

## "GETTING READY FOR CHRISTMAS"

### INTRODUCTION

People are beginning to get ready for Christmas. You can feel it in the air. The stores are crowded, and the traffic makes the street almost impassable. People are addressing their Christmas cards, they're buying their presents, they're ordering their trees, they're making plans for Christmas day, and the students and the people away from home are making their reservations on planes and trains in order to be home at Christmas. People are getting ready for Christmas.

I had planned to preach on a different theme this morning, but something changed my mind, and I began to move off in a different direction. It all began last Sunday. I saw something in the Herald Tribune last Sunday evening that was of unusual interest to me. Some of you may have seen it. On the front page of last Sunday's Herald Tribune there was a picture of a rocket seventy two feet high. On the third page of the same section there was a picture of a sixty-four foot Christmas tree, a gift from the State of Maine to NYC. A rocket and a tree. The rocket, as I recall, stood on a beach in Florida where it was soon to be launched into outer space. The tree stood in the plaza of Rockefeller Center, about to be decorated for Christmas, the largest Christmas tree in the city. Both were tall, upright, tapering toward the sky; both were beautiful, each in its own way, one with the beauty of man-made things, and the other beautiful with that more delicate beauty of things that have been grown. Both stood for things that we can be proud of: the rocket for man's mind reaching outward and upward into the mysteries of the physical universe, penetrating the secrets of nature; and the tree for man's spirit reaching upward and outward into the mysteries of the Eternal.

These two pictures, so close together, jarred me. They sent cold shivers up and down my spine. An intercontinental ballistic missile, and all that it means, and a Christmas tree, ready to be decorated in order to celebrate the birthday of the Prince of Peace. These two things somehow do not go together. The rocket seems to make a farce of the tree, and the tree somehow makes the rocket grotesque.

### WHAT THEY TELL US

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that these two pictures are worth thinking about this morning for a few minutes on this second Sunday in Advent. I think they tell us more about the world that we live in and the kind of people we are than almost anything else than you could suggest. They suggest to us that the world that we live in is a strange mixture of good and evil. We live in a world of rockets and redeemers. We live in a world of missiles and missletoe, a world of satellites and Santa Clauses, a world, if you will, of Kruschev and Christmas. When you stop to think about it our world is split right down the middle. On the one hand, you see people trimming the Christmas tree, getting ready for the best loved holiday in the whole year. And then on the other hand, you have people preparing rockets that may soon reach the moon, or blow up the earth on their way down. This is the kind of world we live in, the world we have to live in, whether we like it or not.

These pictures also serve to remind us that we ourselves are divided. In a sense, we're torn between the rocket and the tree. We take to Christmas the way a duck takes to water; at the same time we

reach out for the rocket. We have an impulsive desire to protect ourselves and to defend ourselves, and we also have an impulsive desire to give and to lose ourselves. We can be terrible in our hate, and we can be tender in our love. We have, so to speak, one foot in heaven, and the other on earth. It may frighten us to see these things about our world and ourselves, and yet I can't help but feel that perhaps out of all this there may come a good, strong healthy fear, ~~for as it has been said,~~ "THE KIND OF FEAR THAT IS THE BEGINNING OF ALL WISDOM"

### TWO THINGS TO REMEMBER

So much for the pictures. There are two things that a Christian needs to remember at a time like this, and the first is simply this: the world has always been a mixture of good and evil. Sometimes we're likely to forget this fact. We become so pre-occupied with the world situation and the great tensions that exist that we in turn lose sight of the great perspective. A Christian knows (in the light of history, and in the light of what he knows about the revelation of God in the Bible) that the world has always been a strange mixture of Good and Evil. We think of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, to be sure, mythology at its best, and yet it suggests to us the struggle between right and wrong. While Jesus was in the wilderness following his baptism by John the Baptist, Satan was waiting to tempt him. While Augustine dreamed about the City of God, the barbaric hordes from the north were storming the gates of Hippo. While Schweitzer was pleading for the end of nuclear tests, the London disarmament conference was ending in a fizzle. While reformers clean up the city, the racketeers tear it down. So it is, and so it goes.

All of this reminds me of a sermon that Harry Emerson Fosdick preached back in 1935 about the time that we were emerging from the depression and the war clouds were just beginning to gather over Europe. The sermon has become something of a classic in so far as sermons go, and it was addressed to the people who were asking this question: "How can I be a Christian in an Unchristian world?" He began, as he would, with his imaginative use of the Bible, by turning to Paul's Letter to the Philippians to the section where the following words are to be found: "All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household". Dr. Fosdick went on to preach his sermon on what it means to be a saint in Caesar's household, that is, to live the good life in an atmosphere hostile to goodness, to make the heroic effort in a world where heroism was doomed from the start. It may not be easy to be a Christian in this rocket conscious age, but neither was it easy to be a Christian in the palace of Nero. It's never been easy to be a Christian.

And then the second thing that Christians need to remember at a time like this is that human beings never need be completely at the mercy of the world. We ought never to lose sight of the fact that men can and do change the world for better. They can and have made the desert bloom like a rose. They may not have been able to eliminate all disease, but they have eliminated a great many. They can and have taken children out of coal mines and put them into schools. They can and have emancipated human beings from slavery and set them free. They can and have changed dictatorships into democracies. They can and have reclaimed slums and made them into decent homes. They can and have taken broken personalities and made them whole again. The earth may not be the Garden of Eden, but at least men and women are doing their best to keep the weeds down.

## "GETTING READY FOR CHRISTMAS"

INTRODUCTION Today is the first Sunday in the Advent Season. Once again our hearts begin to turn toward Christmas and the coming of Jesus into our world. Already people are getting ready for Christmas....the colored lights across 86th Street cast their warm and cheerful message...people are doing their Christmas shopping....getting their cards addressed....making their plans for Christmas Day even before the left-overs from the Thanksgiving Day celebration have been tended to. However, this year we go about all of this in a somewhat different mood than we have on other occasions. For in the background there hangs the great tragedy of last weekend. Life goes on, to be sure, (and this is our faith as Christian people) but all of us feel, I'm sure, that something good, something great has been taken out of our world.

DEVELOPMENT What I want to say to you this morning in the way of getting ready for Christmas grows out of the tragic events of that long and historic weekend which brought all of America to its knees. Certainly not all has been said or written that needs saying and writing about those day none of us will ever forget.

Last Monday's edition of the NY Times showed two pictures on the front page. Both of these pictures touched on different aspects of things that happened on Sunday. One picture (at the top on the left hand side) showed Mrs. Kennedy and Caroline Kennedy kneeling quietly and reverently at the coffin of President Kennedy as it stood in the Capitol. (It has been said a picture is worth a thousand words) (This one was...it said so much). It spoke of things holy, of things sacred. It spoke of a reverence for life. It spoke of goodness and of all those things you and I associate with it. We think quietly here this morning of the things...ideals, values...for which the man stood whose body had been tenderly placed in that coffin. The picture spoke of a recognition of a power far greater than ourselves, a power which was the source of his courage, his idealism. This same power was also the source of the inner strength which enabled Mrs. Kennedy to walk with such great dignity across the center of the stage of history as it was being made. The picture had even more to say for the American flag draped over the coffin reminded us, too, that woven into the fabric of the life of this nation are great spiritual ideals - justice, brotherhood, freedom, equality, life, liberty, pursuit of happiness. Truly this picture of Mrs. Kennedy and Caroline kneeling at the coffin spoke eloquently to all of us of all that is good and holy in human life.

The second picture (at the bottom of the page on the right hand side) showed Lee Harvey Oswald cringing in pain as he was being shot to death by Jack Ruby in the Dallas Jail. This picture, too, had much to say. It spoke of anger, cruelty, disorder, insane malice, misguided loyalty, murder, revenge, rebelliousness, violence. It showed the face of a man who knew no higher law, no higher power, a man who had no respect for the dignity and sacredness of human life.

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our minds to think in terms of love and kindness rather than hate and cruelty.

There is another thing that comes to us. I think all of us have been extremely conscious of our need for God in real fashion these past ten days. We have been driven to our knees. Who of us was not moved by the anguished words of this young wife who cried, "Oh God, no". She must have known almost from the first what the truth was.

When I saw her descend from the airplane ramp, walk bravely to the door of the ambulance and fumble for the door to open that was locked, I could not escape the feeling that she knew that she stood in the center of time and eternity. She could not have taken her part without a sense of her part in history. He was her husband, the father of their children, and the President of a great nation. Under God she was bidden to be all that she could be.... and she was sustained.

What do we learn from this? I think we should see in it a promise that all who trust in God are upheld by the invisible powers that touch only those who know they have not the strength to bear a burden alone.

Will God help us then? Yes - but on only one condition. We must put our hand out for his before he will stretch his hand to us. And this it seems to me, as we pause today in the afterglow of thanksgiving and prepare for ourselves for the coming of Christ, this is something for our deepest thanksgiving. This is our faith as Christians because of what happened long ago on a dark night in Palestine when God brought forth a new life into the world which has given light and hope to all in many a tragic moment of life. It is the light of love and it offers us the only real hope if we are ever to claim for our time and for all time that ancient vision of peace on earth - goodwill to men.

This is what I see - this is something for our deepest thanksgiving. George McDonald, the great Scotsman, wrote of his agony at being bidden by God to carry a burden he did not wish to take. But at last he accept it and he tells us - in a tenderly intimate exposure of his own soul:

"Into his hand went mine  
And into my heart came he  
And I walked in a path sublime  
A path I had feared to see"

LET US PRAY:

As we come to thy table this morning, O God, may we come quietly....thoughtfully....reverently....mindful of the life that these moments have brought to mind.

May the courage, the integrity, the goodness, and the unselfish dedication of our late beloved President to the great tasks of this day in bringing peace to the world and freedom to many within the borders of our nation touch our lives in meaningful fashion.

And as we kneel at thy table, Our Father, at this place where the wisemen of all ages have knelt, may something of thy spirit flow into our lives.....that we may depart from this place strengthened, renewed and ready to go forth into our world - not to condemn it, but to redeem it through love and goodwill. Save us from assassinations on truth, goodness and kindness. We ask this in the spirit of Christ.