

"EMMANUEL"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
December 21, 1986

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TEXT: "And His name shall be called Emmanuel"
(which means God with us).
(Matthew 1: 23)

INTRODUCTION

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"Oh, Lord, how long...how long before You declare Yourself with some mighty act; prove Your existence, and so bring us to our senses. You are the Saviour, so save us. Save our world."

It's a natural cry. In Isaiah we read, "He shall smite the earth with a rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips, He shall slay the wicked". And in Jeremiah we read, "Is not His word like a hammer that breaketh the rod into pieces?" And yet I'm sure that Isaiah and Jeremiah both knew as well as the next religious person that the Word of the Lord generally hits this world with the force of a hint..the sound of a gentle whisper...

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DEVELOPMENT

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Several years later, the customs official, now retired, was having himself a few beers in a bar in Detroit. Suddenly he spied the cyclist coming through the door. Hailing him, he bought him a drink and said, "Look, it doesn't mean anything to me now that I'm retired, but...I'm really curious. What was it that you were smuggling all that time?" And back came the answer, "bicycles!"

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Here are some lines from an unknown 15th Century writer:

"Thou shalt know Him when He comes -
Not by a din of drums,
Nor by the vantage of His airs,
Nor by anything He wears,
Neither by His gown,
Nor His crown.
For His presence known shall be
By the Holy Harmony
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I like that verse because my passions need harmonizing. The notes of my life need to be set in tune with that divine note that God played long ago. I like it, too, because it reminds me that God's revelation is like a stained glass window. From the outside one sees nothing. Only insiders see the radiance and the glory. And I hope and pray you will see that radiance this season and experience something of that blessed holy harmony!

A CHRISTMAS STORY

Each of us, I guess, has his or her favorite Christmas carol. Likewise, each of us has his or her favorite Christmas story, many of whose heroes, not surprisingly are children - like Tiny Tim or Amahal or Imogene in The Best Christmas Pageant Ever.

One of my favorite Christmas stories is Soren Kierkegaard's story of the King and the maid. Kierkegaard didn't tell it as a Christmas story, but that's all right. The Star Spangled Banner I once read was originally a drinking song, and Dvorak's "Going Home" was played at twice the tempo it is played today. An author is entitled to everything the hearer hears in his work.

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"Sire, nothing could be easier. Your majesty has but to appear in all your glory before the humble abode of this maid and instantly she will fall at your feet and be yours".

But...it was precisely that thought that troubled the king. In return for his love, the king wanted hers...not fears that would lead to her submission. He wanted her glorification...not his. What a dilemma when to declare your love means the end of your beloved, and when not to declare your love means the end of love. Night after night the king paced the floor of his palace pondering, until at last he saw love's truth: freedom for the beloved demands equality with the beloved. So late one night, long after his counsellors had retired to their chambers, the king

stole out of a side door of the palace and soon appeared before the humble abode of the maid dressed in the garb of a servant. He knocked on her door.

HE COMES TO US AS ONE OF US

He comes to us as one of us. Indeed, the Christmas story. And again...it's touching and somewhat maddening. This solution, so satisfactory to the king - and to Kierkegaard - had I been the maid I'm not sure that I would have found it satisfactory at all. I think I would have wanted to know more about this young man, the King - about his future and also my own future. Were the two of us going to be stuck forever in this miserable hovel or would we some day go to live in his palace? Why couldn't he be more honest and tell us more? I don't mind marrying a king!

What makes it so maddening is that while we want God to be God, He wants to be human! We want God to be strong, probably so that we can be weak. But He wants to be weak so that we can be strong. We want God to prove Himself, to show Himself in strong, dramatic fashion so all will know He is God. But He answers, "Do you want proof or freedom?"

"God is love" as Scripture says, and that means the revelation is in the relationship. "God is love" means God is known devotionally, not dogmatically. "God is love" does not clear up old mysteries, but rather it discloses new mystery. "God is love" is not a truth we can master; it is only one to which we can surrender. And faith is being grasped by the power of love. So the perfect self-expression of the Holy is in human form. "And His name shall be called Emmanuel" - which means 'God with us'."

Late one night...He stole out of the side door of his palace and appeared before the humble abode of the maid, dressed in the garb of a servant. Why should the maid...why should any of us...open the door? Because, although we behave like frightened virgins, we know that it is in self-abandonment, not in self-improvement that we ultimately find our self-fulfillment. Not in self-improvement but in self-abandonment do we find our self-fulfillment. Let go of the self and let God come into the heart's center.

OPEN THE DOOR WHEN HE KNOCKS

We should open the door because we need to be set free...from fear, for love...from self, to God. We should open that door because we need to turn from the apparent to the truly significant. We should open the door because to deal rightly with earth's sins and needs we must look steadfastly at Him who was sent to us from heaven. We should open the door because deep down we know William Blake was correct:

"And we are put on earth a little space
That we may learn to bear the beams of love".

And so as we near Christmas, dear brothers and sisters, pray to Jesus. Pray to Jesus several times a day this coming week. St. Thomas a Kempis said, "Let Thy thoughts be always upward to God and direct thy prayers to Christ continually". But pray to Jesus, as to One who is more holy than upright; more beautiful than correct; less law abiding and more abiding. Pray to Him as to One who can make our souls steady as well as ardent.

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Like Kierkegaard's maid, we live in a little space and but for a little space. Yet, like St. Theresa, who, taking her turn in the kitchen, found Jesus very easily

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CLOSING

In a palace of a hovel, we can - through self-abandonment find the self-fulfillment that leads to real life.

"O Jesus....thou art standing outside the fast closed door". I hope the maid opened the door when the King knocked that chilly night when he left the palace and came down to the humble abode of the maid dressed in servant's garb. And I hope we do, too - open the door when He knocks at the door of our life.

Perhaps....He is knocking now. Perhaps there is some one present this morning in this Christmas congregation saying, "Yes, Jesus...yes...yes...come into my life. Yes, Jesus....come now...quietly and quickly."

PRAYER

"How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is
given.

So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of
His heaven.

No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin;
Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear
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Make each of us sensitive to your presence and peace in
these quiet moments, O God. Come into our lives and heal
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