

"LIGHTING UP THE WORLD"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
January 3, 1999

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INTRODUCTION

It's always nice to receive Christmas cards....they help to "light up" our world...to know that others are thinking about us. Recently I read about a man who profited greatly because of a Christmas card he sent to a friend who was hurting. You'll enjoy this story.

The year was 1924. Clinton Odell heard about a chemist who had become ill and had moved to Arizona for health purposes. He enclosed a twenty-five dollar check with the Christmas card that carried a warm message. A year later, the gentleman to whom he had sent the card and check appeared at his front door.

"I'm here and I'm well. What can I do for you?"

Clinton Odell told his chemist friend, Carl Noren, that he had been toying with an idea for some time...an idea of developing a brushless shaving cream. Perhaps his chemist friend could help and so the chemist, Carl Noren, went to work on a new shaving cream...one that would be brushless. It worked.

DEVELOPMENT

Now Clinton Odell had to let the world out there know about this new amazing product....brushless shaving cream. His son came up with an idea. He had noticed that some gas stations located on highways advertised gas and oil and clean rest rooms with a series of signs posted along the highway. He liked the idea. Perfect. Put up signs along the roads around America. Starting with an advertising budget of two hundred dollars, the family worked on painting crude signs and unrhymed signs, hurrying to hammer them into the ground before it froze. They were pleased with their results. Orders soon came in from druggists whose customers were travelling the roads where these home-made signs had been planted.

These simple signs had certain advantages. They could be read in about 18 seconds...which was more time than most advertisers could expect to get from their readers. Also, he separated the signs on the rod and thus created a bit of suspense because there was no way to cheat by jumping ahead to the ending. The signs used humor and rhyming was eventually added which delighted the public. Raise a hand if you know the product they were advertising. Some examples...

"The bearded lady / Tried a jar.
She's now / a Famous / Movie Star BURMA SHAVE."

"Fisherman! For a lucky strike.
Show the pike / A face / They'll like BURMA SHAVE."

"If you dislike / Big traffic fines /
Slow down till you / Can read these signs. BURMA SHAVE."

Now you know the origin of those long-gone BURMA SHAVE signs that once graced the highways of our land. I guess they went out as the Interstate Highway System came into existence in the fifties. But remember this: they were the result of one man's kindness at Christmastime. A card and some kind words.

Christmas is a surprising time, isn't it? It's a time when we might send a card to someone who's down on his luck. You never know where it might lead and what might happen.

This is a time of the year when so many people feel more charitable and more decent and more loving than at any other time. It's truly wonderful. I have watched this and witnessed this for many years in this city. Can we not say that at its very best, Christmas is a "reflection" of the love of God.

GOD'S PURPOSE FROM THE BEGINNING

Turning to John's Gospel, we find him reminding us right at the very beginning of his prologue that Christmas was in God's purpose right from the start.

"In the beginning was the WORD and the WORD was with God, and the WORD was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made and without Him nothing was made that has been made."

And then later in John's prologue, we learn that the WORD that was with God in the beginning was Jesus. So I invite you to think of it this way that Christmas was God's great purpose for humanity. His plan right from the start. When God said, "Let there be light", it was for the purpose of sharing His love. And then when He separated the earth from the waters, it was for the purpose of creating beings upon whom He could pour out His beneficence.

At times we fail to realize what a wondrous thing creation is. Paul Davies in his book, God and the New Physics, writes that,

"Had the big bang been weaker, the entire cosmos would have fallen back on itself in a big crunch. On the other hand, had it been stronger, the cosmic material would have dispersed so rapidly that galaxies would not have formed....if this balance had been off by 1 to a staggering 10 to the 60th power, we couldn't exist!"

"Suppose" he said, "you wanted to fire a bullet at a one inch target on the other side of the observable universe, 20 billion light-years away...your aim would have to be accurate to that same 1 to 10 to the 60th power..."

Now what all of this is saying is WHAT an amazing event Creation is. It is far more difficult to believe such an event happened only by accident than to believe that there was and is a Divine Mind, a Divine Purpose behind it all. There was a Divine Purpose at work and that purpose one might say was Christmas - that God's perfect love would be revealed to humanity. Love is...

Love is the reason behind the universe. There are evidences of God's love at work in the Hebrew scriptures..running through them like a golden thread, but it was the coming of the Christ Child that brought the matter home. God had always loved us, but we never knew just how much until Bethlehem's manger scene.

A VICTORY OF LIGHT OVER DARKNESS

light over darkness.

But there's a second thing for us to consider. Christmas is the victory of

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Back to the Scriptures. And then one day into this world of darkness there shone a great light. John put it this way:

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I love that passage. Such meaningful imagery to describe what Christ's coming into the world meant....light overcoming darkness.

Viktor Frankl, the father of logotherapy, was interned by the Nazis for being a Jew. In his book, Man's Search for Meaning, Frankl tells how a distant light helped him through the darkness and horrors of his incarceration. The camp in which he was held prisoner was cruel, ugly and squalid beyond belief. Nearby were smoke-spewing crematoriums. And surrounding him were other human beings living in the most wretched conditions. The apparent hopelessness of the situation took its toll on many, driving them to end their lives. But Viktor Frankl discovered something...that if you have a purpose for life, you can make it through.

He tells us that in the distance there was a house surrounded by trees. Early in the morning on cold, winter days, the glow emitting from that farmhouse served as a beacon of hope. Frankl tells us that he would often envision a normal family in that house, gathered around the hearth. Deep in his heart he knew that the lights had not gone out in all the world and that one day the present darkness would be overcome. Faith. Belief.

And that dear friends, is Christ's great promise to us. The present darkness will be overcome. For light has come into our world and that light is Christ Himself. He brings hope, peace, joy and love into our lives.

In the Metropolitan Diary feature of the NY Times, a reader recalled an amusing incident that took place here in our city when he was working on one of TV's most popular soaps. Apparently there was a subway or transit strike in the city and it was tough getting around town. The producers of the "soap" did a nice thing....they provided their own bus service for the actors to get them to the studio somewhere in town. At one of the stops on the bus' schedule, an expected rider was nowhere to be seen. Then the driver noticed a man standing on the corner, looking uptown, then downtown, on tip toe. The driver stopped the bus, got out and went over to the man and asked him, "Are you looking for THE GUIDING LIGHT?" With that the man's face glazed and said,

"I really have no time for fanatics"...and with that he retreated to the other side of Broadway...quickly backing away....WELL...

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CHRISTMAS: UNFINISHED BUSINESS

But one more thing to carry away from here. Christmas also represents some "unfinished business" for those who choose to follow the child of Bethlehem. Let's go back to John's Gospel once again. He writes:

"He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him. Yet, to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will....BUT BORN of God,"

Remember...that is who we are! Because Christ came into our world, we have become children of God and as children of God, we are involved in the "unfinished business" of Christmas. We are those who must carry the light into the dark places of our world. We are those who carry love into hostile, hurting places. We are the agents of the peace of Christmas...its hope, its joy, its love. Never forget that. Each generation is charged with the responsibility for transmitting that light not only to the following generation, but also of transmitting that light to everyone on earth so that darkness is finally driven out for all time.

We're like those angels who sang over the stable of Bethlehem, but the song is unfinished. We leave and go from here to sing Christ's tune to our world...lighting "UP" the world wherever we go!

PRAYER When the song of the angels is still and when the star in the sky is no longer there....and when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flock, then it is that the work of Christmas really begins.

As we prepare to leave Bethlehem's manger in these hours....may we depart as did the Wise Men...depart by another way...the way of faith and service.

Help us to take up the "unfinished business" of this Holy Season...

To find the lost, and to heal the broken.
To feed the hungry and to release the prisoner.
To rebuild the nations....and to bring peace among
the brothers and sisters,
And always to make music in the heart.

We give you thanks, Lord, that YOU are not only in the past, but also in the future. Help each of us to remember this as we prepare to walk into a this new year.....and to remember always that even there you are present to lead us and guide us. In the spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.