

"LEARNING FROM A LITTLE CHILD"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
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## "LEARNING FROM A LITTLE CHILD"

### INTRODUCTION

Dr. Bryant Kirkland, former pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church here in the city, tells of traveling to preach out on the West Coast one winter not too long ago. He said,

"I needed the time on that three hour flight to study and to prepare what I was going to say....and so I buckled down and let everyone near me feel the tension I was under....you know, don't bother me....I'm a busy man with places to go and work to do. A young woman and a baby slipped into the seat next to mine. I thought to myself....'this is going to be difficult'... so I kept a straight face and tried to look very Presbyterian. It lasted for about ten minutes and then pretty soon this little boy began fussing around. 'Man, man' he cooed at me. I couldn't resist, so I put my sermon down...back into my brief case, picked him up out of his seat and just loved him all the way across the country.

When he landed in Los Angeles, his mother said to me, 'Thank you for doing that. He lost his father not long ago and he has no man to muss him up like that and love him. Thank you so very, very much.'"

And Dr. Kirkland realized, as he got off the plane and pushed into the crowd, just how much joy and peace that little boy had brought into his own heart, when he least expected it would happen.

### DEVELOPMENT

Sometimes a child will do that for us. Sometimes a child can get into a heart that has been locked tight for years. Isn't that what Christmas is all about? There is a child that has brought that kind of joy into millions of hearts across many centuries. One of the great hymns of the Advent Season says it best,

"Come, Thou long-expected Jesus....born to set thy people free." That's what many of us are longing for this Advent Season....longing to be set free.

Maurice Boyd, in his book, Corridors of Light, tells of a man who as a child treasured the Christmas story. But there came a time in his life's journey when he knew so much that he simply could no longer believe the story's miraculous setting. He had discovered psychology, Freudian thinking, science, Biblical criticism and other academic disciplines. But when he reached the sunset years of his life, he was now not only educated, but wise. He realized how much he did not really know. Now like his childhood days, he came to believe once again in the words of the Biblical writers who told of shepherds in Bethlehem's fields, and of Wise Men coming out of the East and of angels singing in the heavens and a child who can set us all free.

What are the great truths of this Christmas Season that can fill our hearts with joy and praise. Let me speak of three.

IMMANUEL: GOD WITH US

The first, of course, is communicated by that ancient word, "Immanuel" which means God is with us. Isaiah the prophet predicted it hundreds of years before the birth of the child in Bethlehem.

"Be strong. Do not fear. Your God will come....."

And God did come, and God is with us still. There is a way out of the sinfulness and the hopelessness that can destroy the human spirit, because we are not alone.

Dr. John Killinger in his book, Christmas Spoken Here, tells of a little girl who was hospitalized during the Christmas season. As the days passed and the test results were collected, it became obvious that she would not be able to be at home on Christmas day. Her prosperous and caring parents showered her with expensive gifts in an effort to overcome this unfortunate circumstance. There were great overstuffed animals, including a six-foot tall giraffe, dolls, dollhouses and games of every description. The room was transformed into a miniature, "Toys-R-Us". Every time her parents came to the hospital they brought another present. But they were never able to stay very long for they were always having to run off to some society function.

One day the child was particularly unhappy in the midst of all these fine gifts and held desperately onto her mother as her mother gave her a kiss and a hug before running out the door to the next engagement. The mother tried to interest her child in the newest toy she had brought. Through tears the child cried, "Mommy, I want you!" That is our greatest need, too, isn't it? We want God. We want to know that God lives and that God cares and that God is with us. Immanuel!

Mark Connelly in his classic play, Green Pastures, has the angel Gabriel walk on the stage with his horn under his arm and approach the Lord who is in deep thoughts. God is troubled about what is happening among his people on earth. God is troubled - because He has sent prophets and messengers but the people refuse to listen to them. God is troubled about humanity's sinful ways. Gabriel offers to blow his horn - the final trumpet - and end the whole thing, but the Lord brushes the horn from Gabriel's lips. Gabriel presses the Lord about what He is going to do. The Lord answers Gabriel by saying,

"I am not going to send anybody this time. I am going MYSELF."

And that's the first piece of "good news" about Christmas. God did not remain in Heaven....receiving a computer printout on the sufferings of the world. God did not issue a memo to form a committee to work on our dilemmas. NO! God left the throne and came into the trenches. Indeed, God did more than that. God became one of the wounded. His hands are nail-scarred. In Christ, God became the "wounded healer". See Isaiah 53: verses 1 - 12. That's what makes Christmas like no other holiday in the world.

First of all....Immanuel. God with us. But wait, there's more. Turn the page with me.

GOD SPEAKS TO US.....

most unlikely people.

The Christmas story teaches us that God speaks to us in the most unthinkable places and through the

Certainly John the Baptist was an unlikely person to prepare the way for the Messiah. Clothes made of camel's hair, a diet of locusts and of wild honey. No wonder Jesus chided the crowd (in today's scripture lesson), saying:

"What did you go out to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes?"

If that's what the crowd went out to see they were in for a shock. Then Jesus answered his own question:

"A prophet? And yes, I tell you...and more than a prophet." God speaks to us in strange places and through unlikely people.

I never tire of hearing stories of churches that put on the traditional nativity pageant. In this particular church was a lively ten year old boy who had managed to create a disaster in just about every Christmas pageant he had been in. The boy's name, as I recall, was Barry. One year his angel wings caught on fire which nearly burned down the church. And the next year, as Herod the Great, he jumped up from his throne and in his usual clumsy way jerked the carpet out from under three Wise Men and dumped them on their heads. The children begged the teacher not to let Barry ruin another Christmas pageant. The whispers went around,

"Please teacher....can't you leave Barry out of this year's pageant?"

But the teacher could not reject a little boy who tried his best and loved Jesus with all his heart, even if he was inclined to be a big clumsy and a bit of an unruly youngster. She was finally able to convince the children that Barry couldn't do any real damage by playing the innkeeper of Bethlehem. All he had to do was open and close a door and speak one short line.

Well, Barry made it through all the rehearsals and the dress rehearsal. But then on the night when all the mothers and fathers, all the friends and the strangers and the entire community sat in hushed silence, reliving the Christmas story, Barry had his chance to "redeem" himself with a flawless performance. He opened the door of the inn and looked straight into the face of Mary and Joseph. Mary sat very sad and pale on a little donkey which they never used in practice. Why, you could almost hear the cold wind whistling around the cold stone walls of the inn and blowing the thin cloak of gentle Mary. But Barry came through. He said his line with professional emphasis and perfect timing:

"Begone....I have no room for the likes of you!"

And with that Mary and Joseph turned sadly away into the cold night, but Barry was still standing at the open door of his inn. Those who were on the front row saw tears well up in his eyes and his lips trembled and then he said:

"Wait....." It came like a thunderclap. Every heart in the room stopped. What on earth? That word wasn't in the script of the familiar Christmas story. "WAIT" he called out to them....

Then Barry finished it:

"WAIT! You all can have my room. Wait. Don't go."

Well, all bedlam they say broke loose. The children cried. Parents were outraged and pandemonium reigned. Barry had "ruined" another Christmas pageant. But the teacher quieted the crowd, dried Barry's tears as well as her own and said,

"Maybe....Barry was the real messenger after all. Only those who have 'room' in their hearts, can the dear Christ enter in....."

God comes to us in unexpected places and speaks through unexpected people. And sometimes we can become so busy celebrating Christmas that we fail to hear the voice of the One who spoke the first Christmas into existence.

It's like a little boy and his father who were admiring Holman Hunt's famous painting of Christ knocking at the door. The little boy shouted out,

"Daddy....daddy...why don't the just answer the door." The father said, "To tell you the truth, I don't know why". Then the young boy said, "Perhaps they are making too m ch noise to hear him knocking". Ah...the wisdom of children.

Dr. Ernest Campbell in his book, Where Cross the Crowded Ways: Prayers of a City Pastor, share a prayer he once wrote, a line or two of which I have used in an Advent prayer:

"Grant, that when Christmas breaks for us this year, we may have something more to show for our much running about than tired feet, unwrapped present, and regrets for cards not sent."

I like that. And if that is to happen, you and I will have to look for God in unexpected places and hear God speak through unexpected people. But there's one more thing to say and I shall say it briefly.

CHRISTMAS STORY IS NOT YET FINISHED: The Christmas story is as yet unfinished. For you cannot isolate the Christmas story from the rest of God's activity in human history. Advent and Christmas are part of an unfolding drama. God seeks and continues to seek the redemption of His creation. Isaiah long ago described it this way:

"The eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped....the lame leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute shout for joy. And a highway shall be there and it will be called the Way of Holiness...."

Much of that prophecy that is yet to be fulfilled, but it will happen. As the writer of the Epistle said, "Be patient...until the Lord's coming". The story of Christmas is as yet unfinished.

Dr. Earl C. Davis of Memphis tells of finding a book called, The Curse of Batterslea Hall. The interesting thing he discovered about the book is that the book had not one but twenty-two possible endings. You simply chose the one you liked. Dr. Earl Davis then said,

"There is a sense in which the Christmas story is like that...you choose the ending to it. You can keep it fenced in by Thanksgiving and New Years, and keep the babe of Bethlehem in the cradle forever or you can let Him grow up and call you to follow Him. The choice is yours."

And that is true. Each of us will choose how we will finish the Christmas story in our own lives. And that is where we stand on this Third Sunday of Advent. Will we shout with Barry, "Hey, wait! You can have my room" which I believe is just another way of saying, "Wait...you can have my heart!" Or will we simply be observers who keep the child in the manger where we can visit Him once a year.

God is with us. God speaks to us in the strangest places and through the most unexpected people. It's like the little girl named Schia who was 4 years old when her baby brother was born.

"Little Schia began to ask her parents to leave her alone with the new baby....but they worried that, like most 4 year olds, she might want to hit or shake him so they said 'NO'....Over time, however, since Schia wasn't showing signs of jealousy, they changed their minds and decided to let Schia have her private conference with her baby brother. Elated, Schia went into the baby's room and shut the door, but it opened a crack...enough for her curious parents to peek in and listen. They saw little Schia walk quietly up to her baby brother, put her face close to his and say, 'Baby, tell me what God feels like. I'm starting to forget.'"

CLOSING

We come to Advent and Christmas each year to ask the babe to remind us of what God is like. But the Christmas story is as yet unfinished. How it is finished in our lives is....it's really up to us.

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Dr. Bryant Kirkland, the former pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church here in the city, tells of traveling to preach out on the Coast one winter not too long ago. He said,

"I needed the time on that three hour flight to study and to prepare what I was going to say...and so I buckled down and let everyone near me feel the tension I was under....you know, don't bother me....I'm a busy man with places to go and important things to do. A young woman with a baby slipped into the seat next to mine and I thought to myself....'hmm...this is going to be difficult'....so I kept a straight face and tried to look very Presbyterian. It lasted for about ten minutes and then this little two year old boy began fussing around. 'Man, man' he cooed at me. I couldn't resist, so I put down my sermon...put it back into my precious brief case, picked him up out of his seat and just 'loved him' all the way across the country. Finally....

When we landed in LA, his mother said to me....'Thank you for doing that. He lost his father not too long ago and he has no man to muss him up like that and love him. Thank you....so very much.'"

And Dr. Kirkland realized as he got off the plane and pushed into the crowd, just how much joy and peace that little boy had brought into his own heart....when he least expected it would happen.

### DEVELOPMENT

Sometimes a child will do that for us. Sometimes a child can get "into a heart" that has been locked up tight for many years. And isn't that really what Christmas is all about? There is a "child" that has brought that kind of joy into the hearts of millions across the centuries of time. One of the great hymans of this Advent Season through which we are now moving says it best:

"Come, Thou long-expected Jesus, born to set Thy people free."

That's what many of us are longing for this Advent Season...longing to be set free.

Maurice Boyd, in his book, Corridors of Light, tells of a man who as a child treasured the Christmas story. But there came a time in his life's journey when he knew so much that he simply could no longer believe the story's miraculous setting. He had discovered psychology and science, Biblical criticism and other academic disciplines. But when he reached the sunset years of his life, he was now not only educated, but also wise. And he slowly came to the realization how much he did not really know. Now, like his childhood days, he came to believe once again in the words of the Biblical writers who "told" of Wise Men coming out of the East and of shepherds in Bethlehem's fields and of angels singing in the heavens and of a child who can set us all free! Who was it who said, "You're not a realist if you don't believe in miracles"? I know it was Einstein, the great Albert Einstein who said "there are only two ways to live your life. One: as if nothing is a miracle, or the other: as though everything is a miracle."



IMMANUEL: GOD WITH US

What are the great truths of this Christmas Season that can fill our hearts with joy and praise and can set us free? Let me speak of three.

The first, of course, is communicated by that ancient word, "Immanuel", which means God is with us. Isaiah, the prophet, predicted it hundreds of years before the birth of the child in Bethlehem. "Be strong. Fear not. Your God will come...." And God did come and God is with us still. And therein is our hope. There is a way out of the sinfulness and the hopelessness that can destroy the human spirit....because we are not alone.

John Killinger in his book, Christmas Spoken Here, tells of a little girl who was hospitalized about this time of the year and it looked like she wouldn't get home for Christmas and her parents aware of this began to shower her with all sorts of gifts...some quite expensive...that she would have in her hospital room....overstuffed animals, including a six-foot tall giraffe, and dolls and dollhouses and games of every description. Her hospital room was transformed into a miniature "TOYS-R-US". Every time her parents walked into her room they brought with them another present, but they were never able to stay very long for they were always running off to some social function or party...

One day just before Christmas, the little girl was so unhappy in the midst of all these beautiful gifts that she held on to her mother desperately as her mother gave her a hug and a quick kiss before running out the door to the next engagement. As the mother tried to interest her child in the latest toy she had brought, the little girl with tears in her eyes, cried, "Mommy...I want you." That is our greatest need, too...isn't it? We want God. We want to know that God lives. That God cares. That God is with us. Immanuel!

In his classic play, Green Pastures, Mark Connelly, you'll remember has the angel Gabriel walk on the stage with his horn under his arm and approach the Lord who is in deep thought. God is troubled...deeply troubled about what is happening among his people down on earth. God is troubled because He has sent prophets and messengers but the people don't listen to them. They're too busy. God is troubled about humanity's sinful ways. Gabriel offers to blow his horn - the final trumpet - and end the whole thing, but the Lord brushes the horn from the lips of Gabriel. Gabriel presses the Lord about what He is going to do and the Lord answers Gabriel by saying:

"I am not going to send anybody this time. I am going down there MYSELF!"

And that's the first piece of "Good News" about Christmas. God did not remain in Heaven...receiving a computer printout on the sufferings of this world. God did not issue a memo to form a committee to work on the problems and the dilemmas. NO! God left His throne and came down into the trenches. Indeed, God did more than that. God became one of the wounded. His hands are scarred with nail prints. In Christ, God became the "wounded HEALER". Read Isaiah, chapter 53, verses 1 - 12. All of this is what makes Christmas like no other holiday in the world. So, first of all: Immanuel. God with us.

GOD SPEAKS TO US IN AND THROUGH...

But wait, don't leave. There's more. Turn the page with me. The Christmas story teaches us that God speaks to us in the most unthinkable places and through the most unlikely people.

Certainly John the Baptist who presides over much of the Advent Season was an unlikely person to prepare the way for the Messiah. Clothes made of camel's hair...a diet of locusts and wild honey. No wonder Jesus chided the crowd in today's Scripture Lesson by saying: "What did you go out to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes?" And if that's what the crowd went out to see they were in for a bit of a shock. Jesus then answered His own question:

"A prophet? And yes, I tell you....and more than a prophet!" God speaks to us in strange places and through unlikely people.

I never tire of hearing stories about Nativity pageants put on by churches. I heard this week about a church in which a lively ten-year old boy had managed to create a disaster in just about every Christmas pageant he had been in since he was four years of age. His name was Barry. One year his angel wings caught on fire which nearly burned down the Church. One year as Herod the Great he jumped up from his throne and in his clumsy way jerked the carpet out from under the Three Wise Men dumping them on their heads. And there were several other things he managed to do which earned him something of a poor "rep" where his church's pageant was concerned. The other kids were even begging the teacher and director of the pageant not to let Barry have a part in it....

"Please, teacher....can't you leave Barry out of it this year.....he'll mess it up again...."

But the teachers could not reject a little boy who tried his best and who loved Jesus with all his heart, even if he was inclined to be something of a "clutz" and inclined to be a bit unruly. The director finally convinced the other children that Barry couldn't do any real harm by playing the innkeeper of Bethlehem. All he had to do was open and close a door and speak one short line.

All went well through the rehearsals and it looked like a smooth performance was in the offing. But then on the night when all the mother and fathers, and all the friends and members of the church gathered...and a lot from the community....in the quiet hush of those moments when all were "reliving" the Christmas story, Barry had a chance - his chance - to "redeem" himself with a flawless performance and he was up for it. He opened the door of the inn and looked straight into the face of Mary and Joseph. Mary sat very sad and pale on a real live donkey which they had not used in the rehearsal...and you could almost hear the cold wind of Bethlehem whistling around the cold stone walls of the Inn and blowing the thin cloak of gentle Mary. But, yes...Barry came through. With professional emphasis and perfect timing, he said in a strong voice, "Begone....I have no room for the likes of you!" "Begone".

And with that Mary and Joseph turned sadly away into the cold night, but Barry was still standing at the open door of his inn. Those on the front row later said that they saw tears well up in his eyes and his lips tremble when he said as they were turning away: "Wait...wait." It came like a thunderclap. Every heart in the room stopped. What on earth? This wasn't in the script. "Wait" he called out to them.

"WAIT....You all can have my room. Wait. Don't go!"

Well....all bedlam broke loose. The other children cried, for once again, Barry had "ruined" another Christmas pageant. Parents were outraged and some of the teachers were all for getting rid of Barry for once and for all. But the wise director pulled it together and saved the "show"....quieted the crowd and dired Barry's tears as well as her own. She said to all present...

"You know...maybe Barry was the real messenger after all.  
For only those who have 'room' in their hearts...can the  
dear Christ enter in....."

God comes to us in unexpected ways and places...through unexpected people. And isn't it true that sometimes we become so busy celebrating Christmas that we fail to hear the voice of the One who spoke the first Christmas into existence.

It's like a little boy and his father admiring Holman Hunt's famous painting of Christ knocking at the door. You've seen it...many of you....in St. Paul's cathedral in London. The little boy shouted out...

"Daddy....daddy...why don't they just answer the door?" The father said, "To tell the truth....I don't know why" Then the young boy said...."Maybe they're making too much noise to hear Him knocking." Ah...the wisdom of children!

Ernest Campbell, who use to grace the pulpit of Riverside Church here in our city with such eloquence and stories, shares a prayer in his little book: Where Cross the Crowded Ways: Prayers of a City Pastor. It goes like this:

"Grant, O God, that when Christmas breaks for us this year, we may have something more to show for our much running about then tired feet....unwrapped presents....and regrets for cards not sent."

Friend, if that is to happen...you and I will have to look for God in some unexpected places and be open to His voice speaking to us from some unexpected people. But there's one more thing to say and I shall say it briefly and then we're off to Bethlehem with the children of our church.

CHRISTMAS STORY IS NOT YET FINISHED

The Christmas story is as yet unfinished. For you cannot isolate the Christmas story from the rest of God's activity in human history. Advent and Christmas are part of an unfolding drama. God seeks and continues to seek the "redemption" of his creation and His creations. Isaiah long ago described it this way,

"The eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped....the lame leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute shout for joy. And a HIGHWAY shall be there....and it will be called the Way of Holiness."

The way of holiness....much of that prophecy is yet to be fulfilled, but it will happen. As the writer of the Epistle said, "Be patient....until the Lord's coming". Yes, the story of Christmas is as yet unfinished.

A Dr. Earl Davis of Memphis tells of finding a book called, The Curse of Batterslea Hall. To him, the most interesting thing he discovered about the book was that it had not one but twenty-two possible endings. You simply could chose the one you liked. Commenting on this, he writes...

"There is a sense in which the Christmas story is like that. You chose the ending to it. You can keep it fenced in by Thanksgiving and New Years...and keep the child off Bethlehem and all that He represents in the cradle forever or you can let Him grow up and let Him call you to follow Him....the choice is yours."

And how true that is! Each of us will choose how we will finish the Christmas story in our lives. And this is where we stand on this Third Sunday of Advent, 1995. Will we shout with Barry, "Hey, wait....you can have my room" which is just another way of saying, "Hey, wait....you can have my heart, Jesus". Or will we simply be observers who keep that Child in the manger where we can come and visit Him once a year. God is with us. He speaks to us in the strangest places and through some of the most unexpected people. Let us be open...and alert...and aware and sensitive in these coming days as Divine Truth once again sweeps across our world and caresses the hearts of people. The Christmas story is as yet "unfinished"....and how it is finished in our lives... it's really up to us!

PRAYER     Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments, O God. Help us in these days of Advent, to prepare ourselves...so that when the star shines over the stable and the angels sing the good news....we may be ready to receive it because our hearts are open and receptive to Your leading.

Grant, that when Christmas breaks for us this year...we may have something more to show for our much running about than tired feet, grumpy spirits, unwrapped presents and regrets for cards not sent and too many parties attended.

In the spirit of Christ, we now pray. Amen.