades restaurant, a full Christmas dinner. We didn't do much in the way of preparing this year. It is too painful on this first Christmas without Mom. I guess you could say we are not really in the holiday spirit, at least not as the world around us defines it. But the Bible tells us we don't have to be. And neither do you.

So how about forgetting about your list? Maybe what you have done already is enough. Cherish the time you have with the ones you love, even if some of it is by telephone or Skype. If you are lucky enough to have it, let the laughter of little ones fill your heart.

Then listen to the words of an angel. “She shall bear a son and his name will be Jesus.” “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear and son and they shall name him Emmanuel.”

God saves. God is with us. There is no way to prepare for this, the most sublime gift the world has ever known, the gift that saves us from our sins and rules the world with justice, peace, truth and grace.

Whatever you have done or not done this season, Jesus has still been born for you and for all people, so relax. There is nothing you can do to make Jesus arrive in this world and there is nothing you can do to make him leave. God is the only one who can pull off the perfect Christmas and God does it over and over again every year. Take comfort in that and take hope in the one who comes into our world bearing God's astounding love for all creation.

Amen.

*Advent 4A*

*December 18, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Matthew 1:18-25*