

An Uncertain World at Christmas

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Christmas and the whole holiday season bring the expectation of joy, hope, thanksgiving, and the excitement of celebrations with friends and family. As Christians serving the living Christ, serving others, and being a witness to our local community and extended families, there is an even higher expectation that we be an example of joy, hope, and thanksgiving, especially during this time of year. But how do we do this during a pandemic, political crises in our passport countries and countries of residence, when funds for projects are being questioned or cut, when violence is common, and residency permits are being denied? We are all living in a world of uncertainty. I am defining uncertainty as living in between. Living in between what used to be normal and what the new normal may be, between the way I used to be able to do my ministry and what it will be in the future, and between the individual freedoms I used to experience, the lock downs/restrictions I am currently experiencing, and the hope of renewed freedom for travel, not wearing a mask, or having to maintain social distance in the future.

Living in between inflicts all of us with an understandable feeling of vulnerability. When we feel vulnerable for our physical, emotional, economic, or relational safety, it results in fear. Our normal response is commonly one of either defensiveness or anger and is often referred to as the flight or fight syndrome. Flight means to either pull further inward or to try to ignore the feelings of vulnerability, sadness, and grief cognitively by putting on a happy face that doesn't really reflect the reality of my life. Fight means trying to defeat the feeling of vulnerability and fear by working harder, trying harder to control my feelings, or getting angry.

While we all experience these feelings at various hard times in our lives, the holidays can intensify the sense of uncertainty or can bring back painful memories to add to the challenges of uncertainty. Everyone has some level of anxiety around the holidays. For better or for worse, we are all connected to our families in ways that have shaped our identity and ways of responding to fear or emotional pain. And we all have had tragic experiences with great loss and grief.

How we deal with uncertainty and disappointment is key to maintaining our spiritual, emotional, and relational health. Following are some suggestions that may help us all as we seek to deal well with the uncertain stress of the holidays added on to the uncertainties of the impact of the global pandemic and uncertain political climate in many of our countries.

Engage in curiosity. When you are tempted to fight (attack) or flight (withdraw), take the risk of being vulnerable and curious about what God is up to. Ask yourself, "What is the Holy Spirit trying to say to me? What can I learn about myself and how God sees me in this situation? What makes Christmas most meaningful to me and those closest to me, and how can I help make that still happen in some way in the midst of these circumstances?"

Focus first on acceptance. Accept that there are events that you cannot control. Isaiah 55:8 reminds us: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.”

Acceptance allows us to switch focus to living well within the circumstances we find ourselves instead of using our energy bemoaning them or trying to change something that is not in our power to change.

Acknowledge and process your emotions. Owning the natural emotions that we feel (fear, anxiety or anger to name a few) in the midst of the situation allows them to inform us but not keep us stuck. God created emotions as a type of thermometer to inform us about what we need to pay attention to. Naming the feeling and expressing it to God and someone you trust helps you process it and then understand better the cause of it. As Psalm 62:8 says, “Trust in Him at all times; you people, pour out your heart before Him; God is a shelter for us.” Pouring out our emotions is NOT the antithesis of trust in God. He tells us to do both simultaneously. He wants us to share our feelings with Him; he does not judge us for doing so. The large book of Psalms in our Bible underlies this truth.

Reframe your expectations. At the same time, it is important to work through past grievances, as much as it is up to us, with those we will be with during the holidays. Rather than overthinking all the ways that this will likely be a disaster, we can use each concern to make a plan to make it better this time. The truism to “focus on today” with God, yourself, and others provides us the energy and focus to actually impact the present in positive ways. Reminding ourselves as often as needed, “This is the day the Lord has made,” is a powerful reframing tool when we find ourselves drawn back into the fight or flight syndrome.

Breathe. When we feel nervous or anxious, our bodies respond in ways that make the experience worse and before we know it, we may find ourselves in a full-blown panic. Slow down your negative thoughts by focusing on your breathing, something that you can bring back into control unobtrusively and quickly. If you are a person more prone to anxiety or worry, prepare yourself for the possibility of anxious moments by downloading a song, a scripture, or a breathing exercise to use in these instances. (<https://christianmindfulness.co.uk/>) They are simple, powerful tools to help regain control of racing thoughts or overwhelming feelings.

Overcome unrealistic expectations. The holidays cannot always be what we remember from the past. People and circumstances change, and as a result, how we celebrate our holidays will need to change to take in these new realities in a constructive manner. The holiday season is often idealized, which can let fantasy hijack our expectations and lead to disappointment when the day doesn’t live up to what we had envisioned. However, when we realistically assess our current possibilities, we then have the ability to create something positive in the midst of the challenging circumstances or relationships. You might be surprised by the outcome.

Set realistic boundaries. When there are unhealthy relationships, we still have the power to impact the interaction in a healthy way. This starts with a realistic assessment of our own and others’ expectations of the interaction from past experiences and the effect this has had on everyone involved. It is important to clarify what others’ expectations are and to state your

own. The next step is to set clear boundaries for yourself around what you can and cannot do going forward. A helpful rule of thumb is to think about what changes/controls/boundaries you can establish to make the interaction as positive as possible. Often this means limiting it in time, scope, or activities engaged in together. If you are struggling with issues related to a difficult person, for example, calmly share the set amount of time you will be spending with them, where and how you are available to get together, and plan an activity that has a greater likelihood of being positive. Be respectful but clear about your choices and stick with the plan, even in the face of cajoling, manipulation, or blame.

Honor your losses. It can be helpful to have a ritual to honor and remember loved ones that have died during the last year. Some find it helpful to light a candle, place a commemorative ornament, write out a prayer, or write about your grief in a journal.

Be Kind to Yourself. Reminder to be good to yourself; give yourself permission to slow down and to live within your emotional, physical, cognitive, and relational means. Pay attention to healthy life choices that include exercise, sleep, hydration, healthy eating, and a good balance of time with others and time alone. When we are kind to ourselves, it makes it easier to be kind to others – even that relative that drives you crazy!

How to Encourage Someone Who is Struggling during the Holidays

Part of living well in our families, team, and community is to understand that there are many ways the holidays can be stressful for others, even if it is a good holiday season for us personally. Holidays bring natural reminders of life events, both happy and sad. The season is a reminder that a loved one who has died will not be present or will not call this year. It is also a reminder of tragic events that a person has experienced, especially if it occurred during this time of year or limits one's type of involvement this year for the first time due to an accident, or health or cognitive decline. It can also be a reminder of one's own childhood experiences, both positive and negative: of being shuffled between divorced parents and relatives, of unhappy family times, or disappointments in life. One negative remark or action can undo many positive ones, leaving us vulnerable to emotional injuries from holidays past. It can also be a reminder of spending another Christmas being single and alone, or not being able to have a child or the loss of a child while others are enjoying close relationships and family times. Because of the pandemic it may be having to remain separated from people physically so needing to come up with different, creative ways to connect and celebrate together from a distance. When others are hurting during the special holiday time, it can be one of the greatest opportunities for caring and connection we may have with them. This may provide our greatest impact this Christmas season. Who is that vulnerable person God has placed in your life? What is one realistic, manageable way you can include or encourage them this season?

The greatest antidote to vulnerability is connection with others. We were created for connection with God and each other through our relationships. Here are the 3 A's for creating connection during this time:

1. Ask what the holidays mean to the other person. Actively listen to the person's description of past experiences of the holidays and what it reminds them of.
2. Accept the person's feelings and perspective on the holidays as being different from yours and express understanding and empathy for their experience and feelings.
3. Assure the person of your support, care and availability.

Expressing this kind of caring and loving connection provides safety, security, and significance that is reflective of God's love. This not only reduces fear but also may open the door one step further to faith or restoring of a faith in God as the person experiences being really known and loved in the midst of the uncertainty.

Whether you're a person who struggles during the holidays or someone who is trying to assist someone who is struggling, remember during these uncertain times that there was a young couple who also had to deal with a lot of uncertainties. They had to leave the place they called home because of a government order. Their travel was unpredictable and difficult, and they didn't know where they were going to stay upon arrival. When they got to their destination all the predictable places to stay were not available and the place they finally found was not what they expected. It was all very uncomfortable, distressing, and worrisome for a husband and pregnant wife about to deliver their first child. Despite these uncertainties God not only met their needs but blessed them incredibly. He then used them mightily to break through with hope for a weary world with the birth of a child to offer forgiveness and a personal relationship with God for anyone in the world who would only believe. May this be an encouragement to you that in spite of your circumstances this holiday season, He is there with you, His provision will be enough, and if you ask Him and step out toward others, He will use you in ways you couldn't predict or imagine. He is the one certainty in this time of many uncertainties!

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