"THE CEREMONY OF INNOCENCE"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
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INTRODUCTION

There's a marvelous anecdote out of Picasso's life. In 1966 at Cannes there was an exhibit of his work, a huge collection beginning with those paintings done in his youth and climaxing with paintings done in his latter years. Picasso was about eighty-five at that time. A woman came up to him at the exhibit and said to him, "I don't understand. The paintings over there...those that you painted when you were just starting out, are so mature, so somber and serious. The latter ones are so simple and joyful, playful, almost irrepressible. It's almost as if it should be reversed. How do you explain it?" And Picasso said, "It's simple. It takes a long time to become young."

DEVELOPMENT

It's a marvelous story. The pilgrimage of life is from simplicity to complexity and then to simplicity. The most famous of quotations from Einstein's later years reveals that same quality of simplicity and joy. He ended his career with a childlike wonder and awe at the mystery and the simplicity of the universe.

The great theologian, Karl Barth, whose major work called Kirchliche Dogmatik fills a whole library shelf, so formidable an achievement that very few have even attempted to understand it, stands as tall in his profession as Einstein and Picasso do in theirs. When he was an old man someone asked him, what is the essence of the Christian faith? He said, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so". You see, it takes a long time to become young.

MOVING TOWARD CHRISTMAS

This is Advent, and we are moving along toward Christmas. It's a simple story - Christmas. It's almost fairy tale in its quality. A beautiful story of the survival of a simple peasant family - Mary and Joseph and their baby against the evil ways of men and the coldness of the world. The baby is born, and for a moment at least, "All is calm, all is bright". It's a ceremony of innocence, triumphing over the evil of the world. That's what Christmas is all about. Once a year time is suspended and the world as we know it is transformed into the world that we wish it were.

There's an old story out of the First World War. It's always represented to me the enchantment of Christmas. It tells of Christmas Eve in France. The year is 1917. The Germans are in their trenches and across "No Man's Land" the British are in their trenches. At midnight the guns cease and a kind of truce takes place. Then the British begin to sing "Silent Night, Holy Night". Then all is quiet, until from the German trenches is heard, "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht". A beautiful story. I don't know if it's "the way it was"...but that doesn't really matter, because I know that's the way it should be - at Christmas. For Christmas is a ceremony of innocence. Something happened to transform the world, if only for a moment, to be the way we know it should be. Christmas is a time when innocence triumphed over the evil of the world.

The Christian faith would survive without Christmas. The faith began with the Cross and the Resurrection, with the end of the story. It was not until they went to the beginning of the story and told of how - in the darkest time that anybody could remember...when the world was at its worst...when despair and cruelty and tyranny were every day occurrences - just at that moment God came into the world as a baby in the humblest and the most vulnerable of circumstances, and "all was calm and all was bright."
Whenever that story was told, it was told the same way, as a story of innocence triumphing over evil, almost as if this is the way the world ought to be. It was always told the same way. When it was told as a simple story, it was always remembered that the doors were closed on Mary and Joseph, no room for them at the Inn, so they had to go to the stable. And when it was told as a simple narrative, it was like this: "He came to his own and his own received Him not". But He still came. And when it was put as a metaphor, "The Light came into the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it." That's the way the story always began. In the midst of the world the way it really is, God joined us the way we really are, and life became the way it should really be.

CHRISTMAS: FOR CHILDREN

You'll often hear people say that Christmas is for children. I'll confess that I have never really been all that comfortable with that statement. It always seemed to imply that Christmas had nothing to say to adults and I couldn't accept that. After all, I make my living trying to interpret the message of Christmas for adults in sermons. Some go out of Church saying, "That was very nice....and I agree, Christmas is for children." I get depressed when I hear that. I wonder what they're listening to. Well, I have a more realistic appraisal of my interpretive skills now. I no longer expect everybody to understand what I say. I'm content now that they should simply stay awake...enough of them, anyway, to pass the offering plate when the time comes.

I'm also wiser. I can say now, Christmas is for children. They understand instinctively. That story fits the configuration of their innocence. If you told children that on Christmas Eve all wars cease and enemies sing carols to each other across enemy lines, they'd believe it. It would make sense to them. There isn't anything in their world that says that couldn't happen, if everybody wanted it to happen, or because God wanted it to happen. It would happen. They could believe that.

It's when you grow up that you begin to doubt it. We've seen too many Herods and Caesars in this world to believe it. And we know this. We know that in the Gospel of Matthew, right after the Nativity Story, in the very next chapter, he tells the story of the slaughter of the innocent Hebrew children. We know that. Children don't know that. We spare them that account. In Sunday School we never read into the chapter after the nativity, because we want Christmas to be for children, for those who have not lost their innocence, who believe that the world can really be the way it is supposed to be, who believe that peace on earth and goodwill toward men is just a matter of deciding that it's going to be that way. Who believe that innocence can triumph over evil.

We recognize that there is something rare and precious about that innocence in children and we want to protect it. All parents try to do that. We have come out of the world of innocence, all of us. We remember it. We treasure it. And we seek to preserve that innocence in our children as long as we can. Some of the most painful moments I have had as a parent have been teaching my children about the way the world really is. It's not easy to explain to a six year old that there are some people in the world who harm and hurt and steal children. You have to do it. Parents must protect their children by taking away their innocence.

I read about a college the other day, in California, one of these Bible colleges. It was having trouble with the Board of Trustees. They didn't like
what one of the Professors was teaching, fearing that he would contaminate the minds of the students with worldly things. An administrator defended the college by saying this, "We believe that students should not be surprised by the world they find when they leave here." I think that's wise. You have to do that. Parents have to protect their children from the world as it really is up to a certain age, and then at that point, to be good parents, they have to prepare their children to enter into it. And that latter is a painful responsibility.

**CATCHER IN THE RYE** I remember J. D. Salinger's famous book, Catcher in the Rye, about a young man on the threshold of adulthood. He can remember the innocence of childhood and he's now old enough that he can see what he calls the choniness of adulthood, the manipulation and the mixed-up motives and the false values. He's on a bridge, that's what adolescence is. He's on a bridge between childhood and adulthood and he can look back and see the innocence of childhood and the way the world should be. And he can look ahead and see the way the world really is. He sees his vocation as a catcher in the rye. He envisions himself standing in a field of tall grass, children playing in the field. He's protecting them in their innocence, keeping them safe, keeping them at a distance away from the cliff, lest they fall over it and become adults.

In a particular way he follows that vocation in relation to his little sister, Phoebe. He protects her from the adult world. In one instance he rubs out a four-letter word that's written on a wall so Phoebe won't see it, lest her innocence be corrupted.

I was moved by that story. It's stayed with me all of these years because I suppose I see myself as a parent, and as an adult, called to protect the children from the baser forms of life in our world. I think that's a parental instinct. We know our children are innocent. We wish that we could keep them that way, but we can't. You can't go around rubbing out sin and ugliness from the world we live in. You've got to teach the children someday how to live in it. The loss of innocence. It's just a part of growing up.

I remember hearing about a radio dramatization of the Garden of Eden story. In the first part of the drama, before the Fall, when Adam and Eve are in their innocence, their voices were played by children. After the Fall, the voices of Adam and Eve were read by adults. Before the Fall - in childhood - we're innocent, and life is good and dreams come true and peace is real and we enjoy the world as it is given to us. After the Fall - in adulthood - we are jaded and life is good only if we forget an awful lot of it and dreams come true only if we scheme to make it so, and we search for something that we have not found.

And then comes Christmas. Every year. Then comes Christmas, and we say, "It's for children". It's too innocent for adults. And yet are we not drawn irresistibly toward its simple innocent charm? Not even ol' Scrooge can resist it for very long. We say it's for children and that is true. But is it not also true that at Christmas, at the ceremony of innocence, we see that our problem is not that we have not found something, our problem is that we have lost something. Christmas is for children, and for adults who have gained enough wisdom to become young.
LOOK AT CHRISTMAS

Look at Christmas. Look at what happened. Look what it says to us. In the midst of the world as it really is, God joined us as we really are - and life became what it is really supposed to be. Christmas makes an announcement. It says a new age is here. It says a new possibility for human life is now here. Of course, it's the old way of life, we all recognize it. We remember it. It's part of all of our lives. But we gave up on it because it didn't fit into the real world. No room for it, we said, then or now. Just like a light shining in the darkness, that's all it is - then or now. So we said, it won't work...it's too idealistic, it's too innocent. You see, we gave up hoping, dreaming, working for a better world, because we discovered that it is too hard. We could have discovered that in the story. "There was no room for them at the inn". They were shut out.

We could have learned something else from the story. He came anyway. He found the stable and, Emmanuel, God with us. "The light came into the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it."

So the message is, the new age is here! A new way of living is possible. The world tried to defeat it and it couldn't. It's here. That means you can become young again. You can live in openness and wonder and awe of the world. You can believe that love can be genuine, and relationships can be renewed, and goodness can triumph over evil. You can live that way. You can even believe that someday, if we want it, and we work for it, guns will cease and enemies embrace, because of Christmas.

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Remember ol' Scrooge in Dicken's beloved Christmas Carol. I'm sure you do. We all remember him. I wonder if you've ever thought about it - but that story is really about a man who grew old enough to become wise, and in his wisdom became young.

That story ends with Scrooge a new man. For him, the message of Christmas is a new age is here. For Scrooge, Christmas means a new life is possible. For some person present today, the message is the same. A new life is possible. The story is based on the faith that Christmas was not a fairy tale of imaginary time, but an invasion of our time, when God came into the world as it really is, joined us as we really are, so that life could become the way it should really be. As a result, this is a new age, a new way of living for us all is possible. You can become young again...because of Christmas.

LET US PRAY

Sharpen our minds, O Lord; humble our spirits, and open our hearts to take in the love that once became flesh, that comes amongst us again and again, that we may not only take Him in, but show Him to others and let others see Him in us. And we ask in in His name, and by His power, and for His sake.
PROGRAM

Luke 2: 1-7

"O Little Town of Bethlehem" 381*

Luke 2: 8-12, 15

"The First Noel" 383*

Matthew 2: 1-11

"We Three Kings of Orient Are" 402*

Luke 2: 13, 14

"Hark! The Herald Angels" 388*

"Mary Had A Baby"

"Away In A Manger"

"Joy To The World!" 392*

*The audience is invited to join in singing
The Sunday School of Park Avenue Methodist Church presents

A Nativity Pageant

December 16, 1984
ANTHEM: "Quem Vidistis Pastores Dicite"

"Whom did you see? Shepherds say! Who was there? Pray tell us who came down to the earth, tell us who appeared! We saw the Infant Child, and angels sang in chorus glorifying God on high. Tell us then! Say what you saw there. Tell the glad tidings that Christ was born to save us!"

ANTHEM: "Christmas Day"

The second anthem today is a choral fantasy on old, familiar Christmas carols.

ORGAN POSTLUDE

The organ postlude - a final offering of our praise to God - is played after the Benediction. Time permitting, we invite you to share in the beauty of it.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 20

The Oratorio Society of New York, under the direction of Lyndon Woodside, will present Handel's Messiah at Carnegie Hall on Thursday, December 20th, at 8 pm.

Reserve the date and include this performance of the Messiah as a part of your Christmas celebration. For ticket information, speak to Bobbie Heron.

THE ADVENT WREATH

The Advent Wreath with its four red candles is one of the traditions of the Christmas Season. Our Advent wreath - made possible through the kindness of one of our members - is on the chancel steps.

Today, on the Third Sunday of Advent, we light the third candle - the Candle of Joy. Today's candle lighters are Jeb Gray, John Bell and Sarah Cox-Riches Needham.

SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

This morning we are celebrating the Sacrament of Baptism. The following children are being presented for baptism: Molly Rose Haselden Green, infant daughter of Ginger Haselden and Dan Green, born July 25th, 1984; and Divia Caroline Melwani, infant daughter of Jaya and Pak Melwani, born August 3rd, 1984.

"HOUNDS OF HEAVEN"

This is the name of the Tuesday evening study group that meets at 6:30 pm in Fellowship Hall. The Meaning of Prayer by Harry Emerson Fosdick is the text book for this course.

George Leopold is leader. New members are always most welcome.
THE CHRISTMAS FLOWER FUND

Those wishing to give to the fund for Christmas decorations are invited to use the envelope in the pew.

HOLIDAY PECANS

Holiday pecans are available at the coffee hour. They're on a table in the rear of the Russell Room. See either Elizabeth Berg or Bobbie Heron. The price is right.

FINANCIAL CANVASS

The 1985 Financial Canvass is nearing completion. Pledge cards are still being received. To date, 184 pledges, totalling $81,768. have been gratefully received.

Our 1985 pledge goal is $96,000. and 250 pledges.

If you have not yet responded with a pledge for 1985, may we encourage you to do so today.

ENVELOPES

The 1985 boxes of offering envelopes are ready for distribution. Pick up the box that has your name on it. They're on a table at the rear of the Russell Room.

FINANCE COMMITTEE TO MEET

The Finance Committee will meet Thursday evening, December 20th, at 7 pm.

THIS AFTERNOON

The Adult Fellowship will attend the 4 pm Christmas Candleight Service at the Riverside Church this afternoon. Those planning to attend this annual outing are invited to eat brunch together. The group will come together at twelve-thirty in the Russell Room next to the Christmas tree by the front exit door.

For further details check with Linda Burtch, Christie Anderson, Gregg Buttermore, John Hornaday, Rick Kilbride or Margie Troike.

CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE

One of the loveliest services of the year is our Christmas Eve Service of Carols and Candles, scheduled for Monday evening, December 24th, at 8 pm. It's a popular service with neighborhood friends and the sanctuary is usually comfortably filled.

If you're in the city on Christmas Eve, plan to attend. Bring along some friends. It's a good way to introduce our Church to others.

Volunteers are needed to help with the ushering as well as with the arrangements for the fellowship hour. Speak to Larry Morales regarding the ushering and to Helen Wilkinson regarding the fellowship hour.
PARK AVENUE
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
106 East 86th Street
New York, N.Y. 10028
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MINISTER
Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

ORGANIST-CHOIR DIRECTOR
Mr. Lyndon Woodside

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Diane Coloton

DAY SCHOOL DIRECTOR
Judith Keisman

CUSTODIAN
Mr. Fernando Miranda

BUSINESS MANAGER
Mr. Jack Schmidt
THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT
December 16, 1984

ORDER OF WORSHIP
11 A. M.

ORGAN
"Largo: Allegro" Corelli

CALL TO WORSHIP

HYMN NO. 382 "Angels, from the Realms of Glory"

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (seated)

Our heavenly Father, who didst cause light to shine out of darkness in the advent of our Lord, Jesus Christ, we humbly confess our transgressions and implore Thy forgiveness. We are ashamed of that within us which maketh neither for good will to others nor for growth in goodness in our lives. We beseech Thee that the spirit of Christ may be born anew within us, and that we may glorify His nativity with hearts of compassion, deeds of kindly service, and the spirit of good will toward all mankind, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

SILENT MEDITATION - WORDS OF ASSURANCE - LORD'S PRAYER

*** LIGHTING OF THE THIRD ADVENT CANDLE

SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

*** ANTHEM
"Quem Vidistis Pastores Dicite" Poulenc

SCRIPTURE
Isaiah 9: 2 - 7 Page 593

PASTORAL PRAYER

PARISH CONCERNS

ANTHEM
"Christmas Day" Arr. by Holst

PRESENTATION OF THE OFFERING WITH THE DOXOLOGY

HYMN NO. 374 "Angels We Have Heard On High"

SERMON
"The Ceremony of Innocence" Mr. Clarke

HYMN NO. 394 "While Shepherds Watched Their Flock"

A GIFT FROM THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

BENEDICTION

ORGAN
"Allegro" Corelli

*** Interval for Ushering

LAY READER

We welcome Ken Barclay to the Lectern today. A native of Toronto, Ken is Vice President of E. F. Hutton & Company, Inc. Here in the Church he serves on the Membership Committee and as an usher.

USHERS

The ushers today are James Padilla, Anthony Alvarez, Richmond Bates, Gary Kunishima, Ernest Nieratka and Yoshito Oda.

AN INVITATION

Coffee and tea will be served in the Russell Room following the service. Members and friends are invited to share in these moments of warm fellowship possible for us today by Phyllis Balk, Augusta Ansah, Sara Clarke, Norma D'Ambrosio, Bobbie Heron, Audrey Myers and Grace Natividad.

SUNDAY SCHOOL AND NURSERY CARE

Sessions of Church School for children are offered Sunday mornings from eleven to twelve. Nursery care for infants and toddlers is also available.

A GIFT FROM THE CHILDREN

Today, after the worship service, the boys and girls of our Sunday School will present their interpretation of the Nativity pageant. We invite you to stay to enjoy this brief but beautiful gift from the children.

ADULT BIBLE CLASS

The Adult Bible Class meets Sunday mornings at 9:30 in Fellowship Hall. The Book of Revelation is being studied. Janet Ernst is serving as teacher.