

# 12.15.2024 Sermon

## Making Christmas Count

### **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

Advent tradition, Christmas Town, New York trip, family baking, Advent candles, Christmas story, Matthew's account, Luke's account, Joseph's dream, Mary's visit, Elizabeth's prophecy, shepherds' visit, Jesus' birth, family stories, oscillating narrative

### **SPEAKER**

**Elder Kevin Brisbin**

Good morning, everyone. It's good to be here. Grateful to be here in this place. It is a very busy, hectic time, as Dave said, and so I'm grateful that all of us in this room were able to make time to be together in this place. I think being together is very important. I value it very highly, and so I'm grateful to be here with all of you.

So, Advent, in part, is about counting. And so, this morning, I'll be talking about making Christmas count. The first number I have for us is 1010 days. It's 10 days until Christmas any year with the shortest Thanksgiving to Christmas turnaround time that exists. That is when Pastor Tracy, in her wisdom, scheduled me, the preacher with the most school-age kids still in the house, to preach. And I just want to say, thank you.

Many of you may also know our family has a tradition at Christmas that we go to what our kids call Christmas Town. But the rest of you may know it as New York City. Every year at Christmas, we take the train up to New York and do the Christmas things. The kids love it, so do we. And we've done this every year since Evie, our eldest, was born. We go to see the windows, the crowds, and the tree.

The first year we did that was in 2006 when Evie was just two months old. So, here's a picture of that. Here we are. Well, can I know little baby Evie? So, the story starts with my very impressive sister, who was doing her senior internship at Madison Square Garden. This is a picture of that too, with little Evie along our little baby wrap. And she invited us to come and see the city because she's like, this is magical. You've got to come see it.

She was commuting from Philadelphia, where she went to school at Temple, to doing this internship at Madison Square Garden, and was like, you have to come. So, being us, Erica and I, we simply tied up Evie on our gypsy mama baby wrap and

jumped on a train and went to New York like it was no big deal. And we loved it so much that we've gone back every year, and here we are this year, all of us at the tree on Friday. That's right, our big family Christmas weekend is also this weekend.

So, two days ago, I was in New York with the family. Yesterday, we went to see a Christmas show at Salt Performing Arts, and then we baked cookies all day, or at least Erica did. The rest of us kind of taper off after doing the peanut butter blossoms. The kids and I like unwrapping all the Hershey Kisses and rolling the peanut butter cookies into balls and rolling them into sugar. And then we kind of disappear, and Erica continues to bake. God bless her. But yeah, that was this weekend, and also the weekend I am preaching a week before Christmas Sunday. And did I mention I have four school-age children? Thank you, and a thank you. And it's Advent. It's actually the third week of Advent.

And for those of you unfamiliar with Advent, which I'm told is everyone in the church except for me, and I don't like push for Advent either. Like, it just was something that they did. I never had a horse in this race. I wasn't like, "We should really be doing Advent." But no, I just grew up United Methodist, so it was part of my tradition growing up. So, I was just familiar with it, as was Pastor Bob, which was the way he was raised. So, part of how it's here.

For most of you who are unfamiliar with Advent, it is the four weeks leading up to Christmas Sunday. Some of its symbols are a wreath of evergreen and four to five candles, usually three purple, one pink. Some also include a white candle that's like the Christ candle or the Christmas candle that's lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas day, depending on your tradition. And yes, there's variation. The Church of England uses red candles. The United Methodist Church, which I grew up in, actually uses blue candles. Now, some of them celebrate like seven or nine weeks of Advent. It's a different number of weeks than I grew up with. So, there's lots of variation on this, but Advent just means "coming." Like, the Advent of Christmas is coming. It's upon us.

So, these candles symbolize different things: hope, peace, love, joy, or in some traditions, prophets, Bethlehem, shepherds, and angels. So now that we are all illuminated on Advent, a true story, or perhaps a truly embarrassing story, but I'm gonna share it anyway. I really like Advent, so much so that a couple of years ago, I wore a pair of very purple pants on the first, second, and fourth Sundays in Advent, and I actually purchased a pair of salmon pink pants to wear just on the third Sunday of Advent.

You too, of course, not. It's ridiculous. Who would do that? I would do that. And this had me wondering why. It was 80 pounds ago, and they do not fit, but who would do that except for me? So, this whole thing had me wondering, why? Why do I have such an affinity for Advent? So just a quick show of hands: Did any of you grow up with an Advent tradition? Oh, there are some of us. See, look around the room.

Elders, I am not alone. There's like a solid maybe 50% of us. Next year, we'll have you guys teach.

I think Advent, though, holds a special place in my heart because it held space for my heart at Christmas, this otherwise extremely busy season. Are any of y'all feeling the busyness of Christmas, the extra fullness of Christmas? Well, look around the room. You are not alone. And for me, it's been that way for as long as I can remember. As a young, elementary-age child, even before school programming started, my church put on a Christmas musical every year, and the director's youngest child was my age. And so, the musicals every year were tailored to my age group.

So, like when I was young, they were young kid Christmas musicals. When I was in middle school, they were middle school Christmas musicals. When I was in high school, they were high school Christmas musicals. I was just blessed to have been born the same age as the director's youngest child, and so I got to grow up with them. That was part of my Christmas tradition. So very early on, in early elementary school, I was very busy, and I had a strong memory and a good ear for music, and was dramatically inclined. I've heard it both ways, so I was often the lead in this musical. And by "often," I mean every single year.

Now, as a child who loved the arts as much as I did, this was like a huge gift, right? Like this opportunity. But it did mean that I was very busy every single year at this time for as long as I have memory. And on the days immediately following Thanksgiving, the aroma in my childhood home shifted suddenly from turkey and stuffing to Pine Sol and highlighters. I know that's quite a piney pivot, but we would deep clean our house every year before setting up for Christmas, even down to mopping the basement walls. So, picture young Kevin mopping away at the walls while my ever-efficient saint of a mother would spend that time helping me run all of my lines so that I could be off book by December.

This ritual is so vivid in my mind that I can smell and see those walls, that sponge mop, and those highlighters right now. One of them was this like, big, chunky blue highlighter, and another one was a triangle highlighter that was like pink on one corner, yellow on another corner, and green on another corner, all three. Yes, you're welcome for all of those details. I'm high context, so of course, I highlight the colors of my highlighters.

Well, middle school and high school only compounded this busyness with the addition of school musicals, school choir, school band, school handout choirs, and all of the concerts that accompanied that, all on top of these church obligations. So, it was a very, very busy, hectic, hustling season of the year.

Enter into that Advent. My family had, and still has, this small brass-framed, artificially evergreen adorned Advent wreath atop our eat-in kitchen table, not unlike

this one that I brought with me from our house. And we were so holy that we didn't just light the Advent wreath on Sundays but every night of the week too. There was this little booklet that went along with it, and every night we would take turns lighting the candles, leading the responsive readings, reciting the prayers, and singing the Christmas hymns of that day. There was a part for everyone at the table.

So again, it had four candles, looked a lot like this, and I'm just going to light these just as a presence, like, not like a big show. I'm not going to have, like, a reading or anything for all of us to do. I won't make us all go around and have a part. And it's today's the third week of Advent. So, we light three. One week to go.

So, for me, this nightly ritual of lighting candles and sharing these words from this booklet was an invitation to slow down for this minute, to pause and to be present, the chaos feeling like it was suspended in time around me, like a great slow-motion clip in a big-budget movie. Like, picture *The Matrix*, only my childhood eat-in kitchen. You know that moment on Christmas Eve when everyone is standing with candles lit and singing "Silent Night"? The peace in that moment is almost palpable.

That moment was the first moment every year when all of my obligations at school and at church had finally been satisfied, and at long last, Christmas could begin just hours before it would be over in a flurry of wrapping paper. Except for those couple of moments of Advent every day, they would invite that moment of "all is calm and all is bright," that Christmas calm into my Christmas chaos. Alongside my Christmas chaos, those moments would sustain me through the chaos. That ring of evergreen would pull me into its life-giving orbit.

Those purple and pink candles would burn so slowly for a whole season, or sometimes even two or three seasons, that they would slow me down. Advent isn't in a hurry, and for those precious few moments every night, neither were we. This is the essence and the beauty of Advent for me, and this is the invitation of Advent to all of us. A call to gather around this circle of warmth and light in the midst, or even perhaps in defiance, of this season of cold and darkness, and to slow down for this moment and engage with Advent life and circle up around its light.

So, let's do that. Let's circle up around the Christmas story. So where do we find the Christmas story? Luke? Did I hear Luke? Yep, we hear it in Luke, and there's one other place we hear it. Matthew, yeah, Matthew and Luke. Mark skips straight to the ministry of Jesus, and John was waxing poetic about the word being with God and was God. But Matthew and Luke give us the Christmas story that we all know and love.

Or do they? For all they share, these are two of the four Gospels. These are two of the three that we call the Synoptic Gospels because they share so much content. And specifically, Matthew and Luke share 67% of content. The Christmas story, though, is found in both but is not part of this crossover content. It's actually part of

the 33% of completely unique information, which is fascinating to me, because we all understand it as one cohesive story. We all have one Nativity and everyone's there, right?

You don't have like, two separate nativities, a Matthew Nativity and a separate Luke nativity? Or do y'all have like, one nativity? Right? We understand it as one cohesive story, but it's anything but. So, that being said, there is some overlap, not necessarily narratively, but at least in the cast of characters. There are five characters that appear in both Matthew and in Luke.

And can any of you guess who they are? Shepherds are not in both. They only appear in one. They appear in Luke, but not in Matthew. Wise men appear in Matthew, but not in Luke.

Mary. Yes, now we're getting there. We're getting the hints. Mary's in both. Jesus is in both. Joseph is in both. Angel of the Lord, just one, not the choir. The choir is only in Luke, not in Matthew. But there is an angel of the Lord in both. So that's four, and there's one more. Brandon is yes, Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit is mentioned in both accounts. Those are the five characters that appear in both: Mary, Joseph, Jesus, Angel of the Lord, and Holy Spirit.

And that's it. Everyone else appears in one but not in the other at all, not even referenced. And there's also one shared setting that we actually sang about this morning in a couple of the songs. And yes, that is Bethlehem. So tiny, Hebrew grammar school corner moment here. No smaller, yes, this is a little corner this week, Bethlehem. "Beth" means house. "Lehem" means bread, so Bethlehem. Yep, you got it. Add it up. Bethlehem means "house of bread."

I find this beautifully symbolic that Jesus, the Prince of Peace, was born in a town called Bethlehem, a city that means house of bread. And on the day that he dies, he offers his body broken for you through the loaf of bread in Jerusalem, which is a city that means "Prince of" or "City of Peace." The person of peace in a place called bread and the person of bread in a place called peace is not lost on me. I just love connections like that. They make me smile.

But as far as similarities go, that's where the stories diverge, which, to be clear, does not mean that they disagree with one another. I don't see it that way at all. In fact, I simply see the beauty of two different authors with unique points of view, sharing the story of what they saw and the lens through which they saw it.

So, let's take them one at a time. First, Matthew. Matthew is a genius. He starts with a genealogy. So yes, this is going to be starting in verse 18. That's where we'll pick up, and you can leave it up there. It's totally fine. But the first 17 verses in Matthew 1 are a genealogy with 42 generations of fathers begetting sons, tracing the lineage back to David and then to Abraham. Real patriarchs, patriarchs.

Then we get to the Joseph perspective, and picking this up in Matthew chapter 1, verses 18. If you'd like to follow along, this is how the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, came about. His mother, Mary, was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph, her husband, was faithful to the law and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Yeshua, because he will save his people from their sins."

And because this is the Joseph story, we skip ahead to after Jesus was born in chapter 2, verse 1. The Magi, an undetermined number of wise men, star-gazers, astrologers really, come to call first to King Herod, who is the historical reference point for this account. Based on all the intel from the Magi, way to go, Magi, King Herod calls for a mass genocide of all Bethlehemian baby boys two years and younger.

And why does Matthew tell this story this way? Well, because it's an intentional reference to which Old Testament figure? Yeah, Moses. These are not plants. But yes, Moses is correct. Moses. Matthew's just getting started with this. So, Joseph then has another dream. An angel of the Lord tells him to escape to Egypt. Then, after Herod, there Pharaoh-ly or kingly oppressor's death, Joseph has another dream, and an angel of the Lord tells him to return to Nazareth, delivering them out of Egypt and into the promised land, of which Nazareth resides.

So, do you hear any themes in this Matthew account? Major Moses vibes, like we just said, major man vibes, with all the patriarchs and wise men and all of those things. Quite a few. King vibes, King David, King Herod. Even he refers to Jesus as the King of the Jews when the Magi come to see him.

So, in general, a lot of Hebrew vibes. Definitely writing to a Jewish audience, writing to show Jesus as the Messiah, the coming King, like his ancestral father, King David, and to start his big presentation through his whole gospel, linking Jesus with the goat Hall of Famer, MVP, most valuable deliverer, Moses.

And thus, concludes the Matthew account. A round of applause for the Matthew account. And now let's have the Luke account. Shall we?

So, in Luke, it begins first with a prophecy that Elizabeth, Mary's female cousin, will have a baby in old age, which is a call back to Sarah, the matriarch of Israel. And this prophecy comes to the priest Zechariah, her husband, who, through his disbelief, is left speechless. Yes, the only patriarch mentioned here is silence.

Within 16 verses, then we get to the Mary perspective, which is a different perspective than the one we got in Matthew. So, picking up in Luke, chapter 1, verse 26. "In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent an angel, Gabriel, to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.

The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you.' Mary was greatly troubled at his word and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to this be?' Mary asked the angel, 'since I'm a virgin.' The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

The Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.'

'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.' Then the angel left her.

In a nutshell, the angel of the Lord visits Mary and says, 'You're going to have a baby.' She replies, 'Very impossible. Virgin.' The angel of the Lord says, 'Possible. Holy Spirit. Won't He do it?' And to settle that debate once and for all, Mary, did you know? Yes. The angel of the Lord just told her, yes, she knew.

Also, PS, your cousin Elizabeth, you know, that really old one, poor Elizabeth, is also pregnant. So, very Miss Mary visits her really, really old pregnant cousin, Elizabeth, and there's cousin love on two levels: both Mary and Elizabeth, and John the will-be Baptist, and Jesus the will-be Messiah. Blood relations through their mother's side. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and shouts, 'Blessed are you among women! Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord will fulfill His promises to her.'

Then Mary sings the Magnificat, which is another callback, this time, to Hannah, the mother of Samuel, the last judge and first prophet. The parallels between Mary's song in Luke 1:46-55 and Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2:2-10 are very strong. Many of those verses are line-for-line reiterations of one another. So again, for anyone that's in this time, they're catching these references, this one being to another significant matriarch in the Old Testament.

Mary then stays with Elizabeth for three more months. No wonder Joseph was worried. Elizabeth has her baby on the eighth day. Elizabeth, you know, the woman, names him the baby, which is not how things were done, but she names him John. And all the men whisper, 'I think you mispronounced Zechariah, you know, his father.' And she says, 'Did I stutter? His name is John.' They say, 'There's no one in your whole ancestry.com with that name.' And then they all turn to Zechariah, who

finds a tablet and writes on it, 'She said what she said,' and then that his name is John. His voice returns, and he's filled with the Holy Spirit, and he prophesies.

Meanwhile, back in Nazareth, Caesar Augustus orders a census. And while I have questions about this census, I'm not here to debate that today, this is Luke's telling of the story, and he cites this as the event that places Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem.

And then, since Luke is telling the story following a Mary perspective, we actually get a birth story in Luke, which we did not get in Matthew. So, picking up in Luke chapter 2, verse 6: "So it was that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered, and she brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no guest room for them upstairs."

Now, there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloth and lying in a manger.'

Then we get the great company of heavenly hosts singing Gloria in excelsis Deo after the final encore. And we have to assume there was a final encore. The shepherds left the 99 and found the one in Bethlehem. He was wrapped in swaddling cloth and lying in a manger, just as they had been told.

And eventually, we get a genealogy in Luke 2. I know you were all waiting for that. Those are always really popular, often people's favorite verses. And this one gives us 77 generations and leads all the way back to God Himself, listed as the father of Adam. And some speculate, and I find this beautiful, that Luke lists 77 generations specifically as a symbol and a reference or callback to the forgiveness of all mankind. Because, if you remember, Jesus instructed Peter not to forgive seven, but 77 times. All the way back to the very beginning.

Now again, I ask you, did you hear any themes in the Luke story? Major, major woman vibes, like very differently. You notice all these women, Elizabeth and Mary. Major matriarch vibes, with callbacks to Sarah and to Hannah.

But also, there are no expensive gifts for the King of the Jews, but instead a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Luke is writing to a broader audience, an audience beyond the borders of Israel, beyond the margins and out into the marginalized. Among the audience: the poor, the oppressed, the ostracized, the Samaritans, the Gentiles, and the women. So many women.



And again, where Matthew traces the genealogy to Abraham, the father of Israel, Luke traces it all the way to God, the Father of all. And so, you may be thinking, as you often do in the middle of my sermons, 'I feel like I write this sentence every time. So, what? Who cares? What does any of this matter?'

Well, for starters, it demonstrates the beauty of diversity. Here we see the Bible saying more than one thing. In fact, we see it saying two very distinctly different things, and not appearing to have any conflict with that at all.

So, is the nativity story one for the chosen sons of Abraham, the people of Israel, told through the experience of privileged patriarchs, priests, and kings, elevating the Messiah to a high and holy place? Or is it the story of the Nativity, the story of muted men and women taking center stage with callbacks to great, and did I mention very old, when they became matriarchs of the faith, those who were familiar with living on the barren fringe?

Yes. So, is it a story about magi who hold court with kings and bring pricey presents to a child they call the King of the Jews? Or is it the story of lowly shepherds and humble herders, the outcasts of society on the outskirts of town watching their flocks by night, that receive an angelic invitation to a baby wrapped in humble swaddling cloths and laid in an animal feeding trough?

Yes.

Do you see? While we have probably all understood this as one story for all or most of our lives, if we actually read the texts as they are written in the Bible, we get two wildly different stories. And why do we think that is? The answer is quite simple: because two different people wrote them. Matthew is not Luke, and Luke is not Matthew. And their differences don't stop there. Sure, they share 67% of their content, but how they portray that content, and Jesus Himself, is very different.

For Matthew, Jesus was the Messiah that came in the footsteps of Moses to free the people of Israel from oppression. For Luke, Jesus was the divine man that came to get messy in the margins and love those the world had abandoned, excluded, and overlooked. A friend of sinners. Can you see that in his text and in his telling of the nativity story?

And I believe they both got it right. To ask, 'Was He holy or was He humble?' is to miss the mark. Because, again, the answer is yes. Jesus was not and is not one thing, and He didn't have one thing to say, and neither does the Bible that we hold so dearly. And that diversity does not dilute it. On the contrary, it enriches it.

When we see it passing through people, when we see it become native to our world, as it passes into humanity, into flesh itself, we see its nativity. It becomes nearer to us, and I dare say, dear to us, if we allow it. The light of God passes through every storyteller as through a different facet of a beautiful gemstone, refracting the

experience of God in as many unique ways as it has authors. It says many things, because God speaks to and through so many different people.

So, I leave you with this. As we traveled home from Thanksgiving a mere 15 days ago, we listened to one of my favorite podcasts, *Hidden Brain* by Shankar Vedantam. This podcast that week was called *The Power of Family Stories*. His guest, psychologist Robin Fausci, a Jewish psychologist at Emory University, studies family stories. She's found that intergenerational storytelling has a wide range of psychological benefits that range from increased resilience to higher self-esteem. And this got me thinking about our story, the family of God.

Shankar asks Robin, 'You and your colleague Marshall Duke have theorized that there are three types of family stories, and that one of these three is most predictive of positive outcomes in life. What are these three types of stories?'

Robin shares that they are ascending, descending, and oscillating. These are not about particular stories; it's more about the shape of the whole family saga. So, this is really about the family history. In ascending stories, in some sense, it's the American dream. You know, we came with nothing, we worked hard, and we succeeded. Ta-da!

Descending stories? Things are bad. They only ever get worse. Things are never going to get better. Oscillating? Life happens, and we have our highs and lows. But oscillating stories ultimately portray that the good times and the bad times are both parts of life. It's not all good. It's not all bad. Things go up, things go down. But in the end, we make it through.

And then Robin shares the great revelation that this is not just true of people's family histories, but that it's also true of the way people interact with the grander, divine family narrative. Some people see the family of God as mostly ascending or mostly descending. Things are always getting better, or things are never going to get better. And some of us see the oscillating narrative, seeing it as ups and downs, but ultimately, God's work is both.

Then Shankar asked a question that Robin had not thought about. He said, 'Is it possible that the most positive version of these three narratives is a story that contains all three?' That a healthy family story contains all three elements, ascending, descending, and oscillating? She said yes, that would be the best of all the family stories. And that makes sense to me. Because this story is not all good, and it's not all bad. Jesus entered the world at a time when it seemed that God was silent. He entered in as one of the most marginalized and vulnerable, with threats against His life, very early on, and the story of Christmas ends with a death on a cross. But from that point onward, life goes on. He rose again, and with Him, a whole new kingdom emerges.

I think that's the kind of family story we all get to participate in. I believe that what happened on that first Christmas is not just for Mary or Joseph or even the shepherds, but it's a story of God's love for all of us. Every part of it. Whether it's ascending or descending or oscillating, this is our family story too.

The nativity story, just like life, is not always perfect. But Jesus came for us, in the highs, in the lows, and in the messy middle. And that's why we get to celebrate today!