

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on December 24, 2016	On the occasion of Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

### Felicia's List

Felicia had a list. She always had a list. It started right after the kids went back to school in the fall, after the rush of new clothes, shoes, school supplies, and back packs. That's when she started to make her Christmas list. The first thing was a list of people she was going to give gifts to that year. Of course her family and close friends were on the list, but she started to think about the ancillary people in her life—the mail carrier, and newspaper delivery person, a few neighbors they were friendly with, the kid's teachers, the dog groomer—people like that. By mid October, Felicia had a very impressive list, a list of lists, really. There was a large, and ever growing, list of those to whom she would send Christmas cards. Her gifts list had several tiers: those who would get a little plate of goodies, those who would get a gift card to a coffee shop or local restaurant with a hand written note, and those who would get something more personal, yet still simple, like a bottle of wine to her dear friend Connie. There was the list of people to whom she needed to send a package full of gifts, extended family mostly, with the absolute deadline of December 20<sup>th</sup>. She had lists of things to do, shopping lists, lists upon lists of things that would get her ready for Christmas.

Well, it was now the third week of Advent, mid-December, and she had been making pretty good progress on all of her lists, but that familiar anxiety was beginning to grow, intensified by each glance at her calendar. All of the cards were done, addressed, and mailed the day before Thanksgiving. Check. The day after Thanksgiving all the Christmas decorations came down from the attic, and Mark put up the lights outside while she transformed their house into a Christmas wonderland. They had a tradition of leaving one Christmas decoration up all

year. The kids took turns choosing which decoration would be left each year. Last year was Cindy's turn, and she chose the mistletoe. Of course it was gross and falling apart by Easter. So it had to come down. There was a nice fresh one in its place now. All the Christmas decorations up. Check.

December first, or as close to it as feasible, was Christmas tree time. A Frasier fir, because Felicia liked the slightly citrusy smell, and it held its needles longer than others. Christmas tree up and decorated. Check.

Then it was time to, "prepare the way of the Lord, to make his paths straight." Felicia wasn't ever quite sure how to do this. She figured that since God was a God of love, the best way for her to prepare the way for him was for her to be as loving as she could be every day, in her personal relationships and with everyone she met. So she tried especially hard to give everyone a smile and to present the best of herself to all those around her. Prepare the way of the Lord. Check.

Christmas baking started early in December. Felicia liked this part. She enjoyed baking, and there was something satisfying about kneading and rolling out dough. Of course the best part was watching people enjoy her baked delights. There were the traditional favorites: ginger bread, fudge, peanut brittle, and it just wouldn't be Christmas without her grandmother's recipe for sugar cookies. But she also liked to experiment with new recipes. This year she was trying something she'd cut out of a magazine that had pumpkin and allspice in it. Baking was pretty much an ongoing activity for Felicia during the weeks before Christmas. The treats were continuously being shared and eaten, as new ones replaced them. As each new batch was baked, her list received another check.

There was also the usual round of holiday parties and entertaining. Mark's office party thankfully was early in the month. It was nice to get that out of the way. More little get-togethers followed, both informal and formal. Felecia's book group always had a little luncheon party where everyone brought something. She was famous for her green bean dish that everyone loved. The social engagements seemed to pile up every year. The children had their events, often including an obligatory secret Santa gift. Every organization they were involved with had a party. Cooking and preparing for each one began to feel more like a chore than a joyful thing. At times she wished she could just skip the ugly sweater party her son's soccer travel team put on, or not go to the cookie exchange that the home owner's association sponsored. But she showed up, and she smiled and wished everyone a Merry Christmas. Check.

Then it was time to, "repent for the kingdom of God had come near." Felecia often wondered if this was really good news. It sounded a little scary. Oh, she had plenty to repent about. If people can sin by thought, word, and deed, her thoughts alone would keep her busy repenting until next Christmas. She always considered herself to be a good person, but still uncharitable thoughts just popped into her mind. She couldn't do anything about it. She compared herself to others. She was quick to point out the faults of others. She judged others. That guy at the intersection outside the mall, why couldn't he work for a living? He looked capable. His sign said, "Will work for food," but he knew nobody at the stop light was going to offer him a job. It was easier just to hand him a few bucks. He was counting on that. Felecia had those thoughts, and she wondered how much of the money he was given was actually going to food. Is feeling guilty the same as repenting, or is it just the first step? She never wrote down the list of things she felt bad about thinking, saying, or doing, but Felecia had a list. She always

had a list. Perhaps, she thought, there was something hopeful about repenting, and not so scary. It meant that you expected to be forgiven. Repent. Check.

About the time Felecia's mother-in-law called and said she wanted to come over and bring the kids' presents is when things started to go off the rails. She hadn't gotten around to cleaning the hallway bathroom, and the kitchen was a mess. In God's peaceable kingdom the wolf may live with the lamb, the leopard may lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them, but Felecia will never get along with her mother-in-law. Her visit was blessedly brief, but it was peppered with the usual thinly veiled insults and snide remarks about how her grandchildren were being raised. The whole time Felecia kept thinking about the wrapping she was planning on getting done before she went to bed that night. Family obligations. Check.

With three candles glowing on the Advent wreath, Felecia was starting to feel like there simply wasn't enough time to get everything done before Christmas. She remembered what one of her college professors once told her, "If 24 hours in a day isn't enough, work nights." So much for sleep in the next week and a half.

The following days went by in a blur. Eggnog made. Check. Packages mailed. Check. Family pictures posted on Facebook. Check. Hat, coat, and gloves donated for the angel tree at church. Check. Aunt Edna given her annual Christmas phone call, with each of the kids saying hello and telling her how much they appreciated the lame gift she sent. Check. All of her Christmas shopping done, finally. Check. Wrapping done. Check. Turkey defrosting. Check. Grocery shopping for Christmas dinner. Check. Oops, forgot that she ran out of nutmeg. Back to the grocery store. Check.

Felicia couldn't sleep. She was thinking about... everything. She thought about something she heard in the sermon on Sunday. Something about the news from the Angel that the baby Mary carried was from God, and that he would save his people from their sins. She remembered what it was like each time she was expecting one of her children, how it was a joyful expectation, and yet full of anxiety. She remembered how horrible it was to lose her first child in a miscarriage. She never thought she would get over it. She thought maybe she could never be a mother. For some reason, Felicia often thought of that this time of year. Perhaps it was because her grandmother died just before Christmas. She remembered being 15 and being happy on Christmas day, but still wanting her grandmother back more than anything. She would have gladly given up all her presents if she could just have one more hug from Grandma. Funny, how this time of joy often comes tinged with sadness. Funny how God chose not to take away the pain of life, but rather to enter into it and redeem it.

Christmas Eve came, as it does every year, ready or not. There was only one thing left on Felicia's list. Go to Bethlehem. She liked to imagine what it must have been like in that stable on that night. Sometimes she imagined what Mary must have felt, the hope and apprehension of a new, young mother in a strange place. Sometimes she imagined what one of the witnesses would have felt. What were the shepherds thinking? Did people really understand what was happening? Even with the angel's announcement, did they get that God was doing something amazing? Probably not. Felicia realized that even today people didn't seem to understand what God did through Jesus, why he was born in such unusual circumstances, why he died on the cross. She wasn't sure if she really comprehended it all.

This year, Felicia was trying to imagine what it was like for Mary and Joseph as they tried desperately to find a place to stay in Bethlehem. Mary was probably beginning to feel the

first of her contractions. She must have been exhausted from the trip. She must have been frantic, knowing that her baby was almost ready to be born. What was it like to be homeless, to have no place to have your baby? Felicia was thinking how sad it would be to have God's Son never find a place in this world. The place he found was not perfect. It was not comfortable. It was not clean and neat. But as unlikely as it was, he found a place; and he was born.

Go to Bethlehem, and make a place in your heart to receive Jesus.

Check.