



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“There Is No Good Card for This”

Luke 1:39-45

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I have relatives who are desperately trying to have a baby. They have tried nearly everything and they are weary, discouraged and nearly broke. This time of year, with all of its focus on family and preparing for the birth of a baby, is particularly challenging. I want to support them but the truth is

There is no good card for that.

Two of my neighbors are divorcing. They have two young kids. They are in the midst of trying to figure out how to end a marriage while somehow continuing to be a family. I want to help but I’m not sure what to do or say. Once again,

There is no good card for that.

I have a friend who is supporting his spouse and following her to a new city so that she can take an awesome new job with an awesome new company. Supporting his spouse means leaving a job that he loves and it’s really hard on him and yet he knows he’s doing the right thing. I want to be supportive of him but again,

There is no good card for that.

A young girl finds herself pregnant. Her fiancé is not the father. An angel tells her that everything will be OK because God is in this child she carries in an unprecedented world-changing way. Her cousin, also pregnant, wants to support her. But

There is no good card for that.

Except there is. It’s on our bulletin cover. It’s the creation of a woman named Emily McDowell. McDowell was twenty-four years old when she received a diagnosis of Hodgkin's lymphoma. It was rugged. She got sick during chemotherapy, lost her hair and was regularly called “sir” by Starbucks baristas. But, as she remembers it, the worst part was loneliness. Her friends and family didn’t know what to say and many of them simply disappeared. And, then there were the cards she was given. She remembers, “A get-well-soon card is kind of strange if you might not.” None of the cards she received seemed to speak to her situation.¹

So, after McDowell’s cancer went into remission, she created a greeting card business. She started writing non-traditional cards. They say things like:

Please let me be the first person to punch the next person who tells you everything happens for a reason.
I’m sorry you’re going through this.

¹ <https://emilymcdowell.com/blogs/all/105537926-empathy-cards-for-serious-illness>

Here's another one.

When life gives you lemons I won't tell you a story about my cousin's friend who died of lemons.

This one is pretty good too:

If this is God's plan, God is a terrible planner. (No offense if you're reading this, God. You did a great job with that other stuff, like waterfalls and pandas.)

Here's another one:

I know there's no normal for you to go back to. But I'm here to help you build a new one. And I'll bring snacks.

McDowell has cards for all sorts of situations.² She has a card for folks struggling with infertility. She has a Mother's Day card to send to someone whose mom didn't do a whole lot in the way of parenting. That card reads:

Today Let's Celebrate The Amazing Job You Did at Basically Raising Yourself. Happy Mother's Day.

She has funny cards. Sarcastic cards. Snarky cards. A few profanity-filled cards. And then there is this one. All it says is

I'm sorry I haven't been in touch. I didn't know what to say.

Yeah. How many times in our lives has that been the right card to send? Because we don't know what to say. Because words fail us. Because we don't want to say the wrong thing so we say nothing. And we stay away from someone when they most need us.

Which brings me to Christmas. That first Christmas. Around the time Jesus is born, things aren't going well for God's people. They haven't been going well for a long time. The Roman empire controls everything. Hope is in short supply. The age of prophets is long over. People can't remember when they last heard God's voice. It's as though God could be sending that card.

I'm sorry I haven't been in touch. I didn't know what to say.

And then, seemingly out of the blue, Jesus appears. God shows up in the form of an infant. Finally, God shows up.

That's what we celebrate at Christmas. God showing up. In other words, if we take away the candles and poinsettias and trees and lights, all we have left is a very humble claim. When it comes to Christmas, all we can say with any confidence is that, in the birth of Jesus, God shows up. God makes an appearance. God shows up.

But, the claim of Christmas does get a little more impressive if we read ahead. So, let's fast-forward to the end of the story. Because Jesus is going to grow up and he is going to heal and preach and teach and spend time with folks considered outside the reach of God's love and care. He is going to take on the powers and principalities and that is going to get him killed. And that's not the end of the story. God will raise this same Jesus from the dead. This birth in Bethlehem is only the beginning of a story that will end in resurrection – that

² To see her full collection of cards go to <https://emilymcdowell.com/>

will end in God marching into a tomb of death and despair and wrestling out of these poor materials – hope and life that lasts forever. So come back on Easter because that is our big day, our shining moment, the high point, the culmination, the most important part of the story. In comparison, Christmas is nice but a bit thin. The point of Christmas, it's a modest point. Showing up.

He was in his second year at seminary and he had just completed his first visit to a household where someone was dying. He was telling me about it. "I didn't have anything helpful to say. I didn't make them feel any better. What did I accomplish in being there?" "Not much," I admitted. He asked, "What should I have said? What should I have done? Please tell me. I want to do better the next time." He looked at me expectantly, waiting for me to reveal the secrets of the profession. I tried to explain what I learned in my years of ministry. There are no words that help. There is nothing that any of us can do to ease the pain that people experience at such times. All I know to do is to show up. Make the phone call, send the card, stop by for a visit. Even when it is awkward and hard and it looks as though we aren't being very helpful. All I know to do is to show up. When I finished, he looked a little disappointed.

Just showing up may not sound all that impressive. It kind of depends what's going on in your life. I think of my relatives trying to have a baby, my neighbors going through a divorce, my friend trying to support his spouse and I'm thinking that this season of Christmas may be just what they need.

This season does not offer any miracle cures. It does not promise that all the bad stuff will magically go away but rather promises that no matter what, God is involved, God will show up. I took another look at Emily McDowell's cards and found a card that I think God is sending to those who are facing challenges this Christmas:

I know you have been struggling lately. In these times, when it's hard for you to see the best in yourself I'm keeping a record of everything that makes you incredible. I know how strong and capable you are. How loving. How deserving. Your kindness, wit and creativity are a permanent part of you. No storm can wash them away. I'm not afraid of the dark and I'll be here to light your way until your own flame burns bright again. Most of all, I want you to know you are loved. You are so loved.

Let me share one final card that I think God is sending to all of us this Christmas. As God looks around our nation, our world and sees the current state of affairs, the current state of our lives. God is saying this to us:

Well, this just sucks. I wish I had a better way to say it ... But I just want you to know that even though I might not always have the right words you always have me. I'm not going anywhere. So I hope you're cool with that because I love you.

I love that card. Yeah. God is not going anywhere. I hope you're cool with because God loves you.

We know that to be true because of Christmas. The Son of the Living God, the Savior of the World, the Redeemer of our Souls, the Word of God, has come to us, as one of us. This Christmas, we are reminded once again that God is involved; God shows up; God cares; God seeks; God saves. There is hope for you, your family, our country, and the world, because we are not alone. God is here, among us, making a way for love... for life... for hope.

Amen.