

Present Over Perfect

Here we are again, Christmastime.

I'm certainly not the first to point out the irony that it's during Christmastime that we find ourselves most tempted to abandon Christlikeness in favor of overspending, overdoing, and overconsuming, but I find it to be true: the season that centers around the silent, holy night; the simple baby; and the star very quickly becomes the season in which we over-everything--overspend, overeat, overindulge, overcommit, all in the name of celebration.

I fall into it every year, and this particular year, I was falling even a little bit deeper than in previous years because we had a newborn; because my husband was involved in the Christmas services at our church, which meant he was out almost every night in December for rehearsals and programs; and because I had agreed to speak at several events in Atlanta and Dallas, even though it meant taking a nine-week-old with me.

Our week was full to bursting with family parties and gatherings with friends, preschool Christmas programs and coffee dates with out-of-town friends just here for the holidays. Our gifts were mostly purchased but mostly not wrapped, and our laundry situation, after a busy weekend, was dire.

The stress and chaos were on the rise, and something had to change or I'd miss the loveliness of the season entirely. I stopped myself in the middle of it all--the trips, the wrapping, the cookies, the expectations--and I asked for help. I prayed for new eyes to see, for a way outside myself and my tense, swirling chaos. As I slowed down and listened, three words laid themselves on my worn-out spirit like a blanket: *present over perfect*.

I can show up with my perfectly wrapped grab bag gift and my perfectly baked cookies...and my perfectly resentful and frazzled self, ready to snap at the first family member who looks at me wrong. Or I can choose to rest my body and nourish my spirit, knowing that taking a grounded, present self to each holiday gathering is more important than the gifts I bring.

And so I determined to add nothing to the to-do list. I abandoned the well-intentioned but time-consuming projects. And in their place I'm making rest

and space priorities, so that what I offer to my family is more than a brittle mask over a wound-up and depleted soul. My intention for this season is *present over perfect*.

I've been given opportunity after opportunity to live this out. A new friend invited me to a cookie exchange on the only night my husband would be home until Christmas. We didn't have plans, per se, but I had a sense we needed to be home together. And so I said no, which was hard for me, and our little family did approximately nothing, which was exactly what we needed.

I cohosted a party, and one of the things I brought was frozen meatballs. I was planning, of course, to make them from scratch. But it was too much for me, too much time and energy I don't have at this time of year.

And, of course, no one cared. That's the lesson in this for people like me who sometimes get wound up about doing things perfectly: 90 percent of the people in your life won't know the difference between, say, fresh and frozen, or handmade and store-bought, and the 10 percent who do notice are just as stressed-out as you are, and your willingness to choose simplicity just might set them free to do the same.

One thing's for sure: if you decide to be courageous and sane, if you decide not to overspend or overcommit or overschedule, the healthy people in your life will respect those choices. And the unhealthy people in your life will freak out, because you're making a healthy choice they're not currently free to make. Don't for one second let that stop you.

Either I can be here, fully here, my imperfect, messy, tired but wholly present self, or I can miss it--this moment, this conversation, this time around the table, whatever it is--because I'm trying, and failing, to be perfect, keep the house perfect, make the meal perfect, ensure the gift is perfect. But this season I'm not trying to be perfect. I'm just trying to show up, every time, with honesty and attentiveness.

The irony, of course, must not be lost on us: a season that is, at its heart, a love story--a story about faith and fragility, angels, a baby, a star--that sweet, simply beautiful story gets lost so easily in a jarring, toxic tangle of sugar and shopping bags and rushing and parking lots and expectations.

In our lowest, most fragmented moments, we feel out of control--controlled, in fact, by expectations and to-do lists and commitments and traditions. It's that time of year, we shrug, when things get a little crazy. No avoiding it.

But that's not true. And that's shifting the blame. We have, each one of us, been entrusted with one life, made up of days and hours and minutes. We're spending them according to our values, whether or not we admit it.

When things are too crazy, the only voices I hear are the voices of fear and shame. I stop being able to hear the voice of God, the voice of rest, the voice of hope and healing and restoration, the voice that gives new life to dry old bones. And instead I hear that old song I've heard all my life: *You're not good enough. You're not good enough.*

But that voice is a lie. And it's a terrible guide. When I listen to it, I burn the candle at both ends and try to light the middle while I'm at it. The voice of God invites us to full, whole living--to rest, to abundance, to enough. To say no. To say no more. To say I'm going to choose to live wholly and completely in the present, even though this ragged, run-down person I am right now is so far from perfect.

Let's be courageous in these days. Let's choose love and rest and grace. Let's use our minutes and hours to create memories with the people we love instead of dragging them on one more errand or shushing them while we accomplish one more seemingly necessary thing. Let's honor the story--the silent night, the angels, the miracle child, the simple birth, with each choice that we make.

My prayer is that we'll find ourselves drawn closer and closer to the heart of the story, the beautiful, beating heart of it all, that the chaos around us and within us will recede, and the most important things will be clear and lovely at every turn. I pray that we'll understand the transforming power that lies in saying no, because it's an act of faith, a tangible demonstration of the belief that you are so much more than what you do. I pray that we'll live with intention, hope and love in this wild season and in every season, and that the God who loves us will bring new life to our worn-out hearts this year and every year, that we'll live, truly and deeply, in the present, instead of waiting, waiting, waiting for perfect.

From "Bread and Wine" by Shauna Niequist