

"MAY CHRIST BE BORN IN YOU"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
December 5, 1993

## "MAY CHRIST BE BORN IN YOU"

### INTRODUCTION

A number of years ago a minister was invited to preach at a nearby country church that he had never been to before. As he set out that morning, he was a bit uncertain which road to take since most rural roads are not always clearly marked and his directions were somewhat sketchy. He stopped to ask directions a couple of times along the way. One person he asked steered him down the wrong road.

The morning was pleasant and although the road seemed a bit longer than he expected, he cheerfully continued on his way talking over his sermon. He finally arrived at a little white church just as Sunday School was ending. He entered the church and smiled at some of the people and made his way to the pulpit. The service soon got underway under his direction and he preached what he felt was a strong sermon. The people in the congregation weren't quite sure what to think, but they listened and when the service was over, the minister walked to the back of the church, shook hands with the people as they departed, and then, too, he headed home.

Meanwhile, there was another small church a few miles away. It was filled with people that Sunday morning waiting and wondering what could possibly have happened to the minister who was scheduled to come and conduct their service. Our hero never suspected that he had preached at the wrong church that Sunday.

### DEVELOPMENT

There are those times in life when things seem "out of place", and somehow they just don't fit. To me, Advent is one of those times. Everywhere we go we see signs of the Christmas season - festive decorations, brightly colored lights, carols being played, Christmas specials on television reminding us of the jolly nature of this holiday season.

Yet when we arrive at church on this the Second Sunday of Advent, we are greeted by an unlikely figure whose name is John the Baptist. Something just doesn't fit, doesn't seem right. It seems like we're in the wrong place, or, at the very least, John the Baptist has picked the wrong Sunday to be our guest.

For his hair is wild and unkempt. His clothes smell of wild animals. His diet consists of honey-covered bugs. And his message reflects a fine burning in his soul as he thunders, "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make His paths straight". What do we make of it? Somehow, John the Baptist doesn't quite fit the Christmas we've come to know and to love. Yet, every year on the road to this special celebration we bump into this strange messenger. He's part of the scenery of Advent's Second Sunday.

### GOD BREAKS INTO LIFE AT UNEXPECTED TIMES AND PLACES

First-off, John reminds us that Advent is about God breaking into our lives at unexpected times and places.

At the very time when no one suspected that anything great would happen, John the Baptist showed up. While it's true that the people of old were waiting for the arrival of the Messiah, they were taken by surprise by John. After all, there had not been a notable prophet in Israel in over three hundred years. As the years wore on, hope was beginning to wane. No word from God. Silence for centuries. And then at an unexpected time and in an unexpected place John the Baptist burst upon the scene quoting from the Hebrew Bible,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord. Make His paths straight.'"

There was great excitement, I'm sure, among the people as the news spread about John the Baptist. They had to see and hear this man for themselves. They traveled out into the hills and desert areas to hear him, to see him.

"And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him."

You'd have to say that John was a bit of an overnight sensation. A real hit. Something wonderful was about to happen and everyone wanted to be a part of it. Sometimes when we least expect anything to happen, God breaks through our ordinary lives.

Sue Monk Kidd in her book, When the Heart Waits, recalls her youth and how she would prepare for Christmas. In early December she would sit by the wooden nativity set clustered under their Christmas tree and think over the last year of her life. She would think deeply about Christmas and the coming of Jesus.

She remembers one Christmas when she visited a monastery. It was around the first week of December. As she passed a monk walking outside, she offered him a greeting with the words, "Merry Christmas". His response to her "Merry Christmas" caught her a bit offguard. He replied quietly, "And may Christ be born in you".

It hit her as a bit strange and peculiar. Not "Merry Christmas", but "May Christ be born in you". She was unsure as to what he meant, but now many years later, sitting beside her Christmas tree and reflecting a bit on the deeper meaning of Christmas, she felt the impact of his words. For she came to discover that Advent is a time of spiritual preparation. It's like a Winter Lent, as someone has put it. It's also a time of transformation. She writes,

"It's discovering our soul and letting Christ be born from the waiting heart."

At times that are unlikely and in places that are unlikely, God does have a way of breaking into our lives. John was out in the desert proclaiming that the time for God to act had come. The "long-awaited" Messiah was on His way. Yes, the time was at hand. But that was only a part of John's thunderous message.

#### TURN OUR LIVES AROUND

To prepare for God's great gift of salvation, we need to turn our lives around. And this leads me to the second point or theme of John's ministry. He came,

"Proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

His message was simple and quite to the point. Change your ways because the Messiah will soon be here. There was an urgency in John's message. It was time to get ready. His message was so compelling that the people who came to hear him did repent and even more amazing, they agreed to be baptized. This is important for us to see and to take in.

You see John was asking his fellow Jews to submit themselves to something that was not required in their faith. Only Gentiles were baptized, not Jews. And yet, the people not only repented, they even agreed to be baptized.

Repent isn't a word that we hear a lot these days. Repent means to turn your life around. It means to turn away from those things that take us away from God. The first step in preparing for the coming of Jesus this Advent is to examine our lives and make a new beginning.

Ian Maclaren once told a touching story of Lachlan Campbell and his daughter, Flora. Flora left home and fell into the wrong kind of relationships. She began to misuse the gifts of her life. And soon she did not respond to her father's letters because she found it difficult to relate to him.

Maggie, Flora's aunt, wrote her a letter that finally melted her heart. At the end of the letter Maggie writes,

"Flora, your daddy is a grievin' Ye. Come home for your own sake. Come home for your dear Daddy's sake, but Flora...come home most of all for the dear Lord's sake!"

Christmas is a time of "coming home". John's message was quite simple, "Repent". Try turning your life around. Be willing to change your mind. Re-examine some of your ways and your motives because the Messiah will be here soon. And this brings us to the final theme of today's text.

#### JESUS IS THE REASON WE CELEBRATE ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS

and Christmas. The people who streamed out into the desert to hear John wondered if John, himself, might be the long-awaited Messiah. But John, quite adamantly, said "no". He was very clear about his role. Time and again, he proclaimed,

Jesus is the reason we celebrate Advent

"The ONE who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals".

John was not the Messiah. Instead, he was a forerunner who pointed the way to Jesus. And there on the river bank he told the people that he baptized them with water, but one day soon, One would come who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit.

The story is told of a man who was searching for answers in his life. He found a very wise old man. And he thought that maybe this old man could give him the answers he was searching for. Thus he was surprised to hear the old man speak of a great blunder he himself had been guilty of.

"What great blunder have you made?" the searcher asked the wise man. The wise man thought for a moment and then replied, "They called me a Christian, but I did not become Christ." That seemed like an odd answer. The younger man was confused and he said, "You did not become Christ? Is one supposed to become Christ?"

The wise old man answered, "I kept putting distance between myself and Him. I kept deploring the distance" the old man told his new friend, but I never realized that I was creating it".

"But" the seeker insisted, "Is one supposed to become Christ?" Thoughtfully, the wise man replied...."No distance....no distance"

Advent, you see, is about "overcoming the distance"....the "distance" between God's heart and our own. It's a time of preparation for a very special celebration. And at the very heart of that celebration is the person of Jesus.

It was Christmas, almost forty years ago and Rex Pickett was stationed in Korea as a young Marine lieutenant. His wife and baby daughter whom he had never seen were back home here in the United States.

He remembers how on Christmas morning the thermometer hovered around zero with several inches of snow covering the ground. Outdoor worship services were planned for that Christmas morning. Although no one was required to attend services, young Rex went out of respect and "to set a good example for the young marines". He estimates that close to 200 marines were there for the service. It was cold and they stood and some sat on their helmets. They were facing a small portable altar. The chaplain had no microphone and the portable organ was suffering from the extreme cold.

He remembers that something happened to him in that worship service. God broke through into his life. He began to think in those moments of all that was precious to him....home, wife, an unseen infant child. And in that moment as they tried to sing Christmas carols in that cold, freezing air, he realized that Christmas does not depend on church architecture or fine clothing, or expensive gifts and fancy meals. He put it this way,

"Christmas is best celebrated as a voluntary act in which we replenish our personal faith in the company of others."

And so far from home and from loved ones, Rex Pickett realized that,

"Christmas Day - in itself - is not important, but the faith that it represents."

CLOSING So let us never forget that Jesus is the reason why we celebrate Christmas. Advent reminds us each year that God so often breaks into our lives in unexpected ways and at unexpected times. At those times we discover that we must change our ways and realign ourselves with Christ, and break down "that distance" that separates us from Him.

Amidst all the confusion of this day in which you and I live, we need to hear clearly that powerful voice of John the Baptist, calling out to each of us, "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a Highway for our God".

PRAYER For those powerful voices in the past who have brought Your message to us, O God, we thank you....especially for John the Baptist who helped to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. Those voices often come to us from places we least expect and at times not anticipated.

Let us be still and remember Jesus as He was then - powerful to heal, to speak and to save. Let us think of Him as He is now, powerful as Your spirit in our midst....to lift us up out of the low place and to set our feet on the high road of life.

Touch our sick with the assurance of Your love. Encircle the bereaved with Your warming and healing presence. Point out markers along the way to those present who may be drifting from Your path....from Your way... especially those who may be on the verge of some destructive action or some unhealthy decision. Turn us in the right direction.

All this we now ask in the spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

"MAY CHRIST BE BORN IN YOU"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
December 5, 1993

## "MAY CHRIST BE BORN IN YOU"

### INTRODUCTION

A number of years ago a minister was invited to preach at a nearby country church that he had never been to before. As he set out that morning, he was a bit uncertain which road to take since most rural roads are not always clearly marked and his directions were somewhat sketchy. He stopped to ask directions a couple of times along the way. One person he asked steered him down the wrong road.

The morning was pleasant and although the road seemed a bit longer than he expected, he cheerfully continued on his way talking over his sermon. He finally arrived at a little white church just as Sunday School was ending. He entered the church and smiled at some of the people and made his way to the pulpit. The service soon got underway under his direction and he preached what he felt was a strong sermon. The people in the congregation weren't quite sure what to think, but they listened and when the service was over, the minister walked to the back of the church, shook hands with the people as they departed, and then, too, he headed home.

Meanwhile, there was another small church a few miles away. It was filled with people that Sunday morning waiting and wondering what could possibly have happened to the minister who was scheduled to come and conduct their service. Our hero never suspected that he had preached at the wrong church that Sunday.

### DEVELOPMENT

There are those times in life when things seem "out of place", and somehow they just don't fit. To me, Advent is one of those times. Everywhere we go we see signs of the Christmas season - festive decorations, brightly colored lights, carols being played, Christmas specials on television reminding us of the jolly nature of this holiday season.

Yet when we arrive at church on this the Second Sunday of Advent, we are greeted by an unlikely figure whose name is John the Baptist. Something just doesn't fit, doesn't seem right. It seems like we're in the wrong place, or, at the very least, John the Baptist has picked the wrong Sunday to be our guest.

For his hair is wild and unkempt. His clothes smell of wild animals. His diest consists of honey-covered bugs. And his message reflects a fine burning in his soul as he thunders, "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make His paths straight". What do we make of it. Somehow, John the Baptist doesn't quite fit the Christmas we've come to know and to love. Yet, every year on the road to this special celebration we bump into this strange messenger. He's part of the scenery of Advent's Second Sunday.

### GOD BREAKS INTO LIFE AT UNEXPECTED TIMES AND PLACES

First-off, John reminds us that Advent is about God breaking into our lives at unexpected times and places.

At the very time when no one suspected that anything great would happen, John the Baptist showed up. While it's true that the people of old were waiting for the arrival of the Messiah, they were taken by surprise by John. After all, there had not been a notable prophet in Israel in over three hundred years. As the years wore on, hope was beginning to wane. No word from God. Silence for centuries. And then at an unexpected time and in an unexpected place John the Baptist burst upon the scene quoting from the Hebrew Bible,



"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord. Make His paths straight.'"

There was great excitement, I'm sure, among the people as the news spread about John the Baptist. They had to see and hear this man for themselves. They traveled out into the hills and desert areas to hear him, to see him.

"And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him."

You'd have to say that John was a bit of an overnight sensation. A real hit. Something wonderful was about to happen and everyone wanted to be a part of it. Sometimes when we least expect anything to happen, God breaks through our ordinary lives.

Sue Monk Kidd in her book, When the Heart Waits, recalls her youth and how she would prepare for Christmas. In early December she would sit by the wooden nativity set clustered under their Christmas tree and think over the last year of her life. She would think deeply about Christmas and the coming of Jesus.

She remembers one Christmas when she visited a monastery. It was around the first week of December. As she passed a monk walking outside, she offered him a greeting with the words, "Merry Christmas". His response to her "Merry Christmas" caught her a bit offguard. He replied quietly, "And may Christ be born in you".

It hit her as a bit strange and peculiar. Not "Merry Christmas", but "May Christ be born in you". She was unsure as to what he meant, but now many years later, sitting beside her Christmas tree and reflecting a bit on the deeper meaning of Christmas, she felt the impact of his words. For she came to discover that Advent is a time of spiritual preparation. It's like a Winter Lent, as someone has put it. It's also a time of transformation. She writes,

"It's discovering our soul and letting Christ be born from the waiting heart."

At times that are unlikely and in places that are unlikely, God does have a way of breaking into our lives. John was out in the desert proclaiming that the time for God to act had come. The "long-awaited" Messiah was on His way. Yes, the time was at hand. But that was only a part of John's thunderous message.

#### TURN OUR LIVES AROUND

To prepare for God's great gift of salvation, we need to turn our lives around. And this leads me to the second point or theme of John's ministry. He came,

"Proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

His message was simple and quite to the point. Change your ways because the Messiah will soon be here. There was an urgency in John's message. It was time to get ready. His message was so compelling that the people who came to hear him did repent and even more amazing, they agreed to be baptized. This is important for us to see and to take in.

You see John was asking his fellow Jews to submit themselves to something that was not required in their faith. Only Gentiles were baptized, not Jews. And yet, the people not only repented, they even agreed to be baptized.

Repent isn't a word that we hear a lot these days. Repent means to turn your life around. It means to turn away from those things that take us away from God. The first step in preparing for the coming of Jesus this Advent is to examine our lives and make a new beginning.

Ian Maclaren once told a touching story of Lachlan Campbell and his daughter, Flora. Flora left home and fell into the wrong kind of relationships. She began to misuse the gifts of her life. And soon she did not respond to her father's letters because she found it difficult to relate to him.

Maggie, Flora's aunt, wrote her a letter that finally melted her heart. At the end of the letter Maggie writes,

"Flora, your daddy is a grievin' Ye. Come home for your own sake. Come home for your dear Daddy's sake, but Flora...come home most of all for the dear Lord's sake!"

Christmas is a time of "coming home". John's message was quite simple, "Repent". Try turning your life around. Be willing to change your mind. Re-examine some of your ways and your motives because the Messiah will be here soon. And this brings us to the final theme of today's text.

#### JESUS IS THE REASON WE CELEBRATE ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS

Jesus is the reason we celebrate Advent

and Christmas. The people who streamed out into the desert to hear John wondered if John, himself, might be the long-awaited Messiah. But John, quite adamantly, said "no". He was very clear about his role. Time and again, he proclaimed,

"The ONE who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals".

John was not the Messiah. Instead, he was a forerunner who pointed the way to Jesus. And there on the river bank he told the people that he baptized them with water, but one day soon, One would come who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit.

The story is told of a man who was searching for answers in his life. He found a very wise old man. And he thought that maybe this old man could give him the answers he was searching for. Thus he was surprised to hear the old man speak of a great blunder he himself had been guilty of.

"What great blunder have you made?" the searcher asked the wise man. The wise man thought for a moment and then replied, "They called me a Christian, but I did not become Christ." That seemed like an odd answer. The younger man was confused and he said, "You did not become Christ? Is one supposed to become Christ?"

The wise old man answered, "I kept putting distance between myself and Him. I kept deploring the distance" the old man told his new friend, but I never realized that I was creating it".

"But" the seeker insisted, "Is one supposed to become Christ?" Thoughtfully, the wise man replied...."No distance....no distance"

Advent, you see, is about "overcoming the distance"....the "distance" between God's heart and our own. It's a time of preparation for a very special celebration. And at the very heart of that celebration is the person of Jesus.

It was Christmas, almost forty years ago and Rex Pickett was stationed in Korea as a young Marine lieutenant. His wife and baby daughter whom he had never seen were back home here in the United States.

He remembers how on Christmas morning the thermometer hovered around zero with several inches of snow covering the ground. Outdoor worship services were planned for that Christmas morning. Although no one was required to attend services, young Rex went out of respect and "to set a good example for the young marines". He estimates that close to 200 marines were there for the service. It was cold and they stood and some sat on their helmets. They were facing a small portable altar. The chaplain had no microphone and the portable organ was suffering from the extreme cold.

He remembers that something happened to him in that worship service. God broke through into his life. He began to think in those moments of all that was precious to him....home, wife, an unseen infant child. And in that moment as they tried to sing Christmas carols in that cold, freezing air, he realized that Christmas does not depend on church architecture or fine clothing, or expensive gifts and fancy meals. He put it this way,

"Christmas is best celebrated as a voluntary act in which we replenish our personal faith in the company of others."

And so far from home and from loved ones, Rex Pickett realized that,

"Christmas Day - in itself - is not important, but the faith that it represents."

CLOSING So let us never forget that Jesus is the reason why we celebrate Christmas. Advent reminds us each year that God so often breaks into our lives in unexpected ways and at unexpected times. At those times we discover that we must change our ways and realign ourselves with Christ, and break down "that distance" that separates us from Him.

Amidst all the confusion of this day in which you and I live, we need to hear clearly that powerful voice of John the Baptist, calling out to each of us, "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a Highway for our God".

PRAYER

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, December 5, 1993

A ROSE ON THE ALTAR

- A. Note the rose on the altar this morning....there to celebrate the birth of Patricia Rose Kilbride, infant daughter of former members, Kathy and David Kilbride...now living in New Canaan, Connecticut.

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors in the congregation this morning, delighted you're here with us. Time permitting, join us downstairs at the coffee hour. Be free in the sharing of your name...fill out a visitor card or sign one of the guest books. Come, worship with us.....come, work with us....
- B. Always a joy to welcome back friends from former days. And with us today, Kenneth and Andre Halcott, back from Greece where they make their home part of the year. Ken will be preaching here on January 2nd. Also, how nice to see Sandra Trout who moved to New Orleans late last Spring.
- C. Members, be sure to wear your name tags downstairs and make two new friends in the moments we're here together.

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns in your bulletin. Review them on your own noting that our December news sheet is "out" today. Copies are by the door as well as on the table downstairs.....pick up your copy.
- B. December is a busy month and we invite you to share in the programs and activities taking place in the weeks ahead. Two weeks from today is the Children's Christmas Pageant and party, as well as the Adult Fellowship Carolling party at the parsonage.

Next Sunday we have something special "in the works"....a handbell choir of 12 persons will be playing in the service and before the service. They are coming from the Friendly Baptist Church in Greensboro, North Carolina....with an assist from former members, John and Kathy Simms. They will start playing at 10:45...for about 10 minutes and one number during the service. The next two Sundays we will have a full church, as well as on Christmas Eve...so it never hurts to get here early....

- C. Envelopes are in the pews for the Christmas flowers and decorations. Be generous in what you put in there and lets make it look like Christmas. Hope to have the wreaths "up" next Sunday.

## FINANCIAL CANVASS

- A. Our annual fund-raising effort called the FINANCIAL CANVASS is winding down....we'd like to "wrap it up" between now and the middle of December. We still have a ways to go....88 and 8 more pledges will take us to our goal of 250 pledges. Dollar wise we need another \$35,000.
- B. We still have a number of you from whom we have not yet had word about next year's pledge of support. Some of you will be getting a call later today as the canvass leaders seek pledge renewals. Jim, John, Dan and Melissa will be meeting at one o'clock today to divide up those people we need to call. Get the pledge in this morning, if you haven't, so you won't get a call in the middle of the Giants football game, or the Jets...
- C. Pledges are not mandatory, but it is something we ask each members - resident and non-resident - to seriously consider. Other sources of income are uncertain and as a church we ought not to count on the Day School, or AA, or the OS, or Stockholder meetings pay our bills. The membership is our first line of responsible stewardship, I feel.

## "TONIGHT AT SIX"

- A. Membership Conversations will be held this evening at six for those of you who in recent weeks have been worshipping with us and who now would like to strengthen a tie with the church. New members will be received next Sunday. "If your heart is, as my heart is"... "come and give me your hand". Hearts and hands are most welcome in working to keep these NYC churches alive and in service. Too many "lone ranger" Christians trotting around this city. Our churches can use them! It's a tough ministry in this city. Hearts and hands make a difference.

## OFFERING

- A. "It is more blessed to give than to receive" said Jesus. Along with our offerings of money, gifts, tithes, and pledges of financial support for the year ahead...let us also offer our hearts to God and to one a other in peace, and in love.