

"A CROSS IN A CRADLE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
December 26, 1993

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INTRODUCTION

Last Sunday in the concluding moments of our children's Christmas pageant, I was reminded of something that Jo Carr once wrote about a pageant she attended. Let me share it with you as we rest today in the afterglow of Christmas. It helps to lead in to today's message.

"All the songs had been sung and the candles lit. The shepherds had come to peek at the baby, and the Wise Men had brought their gifts. The angels had given their message. Then all the cast in the story of the first Christmas began to leave....Wise Men, shepherds and angels. Only Mary and Joseph and the child remained. Then Joseph turned to go...

And Mary, glancing back at the crib, began to follow. But suddenly she turned back, snatched up the baby doll by the foot, clutched it under her arm, and left."

It was that little episode....that final episode...that struck Jo Carr, that caught her attention. Mary had almost forgotten to take Jesus along with her. Suddenly she remembered, turned around and fiercely clutched Him under her arm.

This Sunday after Christmas gives us one last opportunity to clutch the Christ Child as well and to reaffirm the simple truth of Christmas. What is that simple truth? Let me present it to you as a "three-fold" gift and hope you'll take it down the road of a New Year with you.

GOD ALWAYS KEEPS HIS PROMISES

According to the Scriptures, Mary, Joseph and the baby, Jesus, stayed on in Bethlehem for about a week. Mary and Joseph were devout Jews who took their religious obligations seriously. And when Jesus was only eight days old they brought Him up to the Temple in Jerusalem. The custom was for first born males to be presented to God there. According to their law the first-born male was sacred to God. An offering of either two turtledoves or two young pigeons was required. Jesus was to be dedicated according to the Law of Moses.

Now as Mary and Joseph proudly carried Jesus up the steps of the great Temple they were met there by an old man whose name was Simeon. Simeon went to the Temple on a daily basis. He was a special person who tried to live every day of his life in God's presence. In fact, God led him to the Temple at the very moment Mary and Joseph and Jesus were entering. Simeon would go there every day looking to receive God's promise. On this particular day he sees a young couple with a baby climbing the steps. He wonders if this Child just might be the One he was waiting for. He asks Mary if he might just hold the child for a moment and with wrinkled hands Simeon stands there holding Jesus.

According to the Scriptures, it was while Simeon was holding the baby, Jesus, that the Spirit revealed to him that this was the child he had spent his entire life looking for, waiting for. He begins to sing:

"Master, now you may dismiss your servant in peace,
according to Your word, for my eyes have seen You salvation".

From that moment on Simeon's life would never be the same, for he had seen the Messiah. God always keeps His promises. That's the first point to pin down.

Promises. We all make them. Someone once asked an aide of General Robert E. Lee about something the Confederate General had promised.

"What guarantee do I have that the general will do what he has promised?" the doubter asks. Lee's aide promptly replied, "You have General Lee's promise. And you could have no better guarantee than that."

So it is when God makes a promise. I believe that promise will always be kept.

There was an ad in a national magazine for an insurance company sometime back that caught my attention. It was about promises. It showed a picture of a man and his daughter. The ad read like this:

"A PROMISE to attend recitals, late meetings notwithstanding.
A PROMISE not to show up when you're with friends at the mall.
A PROMISE to keep it all safe, no matter what.

Nothing binds us one to the other" said this ad, "Like a PROMISE kept!"

Well said. Christmas is all about a God who keeps His promises. We need to carry that along through the days of this year soon to begin. And those beautiful and anonymous lines that take us back to a radio broadcast at the end of the year, 1940, always come to my mind.

"I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year,
'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown'.

And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness...and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than a light and safer than any known way.'"

GOD DOESN'T PROMISE US A ROSE GARDEN

Which leads me to offer this as the second point of today's message.

God doesn't promise any of us a rose garden.

As Simeon held the baby, Jesus, in his arms the Spirit revealed to him that this baby was the long-awaited Messiah. This was, indeed, a special moment for this older gentleman. He had waited all his life for this moment. He was holding the Messiah in his unsteady arms. Simeon then blessed Mary and Joseph. This would have undoubtedly been one of those warm and wonderful Christmas memories that Joseph and Mary would have forever cherished if Simeon had stopped there, but he did not. He turned to Mary and uttered a heart-breaking prophecy,

"And a sword will pierce through your own soul also...."

What could he possibly mean? "A sword would pierce Mary's soul"...not a very comforting prophecy to be offered...

A Professor over at Drew Seminary by the name of Heather Elkins shared a story with us recently in a Convocation on the Ministry. It seems that a Christmas play was being held in the most unlikely of places - in a maximum security prison. This was a prison where some of the worst possible offenders of society were incarcerated - murderers, rapist, armed robbers. The prisoners themselves would act out the Christmas story for other prisoners. Since they were in a maximum security prison nothing was allowed to be brought in from the outside in the way of props and costumes. All had to come from inside.

And so a mop was found for Mary to use for hair and a ski mask with cotton balls glued on socks was used for the sheep. A discarded cardboard box was used for the candle and everything seemed to be coming into shape and into place and believe it or not, the prisoners were excited about the play.

Then someone raised a question about the baby. What would they use for the baby, Jesus. A real baby, of course, could not be brought in. And someone suggested that Mary hold a blanket with nothing inside to represent the baby, but that didn't seem to work out...so they were running out of ideas.

But then on the day of the performance, the prison chaplain came to the rescue. He came running to where the actors had assembled. Apparently he had found some thing in his office and the show went on. There came the dramatic moment where Mary revealed her baby - the Christ Child. She very carefully unwrapped the blanket. The object she was carrying wasn't a baby or a doll, but rather it was a cross that the chaplain had taken off his study wall. And suddenly, there in this room in this maximum security prison, the Gospel message came alive.

What would be a better closing to a Christmas drama than a cross - a cross wrapped in a blanket?

God always keeps His promises. Yes, but still He doesn't promise any one of us a rose garden. There was no rose garden for the infant Jesus. And there is no rose garden for us. There will be those times when we find ourselves locked up in some kind of prison - perhaps of illness, or a situation in which we feel "locked in to". Authentic Christian faith should never be confused with rose-colored glasses. There are no promises that things will always be easy.

So often at this time of year when I find myself walking home at the end of the day I always look south on Park Avenue and there one will see the cross formed out of the lights "left on" in the Met-Life building. There is a cradle in our faith. And yes, there is also a cross. But God's lights are "left on" and shine through the cross and sometimes when the night is darkest, the cross shines the brightest.

PROMISES OF GOD ARE TO BE SHARED

not to be kept, but they are ours to be shared.

But there is one thing more to be said and that is that the promises of God are

Yes, we who are followers of Jesus are "heirs" to God's promises, but they are not ours alone. They're there for the entire world. Not just those who gather on a Sunday within the walls of this church. That is why at the heart of Christmas is the giving of gifts.

Mary took her baby back into her arms and continued to climb the Temple steps as Simeon left. So much had happened to Mary and to her beloved Joseph that they probably didn't know what to expect next. First, there had been this strange visit from the angels telling them unbelievable news, then Jesus was born away from their family in a stable in Bethlehem. Then there were shepherds who stormed in to the manger offering their adoration. And finally they encountered this strange old man on the Temple steps who sang them such a beautiful song, but who also startled them with a revelation that a sword would one day pierce Mary's soul.

What would happen next? What happened next was an old woman named Anna. Anna had been widowed for many years. Spent a great deal of her time at the Temple, praying and fasting. Anna really was a remarkable woman. In all her years she had not grown bitter, nor had she ever given up hope. There at the Temple, Anna saw Mary and Joseph holding the infant, Jesus. She came up to them and began to praise God. Somehow Anna knew that this infant was the ONE she had spent all her years praying for, hoping for.

And she did more than just praise God at that moment. She began to tell others about God's great plan for salvation. She spoke words of hope to all around her because the long-awaited Messiah had finally arrived. She was so filled with joy that she had to tell others about the baby Jesus. Anna knew that God's promises are to be shared, particularly at Christmas and that is what Christmas is all about.

A STORY John Uldrich in Christmas Remembered, tells about his mother who was a social worker who worked with unwed mothers. Over the years she helped many families. Some of these grateful parents asked her if there was anything they could do for her. She told them,

"Well, if you have any good used clean clothes,
or toys....I'll be glad to take them...."

John remembers the boxes that mysteriously appeared in the garage. Each year at Christmas, John's mother would deliver the toys and clothing that had been gathered to her clients. He remembers one Christmas when he was nine years old. Shortly before Christmas he passed through the garage and noticed "the most wondrous airplane"...made of metal and very, very big, "about three feet long with a three foot wingspan". John had always been fascinated with airplanes and he hoped that that plane was to be saved for his Christmas. He thought, "Surely, my mother would set it to one side and give that treasure to me."

But as Christmas Day approached his mother delivered that beautiful plane to someone else and he thought to himself at the time,

"That seemed like the meanest thing a kid's mother could possibly do." And he was very disappointed on Christmas Day when he didn't receive that airplane!

Time passes. One day in the early spring John's mother asked him to go along with her on one of her visits. That day they visited a family with thirteen children who lived in an old farmhouse. And while his mother visited the family John wandered around by himself.

As John turned the corner of a weathered barn, he suddenly stopped short. There was "his" airplane. The one he had hoped he would get for Christmas. A little boy was pushing it through the sand and the grass and the dirt. But somehow, though it was all right. Some maturing must have taken place because John was "OKAY" about this boy having it. On their drive home that afternoon, John's mother never mentioned the airplane.

Years later John discovered that one of the boys in that family became a 747 pilot and another was a military flight instructor. John Uldrich says,

"I like to think that maybe receiving that airplane as a Christmas gift that year was a factor in determining what they did with their lives."

John Uldrich discovered at an early age a simple truth about Christmas. It is to be shared.

CLOSING This post-Christmas message began with the story of the little girl in a Christmas pageant who almost forgot Jesus, but then suddenly reached back and clutched the doll representing the baby Jesus. She almost forgot Him, as we sometimes are guilty of doing. But it's not too late. And so before we leave the Christmas story for yet a other year, let's return to the world as did the shepherds, "by another way"...remembering these three simple truths:

God keeps His promises.
He doesn't promise any of us a rose garden.
(There will be a few thorns along the way.....)
His promises are not to be kept; they're to be shared with others along the path we walk.

PRAYER When the song of the angels is still,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the Kings and Princes are home,
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Then it is that the work of Christmas really begins -

To find the lost and to heal the broken,
To feed the hungry and to release the prison.
To rebuild the nations and to bring peace among
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And to make music in the heart of each person. Amen.

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Time passes. One day in the early spring John's mother asked him to go along with her on one of her visits. That day they visited a family with thirteen children who lived in an old farmhouse. And while his mother visited the family John wandered around by himself.

As John turned the corner of a weathered barn, he suddenly stopped short. There was "his" airplane. The one he had hoped he would get for Christmas. A little boy was pushing it through the sand and the grass and the dirt. But somehow, though it was all right. Some maturing must have taken place because John was "OKAY" about this boy having it. On their drive home that afternoon, John's mother never mentioned the airplane.

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To feed the hungry and to release the prison.
To rebuild the nations and to bring peace among
all the brothers and sisters of this world,

And to make music in the heart of each person. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: December 26, 1993

WE THANK YOU, O GOD, for the light that came into our world in the
life of Jesus.

Help each of us to catch something of that light in
our lives.

Let it shine through us to pierce the darkness of
some life...some home...of some situation
this Christmas Season.

By way of Bethlehem, lead us, Lord, to newness of life.

By the innocence of the Christ Child, renew our simple
trust.

By the tenderness of Mary, deliver us from hardness of
heart, from cruelty, from violence.

By the patience of Joseph, save us from rash and unkind
judgements of others, and thus enable us to
persevere through life's more difficult moments.

By the Wise men's long and tedious journey, keep our
searching spirits from fainting.

By the shining of a star, guide our feet in the path of
good will, brotherhood and peace on earth.

LORD, AS WE REJOICE in the joy and wonder of these days -

Without forgetting the sadness, the sorrow, the hunger,
the hurt, the poverty and prejudice that are
abroad in our world...

We would remember that light that the darkness cannot
put out,

Cheer us with the song of the angels, and let the spirit of
love be born anew in our hearts this Christmas.

FOR WE ASK all these things in the name and spirit of Him who was born in a
stable, even Jesus Christ, our Lord.

PASTORAL PRAYER: December 26, 1993

ETERNAL SPIRIT, who art the secure dwelling place of Thy people in all generations, grant us now the help of Thy Holy Spirit, that we may praise Thee for all Thy goodness to us throughout this year now drawing to an end.

WE KNOW that there have been many times when we have failed Thee in the past year. Forgive us for all of our unkind words, unjust deeds, unruly and unholy desires. Make a new beginning in us, we pray.

O GOD OF LOVE, we thank Thee for the joy and happiness of Christmas; for gifts received, for family reunions, for the peace and goodwill among us throughout these days of this Season.

Bless all who have been unhappy at Christmastime; those to whom sorrow and loss have touched; those who were and are sick; those who remember happier times in other years.

Cheer and comfort any who have been forgotten, and help us to share our happiness with others.

For all that this year has given us in terms of new insight into life's meaning and response to the claims of Christ in today's world, we thank Thee.

BLESS US, O GOD with vision and strength,
with firmness and restraint...our country that it may be
a blessing to the world.

Help us to avoid self-deception and pride of place and power, and give equality of opportunity and service to all.

Guide our leaders in ways of peace. Strengthen and sustain and inspire those who prepare in these days to lead our nation in the months ahead.

NOW COME, WE PRAY THEE, with healing to all in sickness, pain, weakness and sorrow. Assure every anxious heart, uphold those miss loved ones, and remind us that Thou art faithful, ever keeping watch above thine own.

In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray.

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