

Help me, Baby Jesus—you're my only hope!

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December 15, 2014

A few recent conversations have gotten me to thinking about the large Load of Expectations people carry around with them this season. It's a bit crazy making, really.

There's the idea that I will purchase The Perfect Gift for a someone in my life, and she will love it so much.

That our gathering (family or friends, co-workers, girlfriends, whomever) will be perfect, the stuff of catalog stock photos. Everyone will say it was the best holiday party ever.

That I will preach the perfect Christmas Eve sermon or the church service I attend will renew my faith/inspire me to sell all my goods and give to the poor/make everything that is wrong in my life or the world right.

That the dinner I prepare will make the judges on *Top Chef* cry with jealousy.

You get the picture. We need to tone it down because

- You probably cannot afford the perfect gift or there is no way you have time to find the perfect gift. It is the giving that is important here, and if the recipient of your present doesn't know that, it's on them and not on you.
- Your gathering will not perfect. Your family will likely not all get along, and someone might be sullen and someone might drink too much and not in the good way and someone will be disappointed. Your friends might cancel at the last moment because their kid is throwing up or because they can't do one more thing.
- Something will go wrong with your dinner—the turkey might be overcooked (which, admittedly, is better than being undercooked). The person in charge of the wine might bring something dreadful. The souffle might fall.

So let me ask, Why are we doing all of this?

If you are a religious person, particularly a religious person who identifies with the Jesus people, you are doing this for Jesus and not for anyone else. So if you think

Jesus will be disappointed with you because you did not give your father-in-law the matching tie and pocket square that he wanted, you are wrong. Jesus does not care about the presents you give or receive. The Wise Men thing? About honoring a king, not about making Mary and Joseph happy that the neighbors did the right thing.

If you are not a religious person, there could be many reasons you are doing this. I am a religious person and always have been, so I'm not entirely sure. But you might be joining in on all the holiday stuff because the sun sets too early and rises too late in this season and you need to add a little cheer to the gray dreary days. You may be doing the holiday thing because you have time off from work and everyone else is doing it. You may be doing it because you think it adds some good to a world that's hurting.

Here is what I know: Some people will be disappointed no matter what. They have unrealistic expectations of you, or of the church, or of this season. You are not responsible for their disappointment.

And some people will be sad or depressed in this season no matter how much cheer and twinkly lights surround them. They have good reason to be sad. They're not getting enough vitamin D this time of year. This is their first Christmas without their beloved and, frankly, it sucks. They are staring down cancer or ALS and wondering if this December is their last. Their family won't fight because their family won't be together, for whatever reason.

The world is a mess and our country is a mess and that's always been the case. There has never been a time when everything was okay. Everything will not be okay this Christmas, and to expect that it will be is to set yourself up for disappointment. But that doesn't mean there can't be some good in the midst of the sad. That doesn't mean there can't be some hope in the midst of all that is dreary and awful.

For some of us, Baby Jesus is our only hope—the hope that God did not give up on the world when it was a mess but instead came to the world because it was a mess in order to start getting it cleaned up a little. If you're doing all this because you're a religious person, you might want to keep that in mind.

I suppose others find hope in other places—in the potential of good in the human heart, in that long arc of history that bends every so slowly toward justice, hope that there have been cures and ceasefires and confessions and pardons and there will be again.

Maybe [Leonard Cohen](#) said it best:

*Ring the bells that can still ring.*

*Forget your perfect offering.*

*There is a crack in everything.*

*That's how the light gets in.*

Originally posted at [Hold Fast to What Is Good](#)