

## "SOMETHING TO DO WITH CHRISTMAS"

INTRODUCTION Yes, the sermon today certainly has "Something To Do With Christmas". Earlier this week when asked what the sermon title would be, I off-handedly replied, "Hmm..well...it will have something to do with Christmas". My remark made its way into the bulletin. On Wednesday morning I wasn't at all sure just what it would have to do...with Christmas.

As I see it, there are two ways to speak about Christmas on a Sunday like this. One way is to reflect on the meaning of Christmas in terms of the modern world - the concern, the problems, the tensions we face in the city, the nation, the world that touch and affect our lives. The other way is to turn to the Christmas story itself...to reflect on it...to linger here and there in the margins, to let it speak to us.

More often than not over the years I seem to have taken the first approach in my Christmas sermons. This year, However, I have chosen the second way. We turn, therefore to the Christmas story - not to dissect it or to analyze it the way the historian might, or as we might in a Bible study group. This is not the time for that. We turn to it to lose ourselves in the wonder and the mystery of it...letting some of the overtones of it spill over and touch our lives.

IT BEGINS IN ROME The story of Christmas begins in a city. It begins not in Jerusalem, but in Rome, in the center of the western world. It begins with Augustus Caesar, the nephew of Julius Caesar, the man who defeated Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium and made himself the sole ruler of Rome - its first Emperor, and for 45 years was the master of the Western world.

It begins then in Rome with Caesar Augustus and with a royal command that everyone go to his own home town to be registered. Whether such a census took place, we do not know for certain for historians vary in their opinions. I believe it did take place.

It reminds us that we can never escape the machinery of life. In every well-run government there is a certain amount of red tape and regulation that is inevitable and inescapable. The other day I received the NY City and NY State Tax forms for 1980, along with some beautiful Christmas cards with the message of this season. The first week of Advent, the city sent out to all of the Churches of NY forms that must be filed in order to maintain our tax-exempt status. I saw fit to pass them on to the Trustees for an exercise in frustration; they're due by January 20th, I recall.

In every well-run family, in every well-run life, there's a certain amount of law and order that often seems like so much red tape and we can never completely escape from it. Even the Church has it. And even God, when He chose to come into our world did not circumvent the machinery of life that can be so frustrating. Rather He came right out of a piece of "imperial machinery" that was making life complicated and difficult for a great many people living in the conquered provinces of the Roman Empire.

Another thought crossed my mind as I thought about those opening verses of the Christmas story in Luke's Gospel. We cannot always tell just how important a thing is by the prominence of the place it occupies. Things that at the time seem so important something turn out later on to be utterly insignificant, while those things that seem minor at the time turn out to be world-shaking!

For instance, in 1809 Napoleon, on the march toward the victory that was his ultimate ruin defeated the Austrian armies in the Battle of Wagram. This was the important, world-shaking event; everybody knew about it. In the same year, however, a boy was born in Shrewsbury, England, son of an English doctor. Also in the same year in Hardin County in Kentucky, another boy was born, son of a wandering, illiterate worker. The first boy was Charles Darwin; the other boy was Abraham Lincoln. From the perspective of history and vantage point of time, these were the decisive events of 1809.

The Emperor who seemed so grand and powerful as the Christmas story begins to unfold, and this royal decree that seemed so significant, coming from the city that looked so impressive - all these eventually fade into insignificance before something else that happened in an obscure corner of the known world.

THE STORY MOVES The story now moves to that corner, a distant province of the Roman Empire, called Judea. It moves from the center of things to the edge of things and in a way, this is somewhat unusual.

I think if you and I were constructing the plot of this story, we would have things moving from the edge in toward the center, but this story seems to go the other way - from the center of the world, the center of power - out to one of its outermost edges. It moves from the "high and mighty" to the "low and humble"....to the little people, to those who are so often pushed around in life, this time to a couple caught in the machinery of this imperial decree.

They complied with the regulations; they had no choice but to comply. It was not a convenient time for them to make this trip...probably on foot...to the city of Jerusalem. The wife was about to have a child. From Jerusalem, they went on to Bethlehem, for this was Joseph's city. It was a small, tiny town several miles to the south of Jerusalem, but it was a village with a great past, great simply because ~~one~~ man had left his mark on it. It was David's city. And it shone like a star among all the towns of that little province. And so Mary and Joseph made their way from the northern county of Galilee, south to Jerusalem and then on to Bethlehem.

Again, we pause in the story to reflect on another thought that comes to my mind. It is true, is it not, that things look backward as well as forward in life. Things do not just happen out of the blue. This is to say that there's a continuity to life. One thing leads to another and what we do today will have some bearing upon what we are or what happens tomorrow.

When God came into the world, He, too, came out of the past - with roots deep in history, and He was born in a city that had a great memory. Jesus was a branch on a full-grown tree, a shoot out of the stump of Jesse. In other words, there was a development that led finally to Jesus - through the centuries, through the prophets and the priests to the Master, the Man from Nazareth.

And by the same token, we look backwards as well as forward at Christmas time. I know I do, and I imagine you do, too. We look back to other celebrations of the same day - perhaps back to the home and parents and grandparents that gave us life. We look back to the family circles and gatherings and to friends that have given so much to our life. As we pause to remember, our hearts are flooded with love and gratitude. It is true that what a person descends from has a great deal to do with what he ascends toward. Jesus, our Lord, came from plain humble folks, but not from lazy or irresponsible people.

It was while they were in Bethlehem that Mary gave birth to Jesus. The only thing on earth that's as common as birth is death. Both are utterly mysterious. Both are beyond our comprehension, but birth is the greater mystery. The creation of life where there was none, the planting of a seed which may unfold into a personality that will in time change the course of history, all of the hidden possibilities and potentialities, the wonder and beauty of a life that is yet to come.

This certainly is the mystery of all mysteries, and it stirs us whether it is the birth of Jesus or the birth of our own child.

NO ROOM FOR THEM IN THE INN

Back to the narrative. To make matters worse than they already were, the inn in Bethlehem was full because other people were in town for the same reason. There was no place for this Galilean couple in the Bethlehem Hilton. The inn keeper took people on a first come, first serve basis - which was right. He did the best he could and gave them a place in a stable at the back of the inn and there the baby was born. Some of us have been to Bethlehem and seen the place where tradition says it occurred. To me, it resembled more of a cave.

We're reminded now that the circumstances of life are not always favorable to life's highest and finest possibilities. Let's put that down in our minds this Christmas and let me remind you of a few instances although you could add some of your own, I'm sure.

John Keats was the son of a livery stable keeper. By the time he was 20, he was infected with tuberculosis and died when he was 26 - and yet, out of those ungracious circumstances came the magic of the Ode on a Grecian Urn, and so many of those other poems that have sung their way into the minds of English speaking folk. Hans Christian Anderson was the son of a cobbler. His mother and father were so poor that they had to make their own furniture and the bed that he was born in was the frame of a coffin that a Count had died in. Yet, out of those unfavorable circumstances came some of the most delicate and fragile stories that the world has ever heard.

Robbie Burns, a ploughboy, born in a cottage in Scotland. I once saw it; it didn't even have a window to let in the light of day. Booker T. Washington was born in a single room cabin; his mother was a slave. Marian Anderson lost her father when she was a child; her mother worked all those years in Wanamakers store in Philadelphia.

The circumstances of life are not always favorable to life's highest and finest possibilities. There have been those times when the circumstances of life have been most unfavorable and we have witnessed the finest flower of human achievement. A cattle stall is not exactly the place where you would expect the Prince of Peace to be born, nor are the circumstances of His life what we would consider the best for raising and nurturing a child. And yet - out of these poor things, what great things grew. We need to remember the wings of the spirit are not bound by the bonds of earth.

There is no promise given us that the circumstances of life will always be favorable; the promise God gives us in the Gospels is that He will always more than match the circumstances of life with the strength to meet them...to cope..

THE STORY MOVES AGAIN

At this point, the story moves again. This time out into the fields of Bethlehem under a night sky. It moves in a strange and wondrous fashion. It moves from Caesar and his royal decree to some shepherds and their flocks. From the mighty to the humble.

There were shepherds, surprised by an angel. Don't ask who the angel was, or what he was like, whether he had a physical body or not. You can't always put these things into photographs. You can paint them, and you can sing about them, but you cannot take pictures of them. But whatever the form of the angel, the angel had an announcement and the announcement was not that the world would be perfect from then on, but that a Saviour had been born. Into this imperfect world that we live in had come a saving life.

And then the heavens began to sing for joy, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and good will to men".

The story ends quietly and simply as the shepherds go quite faithfully and obediently without asking questions to Bethlehem. They were not at all like we would be. They were not sophisticated or skeptical. They went straight to Bethlehem to see what had happened and they found things exactly as they had been told. They saw a man, a mother, and a new born baby. They fell on their...

MORAL OF THIS STORY

The moral of this beautiful story is this. Into this imperfect world once came the perfect love of God. And whenever and wherever that love of God "in Christ" comes into our world today - there is glory and there is peace.

Whenever, wherever - now, here, in you, through you, in situations we face daily...no matter of tragic, dark, difficult, trying and complex - wherever and whenever the love of God in Christ breaks through - glory and peace fill the air.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to your nearness in these moments, O God, as we prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus once again into our world. He comes to us as light and brings glory and peace. Help each of us - as we try to catch that light in our lives. Let it shine. Let it shine through us to pierce the darkness of some dark place this Christmas.

We ask this in the name of Him who was born in a stable, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen