



## “Some Assembly Required”

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*December 31, 2017*

*Luke 2:25-40*

Those of you who have experienced Christmas with young children know that there are three words which strike fear into the hearts of parents on Christmas Eve. They sound innocent enough, these three simple words, but they can bring on cold sweats and inspire nightmares on the night before Christmas. What are these three words that cause us to mumble and moan and to shout and swear? **SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED.**

As a pastor, I work every Christmas Eve and so I haven't had the privilege of putting together complicated toys late at night. But Amanda... oh, she has wrestled with those dreaded words, **SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED.** It was Christmas Eve, not too many years ago, when she engaged in fierce, hand-to-hand combat with a bike for Annaleigh. It came in a large, nondescript box and it was meant to be Annaleigh's big present that year. We could see her flying like the wind, riding up and down the driveway on her brand-new bike.

So, at about midnight that night, after we had returned home from the 10:30 Christmas Eve worship service at our church in Atlanta and after our girls were fast asleep, Amanda pulled the big, nondescript box from its hiding place and saw something that we hadn't noticed until right then. How did we miss those words? They were right there on the side of the box, in big bold letters, those three dreaded words: **SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED.** And Amanda knew she was in big trouble.

Amanda tentatively opened the box and peeked cautiously inside. The bike's frame looked like it would be simple enough to put together. But at the bottom of the box were two large plastic bags. And those bags were filled with screws and washers and nuts and bolts and God only knows what else. The manufacturer had thoughtfully provided Amanda with what felt like a thousand parts to put together. Now see, Amanda and I are probably the least handy people you will ever find. Our skills are more centered in the humanities rather than engineering. Amanda knew she was in for a long night. It was so much more than **SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED.**

In a perfect world, all would be ok just as long as Amanda followed the directions. But, since we frustratingly live in a world where nothing is perfect, one of two things usually happens in these cases, at least it does to Amanda and me. Either we end up with parts left over that don't seem to fit anywhere and we hope and pray that a bike tire doesn't just pop off when Annaleigh is riding it, or at least one of the thousand parts that were supposed to be in that box doesn't make it into the bag of screws, washers, nuts, and bolts, regardless of the assurance given by quality control inspector number 10. It's just part of the Christmas Eve joy, I guess. God has put Christmas Eve toys and for that matter, IKEA furniture, on this earth to test our tempers, our resourcefulness, and sometimes our religion.

Well, two hours later, at 2 o'clock in the morning, the job was finally done. The thousand screws, washers, nuts, and bolts which once lay scattered across our living room floor were joined with pieces scrounged from our junk drawers and toolboxes, along with a good bit of chewing gum, duct tape, and hefty prayers. And the finished product looked ALMOST like the picture on the side of the box. Almost. And after it all I heard from Amanda that the words SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED was the most gut-wrenching phrase of the Christmas season.

Interestingly enough, when Amanda took that bike to friend's house to let the girls ride their bikes and scooters around the neighborhood, the dad at the house, who was an avid cyclist, informed Amanda that the seat was on wrong and that the front wheel of the bike was actually on the back and the back wheel was on the front. He teased her mercilessly for her lack of bike assembly skills and said we were lucky Annaleigh hadn't wrecked on her maiden ride. SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED can be hard words to live by.

It seems like, as we move into 2018, that our lives feel broken, out of sorts, and missing some important pieces. Many of us have lost loved ones this year, we have had major health problems, and we couldn't make the month last long enough to pay our bills. Others of us have felt the sting of marginalization, injustice, and anger. Our lives feel anything but "put together" as we enter this new year. And it doesn't help that Christmas is now over. All of the presents have been unwrapped, the trees are coming down, the lights are being packed away, the decorations are being stored for another year, and the nativity scenes are being put back in their boxes because Jesus is now born and the anticipation is over. With the exhaustion of childbirth still washing over us, the hard work of growing up and living like a child of God is now barreling down on us like the countdown on New Year's Eve.

But, I think it is important for us to realize that we are still in the Christmas season, that the magi have yet to bring their gifts to the young Christ-child. Christmas isn't over. And for me, I feel that the Christmas story has just begun. Jesus Christ is born! The Word has become flesh, and now lives and dwells among us! The long-awaited, much-anticipated Messiah, Emmanuel, God with us, is here! And now that he's here, what difference will the coming of Christ make in our lives? Is anything different than it was before? Or are we eager for things to go back to normal? We seem to be content to linger and dawdle in the good feelings of the Christmas story and the baby Jesus, while ignoring the demands that a grown-up Jesus places on our lives. We might see the image of a perfect Christian life pictured on the side of manger filled with hay, but now that the nativity is packed away, the real work happens as our dedication to live purposeful Christian lives is accompanied by instructions that say **SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED**. We have work to do this year in order to make sure all lives and all hearts are treated fairly, lovingly, and with the spirit of justice and hope. We have work to do to dedicate our lives to the mission of God in the world. There will be **SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED** as we move into a new year.

The Gospel lesson for today focused on the days right after the birth of Jesus, the days after pure joy had come into the world. The excitement was dwindling and there was work to be done to follow the rites and rituals of Jewish law. In this reading from the Gospel of Luke, we see that the life and love of Jesus didn't end at his birth, in a cattle cave, in a rickety old manger filled with straw. No, the Word was made flesh and the hard work had just begun. We see that Mary and Joseph followed the Jewish rituals of that time and dedicated their child in the temple. In fact, it reminds me of the baby dedications we do at Royal Lane. We bring our newly born children into this place, with these people, to make a promise to them that we will dedicate our lives to guiding and growing them in the love of God and the leading of Christ.

We see in Luke 2:21, right after the classic Christmas story we always hear at Christmas Eve and then leading into our text for today, that "On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived." Naming was important to the Jewish people and it is important to us today. That is one of the reasons when I participate in the dedication of babies that I like to explain and explore the significance of their names, how they got their name, and what their names mean. When we are born, we are no longer simply ideas, hopes, or dreams. We have lives and we have

a purpose. We are called to live beyond our births, into what God has promised for us. And it is important to realize that the Christmas story doesn't end with Jesus's birth. He was given a name. The Christ-child was given a name, Jesus, which means salvation. In order for Jesus to live into his name, a lot of work had to be done. There was a long, laboring road of love for Jesus to get to the cross. Jesus's life had a lot of assembly yet required to get him to that ultimate salvific event.

After Jesus's circumcision and naming, forty days after his birth, Mary and Joseph then brought their baby to the temple, according to Levitical law, so that he could be dedicated to God. At this time of dedication and consecration they encountered the priest, Simeon and the prophet, Anna. These two watchers had waited their whole lives for the coming of the Messiah. The scripture says that Simeon was a righteous and devout man. The Lord had revealed to him that he would not die before he saw the Messiah in the flesh. When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus into the temple, Simeon was overwhelmed. He ran over and took the child up into his arms, looked toward the heavens and prayed, "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, your Jesus, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

And I'm sure a shudder went through Mary when Simeon spoke these words. What could Simeon mean with the phrase, "A sword will pierce through your own soul also?" Well, we know, don't we? We know what Jesus's name, salvation, meant for him. We know that Jesus's life would not be easy and that the journey to the cross had instructions which read **SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED**. The way to the cross would take hard work and would pierce through our souls.

For all of us, just as life gets back to normal after Christmas, we realize that the way to healing often feels tedious, the way to justice often feels out of reach, the way to joy often feels grief-filled, and the way to salvation often feels as if it is in the shadow of the cross. And this might be how Simeon felt. As Simeon held Jesus and dedicated Jesus, he announced that there was a change in plans. Instead of the Messiah coming swiftly, ushering in a whole new age where all of a sudden everything was perfect, he knew, that for a while, things were going to be pretty much the same as they had always been and the road to salvation would be uneventful.

And, you too have probably already noticed the let-down of post-Christmas life. Many of us woke up on December 26, the day after Christmas, and had to go back

to work, we had to pay the bills, we had to take out the bags of trash filled with wrapping paper and leftovers. We had to experience our grief yet again. The world, on December 26, wasn't perfect. We woke up and the pain was still there. We woke up and the miracle hadn't happened. We woke up and browsed the news, that day after Christmas, and the world was the same. Nothing, really, had changed.

But for me, the dedication of Jesus at the temple after his birth, revealed that there was indeed a change of plans. Instead of ushering in a new age or taking charge by force and violence, which is what almost everybody expected to happen when the Messiah came, or instead of "knocking the mighty from their thrones, exalting those of low degree," which is what Mary sang about in the Magnificat, God chose another way to change the world. God chose the way of love. The way of slow, transformative, tedious, salvific love. A love that requires us to do our part, to reassemble our lives, to dedicate ourselves to this church, to God, and to the world.

And just like each of you, as I move beyond Christmas, the package I come in is stamped in big, bold letters, **SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED**. But I know, as the new year begins and as things start to feel like they have gotten back to normal, I know who to turn to for help with the assembly process. And so, do you. But just in case, in all the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, just in case you might have forgotten, his name is Jesus, his name is salvation. Are you ready to dedicate your lives this year?

Amen.