

"A MOUNTAIN TOO HIGH TO CLIMB"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
December 3, 1995

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INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time - but not that long ago - in a kingdom both near and far away, there lived a scientist canny and cautious by nature who longed for the love of a beautiful woman. There was something about him that made the wise women of that kingdom somewhat wary of this man and so he lived a rather lonely life.

One day this scientist decided to use his scientific skills to win love, and he set out to concoct a chemical that would cause the object of his affections to fall madly in love with him. His research was successful and before long he produced the "brew"...the chemical he wanted and as luck would have it, just about that time he met a beautiful and talented and good woman. She was the "ultimate" of his dreams. He arranged for friends to introduce them and at their first meeting he poured his secret potion into her glass of wine. And lo and behold, his fantasy came true. This beautiful and talented woman fell completely in love with him and soon they were married.

But was our "hero" happy? Alas, no. In a very short time he became thin and gaunt and a look of unhappiness came over him. His work fell by the wayside. Eventually he could not even bring himself to touch his beloved. Torturing himself, he agonized over the continuing question,

"Would she love me if it were not for the chemical?"

For our scientist did crave love and love cannot be commanded. Love can only be won! So much for our lonely scientist friend.

FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Today is the First Sunday in Advent. Today we enter into that glorious season when we prepare our hearts to celebrate that occasion when God came down to win our love. The prophet, Isaiah, centuries before the Christ Child had written of a day when the peoples of the earth would say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord"

But that mountain, however, proved to be too high and too steep for a "sin-laden" humanity to climb all on its own. So, when we could not climb up to God, God came down to us. The message of Advent is basically threefold.

A GOD-INVADDED PLANET

First of all, we are a God-invaded planet. It is a staggering and presumptuous claim and we ought never to condemn people who have difficulty in accepting it, but that is the contention of our Christian Faith - that the God of all creation has come into our universe in the form of a tiny babe. That is the reason for this season.

Sometime back, USA Today, ran a story about a man by the name of John Barrier, a man who apparently didn't like the way that a bank manager out in Spokane, Washington, looked at him as he stood in line at the local bank. He was wearing construction clothes and got that look from the manager as if he had just crawled out from under a rock and he didn't appreciate it. The problem had begun when Barrier went into Old National Bank on Main Street to cash a \$100 check. When he tried to get his parking slip validated in order to save 60 cents, the receptionist refused, saying he hadn't conducted a transaction. She said,

"You first have to make a deposit...then..."

When he told her he had an account and that he was a substantial depositor, she looked at him as if....well...you know the look. He then asked to see the manager who also refused to stamp the parking slip. Barrier went to the bank headquarters vowing to withdraw his two million dollars plus unless the manager apologized. But no one called. And so the next day, he withdrew over one million dollars.

You can't always judge from appearances, can you? What if you were a resident of Judea two thousand years ago and someone told you that the King of Kings had been born in a stable in Bethlehem. Would you have believed him? I doubt it. Of course not. The claim is scarcely credible even today, and yet our faith is that God left God's majestic throne to enter into our world and to set it right....to bring it back to itself and to Him.

Some of you may remember how about twenty-five years ago America was shocked to see a Rockefeller accept a job as a volunteer in the antipoverty program down in Appalachia. John D. "Jay" Rockefeller, IV, one of the richest men in the world took his bride, Sharon, the daughter of a millionaire, Senator Charles Percy of Illinois, down to Emmons, West Virginia (population about 200), as a Peace Corps worker.

Rockefeller said,

"I took slides with me. I gathered everyone in the community center and I showed slides of my family, my house, my car, my father....and how I lived. I said, 'This is who I am and I am here to help you. I come from a world that may be different, but you'll find me serious and caring and wanting to help.'"

The people of West Virginia later elected Jay Rockefeller governor and then US Senator. We can understand the difficulty that many people down there must have had....especially the poor people...believing that a man of Rockefeller's wealth would leave it behind to become a Peace Corps volunteer in order to help them.

And yet, this is the Gospel. When we could not climb up to God, God came down to us. I think God knew that it is difficult to minister to someone with whom you are not willing to live. This is the first step in understanding the meaning of Advent. When we could not climb up to God, God came down to us. The word Advent means to "come to". God came to our world. We live on a God-invaded planet. That's the first point to pin down.

GOD IDENTIFIES WITH OUR NEEDS

But there is a second amazing claim that Christians make about this Holy Season of Advent. And that is that God identifies with our needs and with our concerns. God is no stranger to the challenge of being human. God took on human flesh and lived as we live.

Sometime back there was an article in Christianity and Crisis by Robert McAfee Brown. It was in the form of a dialogue between a Roman Catholic priest and some of his poor and hurting parishioners. The setting is a country in Central America where there has been a brutal persecution of church leaders and where a number of priests have cast their lot with the poor - the ANAWIM.

It's a Sunday morning and one of the priests is conducting an informal worship service among the poor people of the land. One of the parishioners points out, "Father....today is the Feast of the Holy Name of Mary!" "Is there a connection between Mary and Martin Luther King?" asks the priest of those who are present. One of the parishioners replies, "Well....Father....yes, there would be if Mary was concerned about the oppressed people."

The priest responds, saying, "Let me read part of Mary's Song...the part from Luke's Gospel...that comes just before the Story of the Birth of Christ." And so he begins to read...

"He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things...but has sent the rich empty away...."

The parishioner reacts, saying, "But Father....that doesn't sound at all like the Mary we hear about in the cathedral. And the Mary in the 'holy pictures' certainly doesn't look like someone who would talk that way." The priest then says, "Tell us about the Mary in the 'holy pictures'. And the parishioner displays one and says, "Here she is. She is standing on a crescent moon. She is wearing a crown. Look, she has rings on her fingers and she has on a blue robe embroidered with gold."

"That does sound like a different Mary from the Mary of the Song in the Gospel of Luke" says the priest. "Do you think...do you feel that the picture has betrayed the Mary of the Song?"

One of those present thoughtfully makes this observation. "The Mary who said, 'God has lifted up the humble'....such a Mary would not have left all of her friends so she could stand on the moon." "Right" everyone agrees. "Take her off the moon!" Then someone else says, "The Mary who said that God 'has sent the rich empty away'....certainly she would not be wearing rings on her fingers." "Right! Take off her rings" they all say. Someone over in the far corner then says, "The Mary who said that God 'has filled the hungry with good things' would not have left the people who are still hungry to wear a silk robe embroidered with gold". "Right" they all agree. "Take off her robe!"

The priest then says, "Okay....if you don't like the way that Mary looks in this picture, what do you think....what do you think she looks like?" And hands go up and people start talking openly.....

"She would not be standing on the moon...she would be standing in the dirt and dust where we stand....she would not be wearing a crown....she would have an old hat on like the rest of us...to keep the sun from causing her to faint...."

Someone else says, "She would not be wearing rings on her fingers. She would have rough hands, like ours...and she would not be wearing a silk robe embroidered with gold. She would be wearing old clothes like the rest of us...."

Then an embarrassed parishioner says, "Father....it may be awful to say this...but it sounds as though Mary would look just like me. My feet are dirty and my hat is old, my hands are rough and my clothes are torn...."

Friend, you don't have to be Roman Catholic to get the message of that dialogue. God has not only come to us, but God has taken on the cloak of humanity. St. Paul expresses it this way in Philippians, chapter two:

"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant....being born in the likeness of men....

And being found in human form He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.....and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

(Philippians 2: 5-11)

What a powerful and lifting message is found in those exalted and majestic words of Paul. Christ left the throne to be born in the likeness of humanity. God knows our needs. God identifies with our situation and that brings us to the third and final point of this message.

THE FUTURE IS IN GOD'S HANDS

The future, I believe, is wonderful...it's wonderful because it is in God's hands.

You see, Advent is not only a preparation for the celebration of the birth of Christ. Yes, it is all that. But it is also preparation for that day when God's perfect Kingdom will come, when....in those great words of Isaiah, the

"The nations will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. And nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they learn war anymore".

With the coming of Christ, the establishment of that Kingdom of right relationships has already begun.

It's like this. Back in the Spring of 1964, the legendary announcer Harry Caray whom some of you remember of your days growing up in the midwest screamed to the baseball fans of St. Louis,

"I can't believe it! Roger Craig hit the left center-field wall! The Cardinals are going to win the pennant. The Cardinals are going to win the pennant....."

And, in fact, Harry Caray was right. The Cardinals did win the pennant, but this particular declaration of Harry Caray's was made during the fourth game of the season, around the 15th of April and Roger Craig was a weak-hitting pitcher. In Roger Craig's tremendous feat, Harry Caray saw a "precursor" of what lay ahead.

Dan Baumann, in his little book, Dare To Believe, compares it to opening a present on Christmas morning. He explains that when he was younger he would always do a lot of poking around and snooping around at Christmas time...shaking packages, examining them carefully as they were placed under the tree. He would try to figure out what was in them. One year he discovered a package with his name on it that was easy to identify. It was about this long and when he shook

it he could feel things moving around. There was just no way to disguise the golf clubs that were inside that package. He made this observation....

"When mom wasn't around, I would go and feel that package and shake it and pretend that I was out on the golf course. The point is, I was already enjoying the pleasures of a future event....namely, the 'unveiling'. Oh, it had my name on it and I knew what it was...what was inside...and what joy it brought me.....waiting for Christmas morning!"

SUMMING IT ALL UP

Advent gives us a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. A time of universal peace and universal love under the Lordship of Christ. Remember then, my friend, that God has invaded our world. He has experienced what it is like to be a human being. God has initiated the coming of the Kingdom of God in a sinful, selfish world. When we could not climb up to God, God came down to us.

I think it was Archimedes who once said that if he had a lever to place under the world and if it were long enough, he could sit on the end of it and lift the entire world. God sent us not a lever, but a "lover"....He sent a "lover" into our world that this world might through Him be lifted to new heights. That's what Advent is all about and it's something for us to take hold of and in our ways lift the world around us and make a difference.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive, O God, to Your nearness and to Your presence in these quiet moments. Wrestle with us in the dark and the shadowy places of our lives where sin and selfishness, where despair and disappointment may be lurking. Remind us with the message of this Advent Season into which we enter once again.

Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care. Encircle the bereaved with Your warming, healing presence. Their names are known to you.

Point out markers on this Advent trail for those who may be in danger of losing their way. And douse with the cold waters of common sense any who this very day might be on the verge of some destructive action or unhealthy decision.

For the race is short, O God....even at its longest and we would run it well and always to Your glory. In the name of Christ whose day of birth we now begin to celebrate. In His spirit we pray. Amen.

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