

CHRISTMAS EVE HOMILY

By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
December 24, 1997 / 8 P. M.

CHRISTMAS EVE: 1997

INTRODUCTION

A little boy was given a big role in his church's Nativity pageant. Cast as an angel, he was to deliver that very important line,

"Be not afraid....for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy....for unto you is born this day in the city of David - a Savior, Who is Christ, the Lord!"

That was his line. And for days in advance, he practiced that line. He would say it to his mother before heading off to school in the morning. He would say it to his father before heading off to bed at night. He worked hard on it and he had it "down". He was ready. He was set.

The night of the performance came. He stepped out on to the platform at the proper moment....and then suddenly seeing all those people sitting there... his parents and his grandparents, a brother, a sister...his friends from the church and from the community....looking out and seeing all of those people there...his little mind suddenly went blank and he couldn't remember how his line started. He stood there....nobody offered a cue...and after what seemed like an eternity to his parents, he blurted out,

"Say....have I ever got some 'GOOD NEWS' for you!"

FOLLOW-UP

He had the right idea. And that's what tonight is all about. Yes....we've got some "GOOD NEWS" for all of you. Much of our world now grows still. Tonight churches across our land and around the world are being filled with people for whom Christmas is still a matter "of the heart and the soul".

And those events that took place in Bethlehem long ago provide us with the starting point of "The Greatest Story Ever Told"....and that story has a message in it for all mankind....a message which the world never quite remembers, but which the world has never quite forgotten.

It is the message of God's love....of the hope and promise of "peace on earth and good will to all". That's the "Good News" of this night and of this season, for as someone has penned,

"Of all the armies that have ever marched, and all the navies that ever have been built, and all the kings who have ever reigned, and all the parliaments that have ever sat...all of these put together have not affected the life of people on this planet as much as that ONE SOLITARY LIFE."

OUR HOPE

This Holy Night we celebrate the birthday of that "One Solitary Life". And it is our hope that as you share in the singing of the carols and the lighting of the candles....as you worship the Christ Child in the haunting loveliness of this sanctuary, it is our hope that the warmth of His presence will flood your life with the Christmas lights of HOPE, of PEACE,

of JOY, and of LOVE. A very MERRY CHRISTMAS to all of you in the fullest sense of those treasured words!

DEVELOPMENT

And yes, I hope that your Christmas won't be spoiled by receiving the wrong gift...like the little girl who received a pin-cushion from her grandmother. Oh, she did the right thing and sat down a few days after Christmas and wrote her grandmother a thank-you note.

"Dear Grandmother: Thank you very much for the pin-cushion. I always wanted one.....but not very much!"

And Joey Adams told us one Christmas about the woman who with a note of apology in her voice said to her nephew after Christmas,

"I'm sorry you don't like my Christmas gift....but I asked you if you preferred a small check or a large check". And her nephew sadly replied, "I know...but I didn't think you were talking about neck-ties!"

WHAT TO EXPECT

I don't know what you're expecting for Christmas....my Sunday mornings usually begin around seven-thirty, enjoying a cup of coffee in front of television and turning to Channel 69 to hear a message by Dr. Arthur Calliandro of Marble Collegiate Church here in the city. He helps to get me started. I've known Arthur for years; we both began our ministries about the same time with ties to the Methodist Church, only Arthur slipped away and became successor to Norman Vincent Peale at Marble Collegiate Church, Fifth Avenue and 29th Street.

He said something in his sermon a week ago Sunday morning that touched me. He was talking about "what to expect at Christmas" with his text taken from Isaiah, those familiar words Isaiah borrowed from Handel's Messiah,

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain".

Chances are that none of you heard him....few people are up at seven-thirty on a Sunday morning. As I recall, he was offering the listener six steps for getting "through" this busy season. He was reminding us that most people live crowded lives with obligations and responsibilities and demands, none of which are eliminated in December to "make way" for Christmas. Thus we have our usual busy month of December with Christmas added on top. An already hectic life becomes chaotic and what should be a season of great joy and peace becomes a frenetic, frustrating and exhausting time and by the time we reach this hour on Christmas Eve...well, we've just about had it! Some are just "wiped out"...

Here are the six simple steps he was offering to make Christmas everything you want it to be. It's not too late to hear them and carry them out of here.

FIRST: Remember that Jesus is "the reason for the season". The Roman Catholic Church has done a terrific job in putting that slogan out...and the other one, "Feeling lost? Follow Three Wise Men".

Jesus is the "reason for the season". We don't often hear His name at the parties and social gatherings we take in during December...unless it's something of a thoughtless curse. Remember that Christmas is a spiritual holiday.

**SECOND:** Pace yourself. Consciously regulate your movements. Take charge of yourself and your time. Determine what you can do and not do and stay within those boundaries. Learn the pace that is best for you and then, hold the course. I try to do that. I got started on my Christmas cards on October 1st...trying "to do" five a day, 25 weekly for about ten weeks.... and it came out right...adding personal notes to some former members and dear friends from across the years.

**THIRD:** Absorb the moment. Be aware of every moment of this beautiful season. The lights, the colors, the music, the trees, the snowflake, the warmth and spirit of this most loving time of the year are magnificent and worth your attention. Absorb each moments as it happens. Doing this will help you with your pacing. "BE" with every moment.

**FOURTH:** Practice kindness. Adopt a policy of unusual kindness, especially in the face of extreme unkindness. You will be surprised with the results and with how your life will be transformed as well. Answer by being kind! Not grouchy.

**FIFTH:** Try giving in new ways. Beyond giving gifts to those you usually remember, find a person who except for you would not have Christmas. Do it in the name of the Christ. Locate such a person. Don't let the person know you are the giver. It will touch them deeply and touch your life, too.

**SIXTH:** Experience the true joy of love by calling someone who has hurt you and saying, "It's Christmas. Let by-gones be by-gones. I FORGIVE you." Forgive. Forget. Forever. Release that hurt. Let go of it.

Follow these six steps and Christmas, this year...any year, I guarantee will become some thing very special for you, perhaps the most memorable one of your life.

The "WAY of the Lord" of which Isaiah spoke will become real. Those valleys....dark places...will be filled with joy. Those mountainous problems and huge hills will be brought low and the rough places will be smoothed out for you. Let the spirit of Christ be born anew within you. Go back and read the Christmas story. Let the wonder of it touch you. Practice and remember what you did as a child. Recapture the awe and wonder of these hours.

Christmas is a spiritual holiday!

And get in touch with the Christ - the Christ who had enormous courage, who was just and fair and compassionate. Get in touch with the Christ who was tender and patient. Get in touch with the Christ who came to save us from ourselves, the Christ who had absolute trust in the ways of God. In Him God is entering the human scene, the arena of our life. The Good News is that He is with us...loves us and forgives us. Let the power of your faith in Him make a difference.

CLOSING

I've always been fond of those words on the wall of the eastern entrance to Rockefeller Center. You've seen them...

"Man's ultimate destiny depends not on whether he can learn new lessons or make new discoveries and new conquests, but on his acceptance of the lessons taught him close upon two thousand years ago...."

And that would be the lesson of love. And whether we are willing and able to carry on what began in Bethlehem nearly 2000 years ago depends on personal decisions and collective actions of people like ourselves who in these "holy moments" are drawn to worship the Christ Child in the churches of a city like this.

The warmth and the wonder of these "holy moments" will serve us well if we treat them as an introduction...not as a conclusion...to what preachers and priests often speak of as the duty and privilege of Christian discipleship. We have come here tonight to "adore Him". Let us depart from here resolved to let "divine truth" has a real "go" in our lives in the days of a new year. ....into a new millenium that is edging closer. Let these wonderful words from John's Gospel brush up against your life in a way they never have before and let them undergird your life and bring you closer to Him whose day of birth we now celebrate. Said John,

"In HIM was LIFE....and the LIFE was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out."

FELLOWSHIP

Before we proceed to the Christmas offering and then the candle-lighting....let me mention that there will be a time of informal fellowship following this service. Downstairs in the Russell Room. All are invited. Christmas Eve can be for many a lonely time in this city. Come on down and share in the warth and cheer of this blessed night. Who knows? It may make a difference in your life. Hopefully...it will!

OFFERING

Christmas is a time of giving as well as a time of receiving. We thank you for the many, many generous gifts already received in recent days for the work of this city parish. We thank you, too, for the gifts to be received here this night. They do make a difference and send out a strong message of love and of caring to this community, this city, and out into the world. The Child of Bethlehem, as a grown man, said:

"IT IS MORE BLESSED TO GIVE THAN IT IS TO RECEIVE!"

MEMORIAL SERVICE: Paul R. Russell  
Sunday, May 23, 1999  
1 P. M. at the Park Avenue United Methodist Church

ORDER

Organ Music, from about 12:45 pm to 1:05 pm...as people gather in the sanctuary.

Opening Verses followed by a prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Hymn No. 102 "Now Thank We All Our God"

Readings from the Scripture

Psalm 23. District Superintendent, Carol Cox  
John 14 Bishop Ernest S. Lyght  
(Selected verses)

Hymn No. 654 "How Blest Are They Who Trust In Christ"

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Tributes (With Philip Clarke, presiding)

(Words of introduction. Recognize the presence of Helen Russell, Thad and Barbara Russell, Paul and Samuel. Also Allen Russell, Mary Virginia and...)

(Also recognition of Trust Fund Trustees: William Staubach and Edward Stack....Mrs. McCartney).

1. Harold Black. Lay Leader of the Church in the fifties, and Secretary of the Board of Trustees. Took minutes....
2. Edward J. Brown: Present Chair of the Trust. Brown followed Black....
3. Thad Russell. Son.
4. Philip Clarke....add briefly words of tribute. Closing Prayer...

Hymn No. 710 "Faith of Our Fathers"

Benediction

LIGHTING / CHRISTMAS EVE

(December 24th, 1997 and every year!)

LIGHTING for the Christmas Eve Service is most IMPORTANT in setting the proper mood of worship. I'd suggest the following light settings and CUES for change....

FROM 7 pm to 8 pm.....

We'll open the church around 7 and would suggest a soft low light....in the sanctuary...something like 70....test this...not too dark, not too bright.

AROUND 8 pm.....

When the choir and minister come up from downstairs for the Call To Worship, then the lights get turned up SLOWLY....from 70 ish to 80 to 85 ish....enough light for people to see the hymns.....

Keep them up around 80 to 85 (or higher, if you think more light is needed)....if it's TOO BRIGHT, bring them down....or UP, if necessary.

AROUND 8:40 pm.....

LISTEN OUT FOR "HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING"... This is a CUE hymn....After we sing it, Phil goes to the lectern to read scripture passages dealing with light....begin to bring the lights down a bit as he reads from Genesis, Isaiah, John and Matthew... and offers a prayer following.....

Keep the lights UP high enough for people to read the lines for "O Little Town of Bethlehem".... they remain seated for that carol.

AROUND 8:50 pm.....

Getting to the LIGHTING OF THE CANDLES. Someone should bring down the house lights very slowly.... to where just a soft light is seen at the bottom of the lights.....PHIL will handle the lights in the chancel and try to synchronize with the dimming of the house lights handled in the narthex by Larry or Walter.....he will leave a light on the CROSS.

BY CANDLE-LIGHT.....

"O Holy Night" by the choir. "Silent Night" by the Congregation. A Christmas Prayer by PHIL. Then the closing carol, "Angels We Have Heard On High"..... You may want to bring the lights up for "Angels We Have Heard on High"....just a bit...not all the way!

AROUND 9:10 pm.....

Recessional by choir. PHIL gives the Benediction from the rear of the sanctuary. Bring the lights up (but not all the way) for people to see as they depart.....

NO DOXOLOGY ON CHRISTMAS

EVE.....

USHERS TAKE OFFERING UP TO  
FOURTH FLOOR.....

DO NOT COME FORWARD WITH IT!

CULTIVATION LETTERS: February 21, 1996 to March 21st, 1996 / 25 ~~40~~ LETTERS

1. Ms. Christianne L. Smith: 300 E. 85th Street, #901, NYC, NY 10028 Jan. ?
2. Ms. Kathryn Gettle: 241 E. 86th Street, 11 C, NYC, NY 10028 Feb. 22
3. Ms. Christy Creech: 316 E. 92nd Street, NYC, NY 10128 Feb. 23
4. Mr. David Minkley: 21 Leroy Street, #9, NYC, NY 10014 Feb. 26
5. Ms. Betsy Reynolds: 235 East 95th Street, 2K, NYC, NY 10128 Feb. 27
6. Mr. Norman Wallace: 1234 Stratford Avenue, Apt. 6A, Bronx, NY 10472 Feb. 28
7. Ms. Stacey Rentschler: 50 E. 98th Street, (5H2), NYC, NY 10029 Feb. 29
8. Mr. Rich Kim: 50 E. 98th Street, 14A, NYC, NY 10029 March 1
9. Mr. Lance Baker: 32-13 34th Street, 1F, Long Island City, NY 11106 March 2
10. Mr. Alfredo San Diego: 2685 University Avenue, 60B, Bronx, NY 10468 March 2
11. Mr. and Mrs. Paul Henry: 134 East 96th Street, #4, NYC, NY 10128 March 4
12. Ms. Amanda Velz: 307 East 81st Street, 3RW, BTC, NY 10028 March 4
13. Ms. Candace Carriger: 41 W. 86th Street, 6G, NYC, NY 10024 March 5
14. Ms. Nancy Breiling: 303 E. 83rd Street, 15J, NYC, NY 10028 March 5
15. Ms. Betty Sparks: PO Box 6350, NYC, NY 10128 March 6
16. Ms. Irene Kestanak: 411 E. 81st Street, 2D, NYC, NY 10028 March 6
17. Ms. Diane Murray: 1050 Park Ave., Apt. 6A, NYC, NY 10028 March 7
18. Mr. Russell Cole: 235 E. 95th Street, 20G, NYC, NY 10128 March 7
19. Mr. James Millis: 117 E. 57th Street, 29A, NYC, NY 10022 March 8
20. Ms. Karla Anich: 127 E. 39th Street, 3E, NYC, NY 10016 March 11
21. Mr. and Mrs. Jorge (Margaret) Ferrari: 49 W. 87th, NYC 10024 March 12
22. Ms. Leslie Thompson: 23-68 36th Street, Astoria, NY 11105 March 13
23. Mr. Giles Fisher: 303 E. 83rd Street, NYC, NY 10028 March 14
24. Mr. and Mrs. Scott (Amy) Shubert: 45 E. 89th Street, NYC 10128 March 15
25. Ms. Kim Connor: 239 E. 89th Street, NYC, NY 10128 March 18

26. Ms. Connie Brown: 66 West 94th Street, 10C, NYC, NY 10025 March 13
27. Ms. Cathy Bose: 90 LaSalle Street, NYC, NY 10027 March 14
28. Ms. Jane Cantrell Scaturro: 351 E. 84th Street, 31 C, NYC, NY 10028 March 16
29. Ms. Deborah Wheeler: 23 West 82nd Street, At. B, NYC, NY 10024 March 18
30. Ms. Jennifer Recht: 1626 Second Avenue, 4S, NYC, NY 10128 March 18
31. Ms. Betsy Dowling: 75 West Edd Avenue, P-24D, NYC, NY 10023 March 19
32. Mr. and Mrs. David C. Piehl, Jr.: 555 E. 78th Street, NYC, 10021 March 19
33. Ms. Monica Guitar: 1456 Second Avenue, NYC, NY 10128 March 20
34. Mr. and Mrs. Jon Clark: 241 E. 86th Street, 14B, NYC, NY 10028 March 20
35. Mr. and Mrs. Aaron (Tracey) Kozmetsky: 345 E. 86th Street, 15F, NYC, NY 10028 March 21
36. Ms. Tracey T. Brooks: 328 E. 86th Street, Apt. 23, NYC, NY 10128 March 21
37. Mrs. Elizabeth Wolgemuth: 11 W. 89th Street, (B), NYC, NY 10024 March 22
38. Mr. and Mrs. William E. Ford (Anita): 230 E. 71st Street, NYC, NY 10021 March 19
39. Ms. Elizabeth Oldroyd: 210 East 84th Street, Apt. 2C, NYC, NY 10028 March 21
40. Dr. and Mrs. Danny (Veronica) Winder: 100 Haven Ave. (14 C, NYC 10032 March 21

NOTE: We shall be sending "invitations" out to these 40 people the week after Easter...for the April 14th "CONVERSATIONS IN MEMBERSHIP".....

Plus another 10 persons that I'll come up with....

LOOK OUT FOR: Bill and Anita Ford: 249 -0597. Foundry, UM. Methodist interest. Telephone inquiry. Monday, March 18.