



351: The Heartbeat of Christian Hope

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 351. This is a podcast about making decisions, but it's also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful but distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing. I'm an author, a spiritual director, and an occasional workshop leader. I live in North Carolina with my family and through my work I've helped thousands of spiritually thoughtful people overcome decision fatigue so that they can discern their next right thing in faith, work and life.

Today I'm sharing a story of a time a few months back where I was asked a question and I didn't have a great answer. I'm still not sure my answer is great today, but it's done good work for me and in me to reflect on the recent election, our walk of faith and the heartbeat of Christian hope. Listen in.

A few years ago I began to research my family history, and by research I mean I finally spent some time in that Ancestry.com account that I'd been paying for and I learned a lot of things I didn't know, like how my mother's father enlisted in the military on December 1st, 1941, one week before the attack on Pearl Harbor and the US involvement in World War II. I don't know what he was thinking, what he was afraid of or how he felt about the enlistment, but I do know the date and that he weighed 136 pounds. I attended his funeral in 2002 and remember him well, but I only know him as my grandpa, of course, not as a young man, a young father or a soldier.

There were other interesting facts that I learned in my research, things that tell a story through a glass darkly bits and pieces, but not the whole picture. At some point I learned the name of a small town in England that at least one family member was born in, but I can't find the record now and I would need to take more time to track it down and probably upgrade my membership.

And so my connection to my own family history is thinner than I would like and I carry some sadness and even a little bit of guilt with me about that as I get older. While I can easily go back and name my grandparents, my great-grandparents on both my mother's and my father's side, the names beyond that, at least if I'm trying to name all of them, they're foggy at best and at worst, they're unknown. Still, I'm aware of the privilege it is to have records at

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all, even if I haven't taken full time to explore them. At any given moment, it seems like things will always be the way they are now. My fourth and fifth grandmothers thought so too back when they were living.

Why all this today? Well, on the day after the election back in November, I was recording an interview for another podcast and it was just a few hours after the results had been announced, but the podcast episode we were recording at that time would not be released until the week of the inauguration, which is of course this week. So knowing the timing of the release of the episode, the host at the time ask me something to the effect of what would you say to people who may feel disillusioned or lack hope as we head into life under a new administration? She was referring of course to the fact that while 49.9% of the population voted for the winner, that still left 48.4% of the country whose candidate did not win and who carry grief, fear, anger, and uncertainty about the next four years.

It was a perfectly appropriate question, but I wish I would've been more honest in my response because in a weak attempt to project myself into the future, not knowing what was going to happen between that day, the day after the election, and having only known of our new presidential pick for about five hours at the time and not knowing what was going to happen between then and now, I rambled, I think, and I spitballed and I didn't really have anything helpful to say. What I said, I think, was probably a series of half thoughts about doing our next right thing, which of course I believe in. Maybe I said um a lot. I probably leaned on my fallback vocal tick, which is to begin every sentence with I think that, which is the worst.

What I wish I had said, what I probably should have said at that time was this. That is a very good question. I have no idea how to answer it yet. Well, after that interview, I reflected on what I wish I could have said at that time, specifically as it relates to my faith. Here are some of the things that emerged.

When God arrived in small form among the crowded town of Bethlehem, most people weren't paying attention, but there he was under the care of Mary and Joseph growing every day in slow motion as babies have done since the beginning of time. Eat, sleep, cry, smile, discover, absorb, repeat. Peace grew even as the world was indifferent to it. The presence of Christ didn't take away the harm of the empire, but it lit the way for a new path, a better option, the inauguration of a kingdom that would have no end.

The further back into history we peer the more frozen in time real people seem to become their choices written off as inevitable, even to the point of being uninteresting or unimportant, but these things were not fixed stories while people were living them. Only after the fact did they become distant and still. Mary's choice to say yes to God is one that happened in a real moment in time and her body became a thin place between heaven and earth. Herod's choice to give into his jealousy and insecurity led to the murder of every baby boy under age two, after the Magi never returned to tell him where to find the baby Jesus. The Magi's choice to return home a different way. After meeting the newborn king gave Mary and Joseph time to escape Herod's retribution, Joseph's choice to heed the warning

that was in a dream, like an actual dream to flee Egypt. When he heard that, when he saw that, when he had that sense, he didn't write it off as ridiculous or an over-response, that ultimately saved the life of their baby.

All people standing at the crossroads of their circumstances and their feelings about them all tasked with answering the question, what will I do now that I know? One of the books I read and loved last year was Kelley Nikondeha's *The First Advent in Palestine*, I've quoted it here several times. Well, in it she makes a compelling observation about how the knowledge of a massacre may have impacted Jesus as he grew older. She writes this, "As I read Matthew's narrative I was struck to notice for the first time that we don't hear of Jesus ever returning to Bethlehem, he travels to nearby Jerusalem but not to the ancestral home of his father. In a sense, this feels like the one place he didn't visit, which suggests intention. I continue to wonder if it was due to the guilt of the massacre in his name that he carried into his adult life." She writes that on page 151 of her book, if you want to look it up.

But I was struck by this because we imagine Jesus as one who made perfect choices and never sinned, which of course is true. But we don't imagine his choices to be motivated or influenced by guilt or grief or avoidance or pain. But how could they not have been if he was fully human as well as divine? In the moment, the real lives of Jesus and Mary and Joseph were fluid and responsive, joyful and sad, filled with decisions and oppression and second-guessing and grief. As they were, so we are now. We are not puppets on a cosmic string. We are people with choices and agency, emotion and intellect, integrity, compassion and resolve.

And so the heart of Christian hope is not that God is in control, which of course I guess is true, but also starts to seem cruel quickly and can be a convenient way to bypass responsibility, participation, and agency. The concept of control is not one I'm drawn to in a time of need. The heart, the heartbeat of Christian hope is that God is in companionship with us. We are an accompanied people, a beloved community. In the middle of whatever heartbreak, questions, complexity or regret we may be carrying we're people who aren't left alone in it.

As I reflect on the life of Christ, I think about how Joseph, the named earthly father of Jesus doesn't show up in the narrative of Jesus later in life in any of the gospel accounts. Back to Kelley's book where she points this out, she writes, "For at least part of his childhood, Jesus grew up without Joseph in a landscape littered with reminders of men lost, his own father, likely among them. Even he didn't escape the heartbreak or the haunting presence of empire. This is incarnation, not inhabiting a body of privilege exempt from poverty and violence, but living in a body thick with the trauma common to most in Galilee and Judea. God incarnated this pain in his own human body. It became part of his human experience and is now woven into God's eternal memory." Again, those are Kelley Nikondeha's words in *The First Advent in Palestine*.

And I have to say, I've never considered the fact really that Joseph may have died at the hand

of violence. I've never considered how that might impact his family, including Jesus. My family tree didn't stop when my grandfather enlisted in the army, a day that I can only imagine was filled with fear, questions, what nows. But still he left something behind even though he only had a grammar school education, even though he enlisted in the army right before the US entered World War II, even though all signs maybe at that time pointed to despair. I would like to leave something behind too.

And so if that podcast host were to ask me that same question now, I'm honestly not sure I would have any better answer to the question about what to say to those of us who feel anxiety or dread about the next four years. But as I said, I do think the question opened the door for good reflection. Even if I don't have good closure or great answers or clear next steps. I would like to imagine that one day my great-great-grandchildren might research the archives to learn about me something that shouldn't be too difficult on Beyoncé's internet. But what I would love to know that they would find is a legacy of something that looks like hope, something that hangs on and hangs in, a life that keeps on going.

We are people who are becoming. We are people who are remembered. We are people who are learning how to take care of ourselves and each other. We are people who light candles and drive carpool and pray as we fall asleep. We are people who have good work to do. I wonder what is your next right thing?

Thanks for listening to episode 351 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of remembering that God is with us can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while it's true, this is a podcast about making decisions, the bigger truth is our daily decisions are making our lives. As always, you can find me on Instagram at Emily P. Freeman or online at Emilypfreeman.com where you can find a transcript of this and every episode. A thanks to Ashley Sherlock for doing our show notes and keeping us organized, and to the team at Unmutable for editing our sound. If you like what you hear, it would mean so much to me to have you rate and review the podcast on Apple Podcasts. You don't have to say much, just a sentence about what you like or find helpful here. It would mean a lot to me.

In closing, a prayer from the Celtic Daily Prayer Book. "Circle me, Lord. Keep protection near and danger afar. Circle me, Lord. Keep light near and darkness afar. Circle me, Lord. Keep peace within. Keep evil out. The peace of all peace be mine this night. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Amen. Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.