

December 13, 1992

MEMO TO: Melissa

FROM: Phil

RE: Sunday's Canvass Report

INTRODUCTION

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YOUR RESPONSE

"Thank you....and yes the GOOD NEWS is that we are steadily getting closer to our pledge goal of \$160,000...."

The 'NOT-SO GOOD NEWS is that we are not yet there...we are still \$20,000 away from our goal. \$ 20,000....to go.

THE BEST NEWS OF ALL IS: this is the last Sunday service for this year that you will hear from Jim Perkins, John Moore and myself about the 1993 pledge drive.

And....THE VERY BEST NEWS OF ALL IS: if you have not yet responded...if you have not yet made your pledge and sent it in to the church...and some 50 of you haven't (!)....

YOU STILL HAVE TIME...YOU STILL HAVE TIME.

DO IT NOW...WE ALL NEED TO SUPPORT OUR CHURCH.

That's all. Thank you for listening and for responding and making a MERRY CHRISTMAS!"

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"ARE YOU THE ONE WHO IS TO COME?"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
December 13, 1992

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INTRODUCTION

J. Wallace Hamilton, in his book, Horns and Hales, tells of one of the strangest auction sales in American history. Held in Washington in 1926, some 150,000 patented models of old inventions were declared obsolete and put up for public auction. Buyers and onlookers chuckled as item after item was put up for bid. Some of the items placed on the auction block dated back to the time of Thomas Jefferson.

One by one, these inventions went under the hammer. Some were clever and some were clumsy. Some were amusing. There was an automatic bedbug buster, an illuminated cat to scare away mice. There was even an adjustable pulpit that could be raised or lowered according to the height of the preacher.

Needless to say, this auction of old patent models was worth at least 150,000 laughs, but if we were able to look into this situation a bit deeper, we would probably discover that many of these old models represented many broken dreams, too.

It may seem out of place to talk about broken dreams and disappointments this close to Christmas. After all, this is the season to be jolly. But it's not jolly for everybody, is it? For those who have lost loved ones this can be the loneliest time of the year. And in a world that glorifies materialism, those who are struggling financially may find it to be most depressing.

JOHN THE BAPTIST AND BROKEN DREAMS

Our friend, John the Baptist, knew all about disappointment. John is now in prison and he's looking for a sign, a sign that the "long-awaited" messiah has really arrived. It's somewhat ironic to me. Here John the Baptist is the one who first proclaimed His coming, but much has happened to John since last we saw him preaching and baptizing people in the wilderness. Now his heart is cast down. Doubt and disappointment are his companions in the prison cell.

You'll remember that John's message was "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand". This message burned in John's soul. John wasn't afraid to proclaim his message to religious leaders and royalty alike. He got the King out of his palace and proclaimed his message to Herod, himself. Now he's in jail.

This Herod was not the King Herod who was the ruler at the time of the birth of Jesus. This is his son, Herod Antipas, who turned out to be far worse than his father. This Herod seduced and later married his brother's wife, but first he killed his brother. The nation was in shock. John the Baptist condemned the King's behavior and for this he ends up in prison. And sitting there in a prison cell, John realizes that his career as a preacher-prophet is coming to an end. His life would soon be over and his head on a silver platter.

But there was one thing that John wanted to know before he died. He wanted to know beyond any shadow of doubt if Jesus was really the Messiah. You can't blame him. He had given everything, including his life. Had it all been in vain? Was it an illusion, a dream? Back there in the wilderness days, John had believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but now in the face of certain death, he had some doubts. So he sent his followers to find Jesus and to ask Him,

"Are You the One who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

John found himself in a disappointing and disheartening predicament. Yes, things were not working out the way he had expected and sometimes this does happen to us. Disappointment. Especially at Christmas. It's not an easy time for many people. Remember that haunting country song, "If we make it through December...." Perhaps you know the meaning of those words...."if only we can make it through December...." It was December for John the Baptist. Waiting death in Herod's prison...hurting - physically and emotionally. Three points.

DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS

First of all, John was disappointed because he undoubtedly had different expectations of what a Messiah would do. A product of his time, he was expecting the same kind of Messiah that most people were expecting - one who would drive the Romans out of the country and then establish the Kingdom of God. And while languishing there in prison, John must have wondered why more wasn't happening. What's He waiting for, anyway. Why doesn't He drive those Roman dogs out. Faulty expectations had something to do with his disappointment.

Leo Buscalgia learned about that kind of disappointment as a teenager. In one of his books he writes about his 13th Christmas.

"I remember the sudden appearance under my family's Christmas tree of the largest present I had ever hoped to see. It stood at least a foot taller than I and was twice as heavy; and wonder of wonders, it had my name on it. For two whole weeks before Christmas, this present towered above all other and it defied any conventional attempts to learn of its contents before its time."

During those weeks leading up to Christmas he could think of nothing else but his present under the tree. He imagined all sorts of terrific present. Christmas Day his family gathered together in the room around the tree.

"The main attraction" he recalls, "was to be the opening of my present. How many times in the past two weeks I had anticipated this moment. Even as I was opening it, I remember experiencing a vague sense of 'disappointment'. The great mystery was about to end and I would no longer be able to engage in my soaring dreams."

His present turned out to be a beautiful handmade desk his uncle had made.

"By this time nothing of this world could have satisfied my expectations. I can't imagine what I had expected. Still...in that disappointment was a lesson, a lesson that would last a lifetime."

Sometimes we are disappointed...not because what we receive is bad, but because we have faulty expectations. There are people present in this room who feel that life has somehow cheated them, but I can guarantee you this that if you lost everything you have right now and then suddenly had it all restored, you would be exceedingly grateful. The problem is not what we have, but rather it is rooted in our expectations. John expected the Messiah to come by storm, but nothing much seemed to be happening. It was not Jesus who was at fault, but John's expectations. This is the first reason he was gripped by disappointment. But let's move on. Point two.

LOOKING FOR THE WRONG SIGNS

The second reason John the Baptist was disappointed was that he was looking for all the wrong signs. The followers of John caught up one day with Jesus and they asked Jesus John's question:

"Are YOU the ONE who is to come or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered, "Go and tell John what you hear and see - the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

The "DAY" of the Lord had arrived! Here there was evidence that God's Kingdom had begun. "Just look around you" Jesus told the followers of John. "Yes, look around and see what is happening."

Centuries before, there had been a great prophet, Isaiah. He had prophesied about what would take place when the Messiah would finally arrive.

"The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame shall leap like a deer."

Those weren't the signs that John was looking for. He was looking for something far more dramatic and spectacular. He was looking for "thunder and lightning".

Charles Kuralt, in his travels across the United States, found what looked like a Christmas tree growing in the most unlikely place in the Rockies. Kuralt noted,

"Trees need good soil and good weather and up there there's no soil and terrible weather. Nothing can live up here and certainly not trees. That's why this tree is a kind of miracle."

On a barren stretch of US 50, without another tree in sight, grows this Juniper tree. He goes on to write,

"Nobody remembers who put the first Christmas ornament on it - some whimsical motorist of years ago. From that day to this, the tree has been redecorated each year. Nobody knows who does it. But each year by Christmas Day, the tree has become a Christmas tree. This tree - which has no business growing here at all has survived against all odds"

People who live miles away in all directions know and love this Christmas tree,

"Just looking at it makes you think about how unexpected life on earth can be. The tree is so lonely and so brave that it seems to offer courage to those who pass it and a message. It is the Christmas message: that there is life and hope even in a rough and tumble world like ours."

Isaiah wrote centuries before Jesus that "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad and the desert shall rejoice and blossom". But see, those aren't the kinds of signs that impress people. We want greatness in large letters, but that is not God's way. God chooses to work in the little insignificant places of life...like a manger, a carpenter's shop...yes, even a cross.

JOHN DIDN'T GIVE GOD TIME

The third reason John was disappointed was that he didn't give God time. John wanted action NOW. And we can understand that, can't we, in light of his current situation? But God takes His own sweet time. After all, He has been working on this world of ours for hundreds of millions of years. But His purpose is just as sure and His plan is just as unstoppable. Perhaps there is someone here today who needs to hear that. Give God time.

Lincoln Steffens remembers one Christmas while growing up when he wanted more than anything else in the world a pony. He writes,

"I prayed and I hoped I would get a pony. My good little sisters...to comfort me...remarked that Christmas was coming...but Christmas was always coming and grown-ups were always talking about it...asking you what you wanted."

His parents played games with him, asking him what he wanted for Christmas.

"All I want is a pony...if I can't have a pony, then...then, give me nothing. Nothing."

Christmas Day arrived and the children were all up at six in the morning. At first they were overwhelmed by all the presents. He writes,

"My sisters had knelt down, each by her pile of gifts; they were squealing with delight, till they looked up and saw me standing there in my pajamas with nothing. Nothing..."

The young boy didn't get the pony he wanted "more than anything else" for Christmas. His sisters joined him in his time of agony, running back to their bedrooms with tears in their eyes. He refused to eat anything. He was too upset. He went out to the stable and his mother came out to comfort him. He noticed his father watching him from a window for a couple of hours. This was his "worst Christmas ever". Not one present.

Then he noticed a man riding a pony down the street, a pony with a brand new saddle, a boy's saddle. The man was reading the numbers of the houses. "He looked at our door and passed by" he remembered. That was the last straw. He flung himself on the ground and began crying uncontrollably. The stranger asked,

"Say, kid...do you know a boy named Lennie Steffens?"
"Yes...that's me" he spluttered through his tears. "Well, this is your horse. I've been looking all over for you."

The man told Lennie Steffens his excuses for being late, but the boy never heard them. "I could scarcely wait". Before long he was riding down the street on his pony. And to this day, he still doesn't know if that was his BEST Christmas ever or his worst.

You see, the pony was always coming. It was Lennie's impatience and uncertainty that drove him to the brink of despair.

CLOSING

I've been there. And the chances are you've been there. God doesn't work according to our time schedule, but according to His.

INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we continue with our ADVENT journey toward Bethlehem....to the Child who grew to be our King.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

"He will feed His flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in His arms. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away".

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever!"

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing...you shall receive. And as many as touched Him were made whole!"

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

Touch with healing, O God, those whom we "lift up" in our prayers this morning:

Vera Allick.

Comfort the bereaved and the broken hearted in our midst...and be especially close to _____ who in recent days has lost a loved one - an

And answer the unspoken prayers now whispered in the deep places of our lives...spoken in the name and spirit of the Christ Child who as a grown man taught us to say when we pray...

"Our Father, who art in heaven... Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come... Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory, forever. Amen"

PASTORAL PRAYER: December 13 1992

O GOD, OUR FATHER...

Once again you have brought us to this joyous season of the year when "there's a song in the air"...and the world around us begins to take on a new look.

Because of Bethlehem...because of the star and the stable...because of Mary and Joseph and the Child in the manger, we know YOU as ONE who is not just "up there" or "out there"...beyond us....but as ONE who is very much a part of our life - here with us - identified with infants as well as with infinity.

LORD, we meditate this hour upon that ONE LIFE, born of Mary...remembering how she pondered the meaning of that Holy Birth.

Quietly we would meditate upon the tremendous meaning of that life now, and of what Christmas can and should mean to us.

We remember His lowly toil and His lonely way.
We remember His gracious words, His deeds of compassion.
We remember His friendship for the defeated,
His care for the outcast.
We remember the healing He brought to the sick,
the hope He shared with the discouraged.

TODAY, let the words of Scripture read to us tell us the old, yet ever new story...of Emmanuel, "God with us"...

Let the carols take us back to see again the warmth, the wonder, the tenderness of Your coming.

Let our minds comprehend as never before the glory and the joy of the deep meaning of this Event.

AND in the coming of Jesus, our Lord, You have shown us that Your love is for everyone.

That no one is too small or too weak. That no one is too poor or too lowly. That no one is too selfish or too sinful.

Melt any hostility we harbor, as we meditate on the One who came to love. Melt any bitterness or resentment we hold, as we remember Him who taught us to forgive.

OPEN our hearts to Your coming, O God, that you may come into our lives and make them new. Then we shall be able to say about ourselves,

"All is calm; all is bright"...in the spirit of the Christ Child, we pray.

DUANE

ADVENT WREATH / CANDLE AND BANNER

THIRD SUNDAY

Today is the Third Sunday in Advent. Each Sunday during Advent, the boys and girls of our Sunday School are joining us down here...to sing and to lead us in the lighting of the Advent candles.

Today, to help us with the lighting of the three candles. First, we re-light the candles of hope and of peace, and then we light Candle Number Three - the Candle of Joy!

Our third Advent banner is here on the wall helping to remind us of the joy of this holy season. Jesus always brings hope and peace and joy in to our lives. we light the candles, the children are going to sing for us:

~~"Jesus, our Brother, strong and good, Was humbly
born in a stable rude, and the friendly beasts
around Him stood. Jesus, our brother, strong and good."~~

~~"THE FRIENDLY BEASTS"~~

PRAYER

"Fill our hearts, O God, with the Christmas lights of hope, and peace and joy.

For these warm and wonderful moments together here in Your house, O God, we thank you.

And we thank you for these children...who are helping all of us to get ready for Christmas and Your coming once again into our world.

Help each of us to listen carefully that we may hear the song of the angels. In the spirit of Christ, we pray".

CAROL

No. 227 "The Friendly Beasts". Two verses. Which verses???

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You see, the pony was always coming. It was Lennie's impatience and uncertainty that drove him to the brink of despair.

CLOSING

I've been there. And the chances are you've been there. God doesn't work according to our time schedule, but according to His.

Sometimes He doesn't appear to be working at all, but He is. Remember that. He is. Oh...He certainly wasn't working according to John the Baptist's timetable. But He was working. The very fact that we celebrate the life of John here this morning....two thousand years later...this, for me is proof that He was working.

How about you? Is your life filled with some disappointments...because you have some unrealistic expectations? Think about it. Are you looking in all the wrong places to find real happiness? Have you learned to "wait" on the Lord. If you haven't caught the holiday spirit yet, surely you're not alone. Joy doesn't arrive "on cue". It is a depth response to life's beauty and its wonder. Though joy is incarnate in this season and its tender story of a child born on the cusp of winter's axis...sometimes the energy and the festive zeal invested in December's dance do get in joy's way. So be careful. Don't be discouraged. All that sparkles is not glitter and there is gold to be found in the heart and under the hearth of this wonderful season.

If we mine its stories, transcending fact in search of truth, if we lose ourselves in a momentary shaft of legendary light, contemplate a star, the deeper meaning of Christmas may surprise us with illumination.

A Sunday School teacher lined up so carefully four little three year old "cherubs" for the annual pageant. Each carried a huge cut-out letter. As they stood, side by side, out there on the platform the letters would spell STAR. But, you know...a slight mix-up occurred and those present in the church nearly fell out of their pews as these four little performers took their places in reverse. They stood there and spelled out "RATS" not "STAR". That sort of thing often happens in life when you get your priorities out of order.

YES, HE WORKS

Bethlehem teaches us about expectations, about signs and about patience. God begins with a simple babe and some humble surroundings and He works...slowly, but surely. He is at work. So let us not lose hope. "Joy to the world. The Lord is come!"

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and Your presence...to Your healing power in these moments, O God. As we brush up against Eternal Truth once again in these coming days, touch our lives in a deep and wonderful way... with the gift of joy. Help us to be "on guard" lest our energy and our festive zeal invested in preparing for Christmas get in joy's way. In the spirit of Him born in Bethlehem's manger, we pray. Amen.