

"HE CAME TO US"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

About a hundred years ago down in eastern Tennessee, there was a famous female moonshiner known as "Big Haley". The woman's real name was Mahala Mullins, but since she tipped the scale somewhere around 500 pounds they called her "Big Haley" and the name understandably stuck.

They say down there that Big Haley and her sons ran a reliable operation. They became well-known for the quality of their product not only in Tennessee, but also across state lines. They didn't dilute their moonshine and were known to deal honestly. And that fact, coupled with the problems of arresting a mountain clan, caused local officials to pretty much leave them alone. However, a newly-elected sheriff tried to arrest Big Haley in an effort to make a name for himself. The judge who signed the arrest warrant just smiled and told the new sheriff to be sure to bring her in...into the court room.

The sheriff and his deputies had no trouble finding Big Haley's cabin. He knocked on the cabin door, entered and informed her she was under arrest. What he discovered, however, was that Big Haley was bigger than the cabin doorway and after some futile effort, he decided not to arrest her after all. When the judge later on asked the sheriff about her, the officer complained saying, "Well...she's catchable, but not fetchable." "Catchable, but not fetchable"

DEVELOPMENT

There are some things in life like that...they may be catchable but in the vernacular of the mountains, they're not fetchable.

Suppose you and I had never heard about Jesus Christ, but we wanted to know about God. How would we go about it? I suppose we could begin by looking at nature to draw our conclusions, but nature presents a "mixed bag", as they say. Certainly, there's the abundance of the soil and the faithfulness of the four seasons, not to mention the breath-taking beauty of the sunset and the stars and the amazing complexity of all that "lives and moves and has its being". But there is also cruelty in nature and destruction and terror. Is that what God is like. I hope not.

Or, we could turn to pages of sacred literature. All the world's great religions seek to describe God in high and exalted writings, but they were written by human beings - people like you and me. Granted, they were religious geniuses but how can we know that their testimony is true?

The little girl sits in a corner of a class room drawing a picture of God. "But no one knows how God looks" someone says to her. "They will when I'm finished" is her answer. And who's to say she's wrong. Her guess is as good as anyone else's if all we have to go on is our human intuition.

Truly God is neither "catchable" nor "fetchable". Can clay describe its potter? Can fish do justice to the one who changes the water in their aquarium? How can tiny human brains that cannot understand electricity or produce a cure for the common cold ever hope to comprehend the wonder of the eternal Creator God? We cannot. Fortunately, we do not have to. Why? Because He came to us. As folks in the business world would say - that's the "bottom line" when it comes to Christmas. God has come to us....in the child in the manger.

Catchable? Fetchable? No, because He has come to us.

TO A HUMBLE MAIDEN IN AN OBSCURE VILLAGE

He came to a humble maiden in
an obscure village named Nazareth.

Not to the philosophers or the Caesars or mighty war-lords, but to a humble maiden named Mary. How extraordinary. No wonder the cynics of the world reject such talk as nonsense.

Sometime back there was a story in Time about a 2-foot-long, 40 pound package that arrived at the post office in Troy, Michigan, addressed to a Michael Achorn. The PO phoned Achorn's wife, Margaret, who cheerfully went to accept it, but as she drove the package back to her office in Detroit she began to worry. The box was from Montgomery Ward, but the sender, Edward Achorn, was unknown to Margaret and her husband, Michael, despite the same last name.

Suppose, she thought, the thing inside was a bomb. It could be. So she telephoned the postal authorities and soon the bomb squad arrived on the scene with eight squad cars and an armored truck. They took the suspicious looking package in the armored truck to a remote tip of Belle Island in the middle of the Detroit River and there they wrapped detonating cord around the package and as they say in the bomb business, they "opened it remotely" with a big bang.

After the explosion and after the debris had settled, all that was left intact was the factory warranty for the contents: a \$450 stereo AM-FM receiver and tape deck console. Now the only mystery that was left was who is Edward Achorn and why did he send Michael and Margaret Achorn such a nice Christmas present?

We live in a cynical age. Who can talk of angels and humble maidens and of Divine Revelation in the same breath to such a generation? And yet, dear friend, on such a foundation does our faith rest. Yes, most extraordinary!

Selma Lagerlof, the Swedish novelist, once wrote a little volume that she called Christ Legends. One of the most beautiful is called, "The Wise Men's Well".

Let me share it. In this legend the three Wise Men are drawn together by their common vision of this beautiful star that bids them seek a newborn King. They follow this star across desert and plain until it stands over a grotto in Bethlehem. But when they look into the grotto they see only a young peasant woman and her husband with a newborn child. They turn away in disappointment.

After they have gone some distance, however, they discover they have lost the star and with it the memory of where they have been. Then, overwhelmed by a sense of guilt, they know that they have allowed their earthly judgment to lead them astray. In their shattering remorse they come upon an old well. It is a well that is known for its brilliant reflections to the local folk. They sink down in despair at its side until one of them, wishing to quench his thirst, suddenly finds in the depths of the well the reflected image of the lost star. Looking up to the sky, they discover it there. Thus they are led back to the grotto where they pay their homage to the hidden King, to Mary's child.

Marshall McLuhan said many years ago, "the medium is the message". There must be something starkly significant about the means God used to reveal Himself. As we reduce Christmas in our time to an orgy of material satisfaction, let us consider what it means that the Christ was born in some of the most deprived circumstances in this world. He came to a humble maiden in an obscure village called Nazareth.

TOLD SHE WOULD BEAR A CHILD

Now, this humble maiden living in Nazareth was told she would bear a child.

William Griffin tells this story beautifully in his book, Jesus For Children. Let me share it with you.

"Stay where you are" said the frightened young girl, "or I'll scream!" "My name is Gabriel" said the tall stranger. "Are you an angel?" asks Mary. "I have a message for you...you shouldn't go around surprising people" said Mary, closing her book.

"Angels are for surprises" said Gabriel. "I didn't know that" said Mary.

"You are one of God's favorites" says Gabriel. "He wants you to know that" says Gabriel. "Thank you for telling me", Mary now replies. "And He wants to ask you a favor. He wants you to be the mother of His child. The child the Scriptures speak of. The child that will save all the people of the world. Will you do God this favor?"

"Does He have to ask" Mary replies. "Blessed are you among women" says Gabriel and the angel was gone. Yes, God did have to ask, thought Mary to herself, as she returned to her book, and yes, she would never say no."

The angel announced to her that she would have a child. God would not be content to communicate with His creation by satellite or by skywriting. He would actually become One of us. And that is mind-boggling. I wonder...have you heard the story so many times that you have forgotten what it's saying? The manger of Bethlehem becomes the "entry place" for God to touch down on earth to reveal Himself in human flesh. That's deep..too deep for many of us to take in.

Wade Burton tells about a man who was riding a bus from Chicago to Miami. He had a stop-over in Atlanta. Sitting at a lunch counter, a woman came out of the ladies' rest room carrying a tiny baby and she asked the man,

"Will you hold my baby for me. I left my purse in the rest room...."

He did. But then as the woman neared the front door of the bus station, she darted out into the crowded street and was immediately lost in the crowd. The man couldn't believe his eyes. He rushed to the door to call after the woman, but she had disappeared in the crowd. What should he do? Put the baby down and run? When calmness settled in he went to the Traveller's Aid booth and they soon found the baby's real mother. Seems that the mother who had left him holding the baby was not the baby's real mother. She had taken the child, perhaps to satisfy a motherly urge to hold a child. The man breathed a sigh of relief when the real mother was found. After all, what was he to do with a baby?

And in a way each of us is in the same situation as this gentleman. We are left with the question, "What will we do with the baby?" - with the babe that grew to be a man and died on a cross? Have we really come to terms with the

fact that this baby is not simply extraordinarily gifted, but that He is Himself a gift to all mankind from the very heart of God?

In his story, Cat's Cradle, the contemporary novelist, Kurt Vonnegut, shows a physicist who helped "father" the atom bomb visiting his laboratory during the Christmas season. Office employees are all standing around a creche singing Christmas carols. With cup in hand, they sing, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight". Do the carolers really believe that "the hopes and fears of all the years" - which will vanish in a moment if someone presses the wrong button on the little black box - rest on faith in a Bethlehem "newborn" destined to live only 33 years on this earth? Yes, my friend, that's what we believe. We believe that the God of all creation came to a humble maiden in an obscure village called Nazareth and told her that she would bear a child...

"...a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the most High.and of His Kingdom there will be no end!"

HOPE OF THE WORLD

That child is the hope of our world. And this is the message of Christmas...the reason for the season. What it is saying to us is this. Power and possession are illusions. They are fleeting. Here today. Gone tomorrow. Pride and pretense are tragedies. Only one thing matters. Only one thing is eternal. That is relationships. That is what we are trying to say with our gifts.

"You matter to me. I love you. There is nothing in the world that is as important to me as you are."

We can say that to one another, because an incomprehensible God said it first to us.

On Christmas Day a small manger scene had been carefully set up on a table just inside the doorway of a busy home. People hurried past it all day long, in and out...barely noticing the tiny figures gathered around the infant tucked into golden straw. In the morning children raced by it on their way to the presents under the tree. At noon, as guests arrived, they pushed past it, one accidentally knocking over a shepherd as he took off his heavy winter coat.

Later in the afternoon a well-fed assembly of adults and children moved somewhat slowly by the manger again as they drifted from the dining room area back into the living room. Almost none of them stopped to look at the manger scene. In fact, none of them even noticed it, except two. An elderly woman, walking with a cane, passed in front of the scene. Gently she put the shepherd who had been knocked over back into an upright position. Then she looked at the child in the middle of the figures. Presently she became aware of a small grandson by her side. As voices drifted in from the living room, the two of them continued to look deeply on the scene. At length a smile spread across the woman's face. The child took her hand. And there in the midst of a day filled with much busyness, the two of them quietly received God's gift.

God came to a humble maiden in an obscure village called Nazareth. He told her that she would bear a child. The child would grow to be the hope of the world. Christmas is the starting point of the greatest story ever told. As someone has written of Him:

"Of all the armies that ever marched, and all of the navies ever built...all of the parliaments that ever sat and all of the kings who have ever reigned...all of these...put together...have not affected the life of man on this planet as much as this 'one Solitary Life!'"

PRAYER Lord, help us to remember the birth of Jesus, that we may share in the song of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds and the worship of the Wise Men.

Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world. And let kindness come with every gift, and good desires with every greeting. Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings and teach us to be merry with clear and light hearts.

May the Christmas morning make us happy to be Your children. And the Christmas evening bring us to our beds, with grateful thoughts, forgiving and forgiven. In the name of the Christ Child, we pray. Amen.

A CHRISTMAS BAPTISM

INTRODUCTION Boys and girl....all of you....a baptism on this
Sunday before Christmas....it helps to make Christmas
even more special for us all! I remember last year we baptized Linnea
and Peter Jacobson on this special Fourth Sunday of Advent.

Today we are baptizing a little girl. Her name is:

A BAY JEA.....CHARMANE BEMBURY A beautiful name.

Infant daughter of Charmane White Bembury and Edward Lee White
Bembury...sister of Salehe...also baptized here...

A BAY JE Born last February 15th...in Mt. Sinai Hospital.
Her Godmother is Dr. Vriginia Flintall....who, along with
Charmane and Lee and Salehe I now invite to the baptismal font. How nice
to have grandparents here today to share in this blessed moment.

ADVENT WREATH / CANDLE AND BANNER

FOURTH SUNDAY

Welcome to the Fourth Sunday in Advent. Each Sunday during this warm and wonderful season of Advent...as we make our way to Bethlehem and the manger of the Christ Child....the boys and girls of our Sunday School join us down here. First to sing and then to lead us in the lighting of the Advent candles.

Our fourth Advent Banner - our LOVE BANNER - is now hanging over here on the wall...reminding us of the LOVE of this time of year. Jesus always brings hope, and peace, and joy and love....tin our lives and into the life of our world when we open our hearts to receive Him. All four banners are up and that means we must be getting close to Christmas...

Our candle lighters today are: Daniel Lewis, Marissa Lombardo, D'ivia Melwani. Linnea Jacobson. However, before we light the candles, we're going to have a song. (No song today? I know we worked you hard last Sunday....) How BLESSED we all were last Sunday by your music... and the pageant!

LIGHTING / PRAYER

We'll proceed to the candle lighting then and invite Daniel and Marissa and D'ivia and Linnea to join me on the steps....

"Fill our hearts, O God, with the Christmas lights of hope and peace and joy and love on this Day Sunday before Christmas.

For these special moments together in Your House, O God, we thank you. And we thank You for these children...such precious gifts to us...and for their helping us to prepare ourselves for the greatest gift of all - Your son in Bethlehem's manger.

Bless us all together and help us to listen carefully that we may hear the song of the angels...and of the hope for peace on earth and goodwill to all men. In the spirit of the Christ Child, we pray. Amen."

BAPTISM

Now we invite the children to remain for the baptism of Abeje, infant daughter of Charmane and Edward Lee White Bembury. (Abeje Charmane....sister of Salehe Lee Bembury). Special moment for Charmane and Lee...joined by.....

LORD'S PRAYER

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And let us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power and the Glory, forever...."

INTRODUCTION

As the world once again draws still to hear the song of the angels, and to kneel in adoration before the manger of the Christ Child....

Let us enter into a time of quietness...preparing our hearts that we may receive the GLAD TIDINGS of this Holy Season. In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We come like shepherds...lonely and seeking.
We come like Wise Men...~~searching~~ looking in the ~~wrong~~ at time wrong places for Your gifts.
We come because year after year we have heard the angels sing and have been reminded of the GIFT of love.

~~We seek the hope that His coming assures.~~
We seek the love that His coming brings.
We seek the joy that His coming inspires.

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"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".

We remember the HOPE He shared with the discouraged, and the HEALING He brought to the sick.

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

Touch with Healing, O God, father of us all, those whom we "lift up" in our prayers this

Sunday:

Jane Brown...mother of Edward.
Louise Williams...mother of Ann.
Karen Oldham
Mary Lewis Beloved members and
Ada Kinney friends of this parish.
Daisy Herrick
Philip Yu / Gloria ^{FLYNN} Scott / Sharon Johnson

And let your healing benediction touch each of us at the point of our deepest need. Comfort the bereaved and broken-hearted in our midst.

All of this we now ask in the name and spirit of Jesus who 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....

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, December 23, 1990

GREETING / VISITORS

A word of warm greeting to the visitors who have joined us here in worship this morning. Delighted you're here...and hope that we'll have the joy of greeting you personally before you depart.

Join us downstairs at the coffee hour. Be free in the sharing of your name with us. Fill out a visitor card or sign one of the Guest Books in the narthex. Come and worship with us on other Sunday. Come, work with us in the programs of outreach that we are involved in here in the community.

We minister in the name of Christ...have been doing so since 1837. It is in His loving spirit that we greet you all on this the Fourth Sunday of Advent, 1990.

MERRY CHRISTMAS

We wish you all a joyous and a Merry Christmas. May the Christmas lights of peace and hope, of joy and love be yours this Christmas.

It's a warm and wonderful time of the year. These days usually bring families together and how nice it is to welcome home some of our ~~college students....students away from home~~....as well as to greet the parents and grandparents of some of you.

PARISH CONCERNS

Our thanks to all of you who responded so generously to the Christmas Flower fund...the tree, the ten wreaths, the pointsettias...the list is long of all who have given. Our thanks to each of you.

Also, our thanks for the many Christmas gifts to the Church at this time of the year. They make a difference and we are most grateful. Grateful for the gifts already received and for those to be received here this morning and on Christmas Eve.

Remember the Christmas Eve Service tomorrow evening....our traditional Service of Carols and Candles. All are invited....bring a friend with you.....it's a good HABIT OF THE HEART....a chance to sing the carols, to light a candle and to worship the Christ Child in the haunting loveliness of this sanctuary.

Just as we wrap presents, so too we are "wrapping up" our 1991 financial canvass. Pledges are still being received. We're up to 177 pledges totalling \$123,588. We'd like to be up to 190 by today at 1. We invite you to respond if you have not already. 200 by the 1st of the year.

OFFERING

"It is more blessed to give than it is to receive". In...

PASTORAL PRAYER: December 23, 1990

WE THANK YOU, O GOD, for the light that has come into our world in
the life and love of Jesus...

HELP each of us to "catch" something of that light in
our lives this weekend.

LET IT SHINE through us to pierce the darkness of some
life...some home...of some situation this
Christmas Season.

By the WAY of Bethlehem, lead us, Lord to newness of
life...

By the INNOCENCE of the Christ Child, renew our simple
trust...

By the TENDERNESS OF MARY, deliver us from hardness
of heart, from cruelty and violence...

By the PATIENCE OF JOSEPH, save us from making rash and
unkind judgments of others, and thus enable
us to persevere through life's more demanding
and difficult moments.

By the WISE MEN'S long and tedious journey, keep our
searching spirits from fainting, our steps
from faltering.

By the SHINING OF A STAR, guide our feet in these days of mounting world
~~of our world~~ tension in the path of good will,
brotherhood and of peace on earth.

AND LORD....as we rejoice this weekend in the joy and wonder of these
days....

Without forgetting the sadness, the sorrow...the hurt and
hunger...the poverty and prejudice that are abroad in
our world...

We would remember that light that the darkness cannot put out...

Bring us faith in place of doubt, and strength in place of
fear. Cheer us with the song: of the angels. Let
Christmas come into our world and bring us all together.

This we now ask in the name of Him who was born in a stable, even Jesus
Christ, our Lord.