

"THE GREATEST GOOD NEWS OF ALL"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
December 22, 1991

## "THE GREATEST GOOD NEWS OF ALL"

### INTRODUCTION

Christmas Day, 1948. The place is West Berlin. It's a cold and a lonely city if you're an American soldier. You're behind Communist lines...behind a wall of fear and mutual distrust. But there's one glimmer of hope, however (no pun intended). For an American entertainer has come with a troupe of pretty girls and musicians to do a show to raise your spirit. His name is Bob Hope.

He begins his show with his regular patter. There's an air of warm congeniality. He says to the soldiers,

"When I landed, General Clay came up to me and shook my hand and asked me for my autograph. What a sneaky way to get enlistments...."

By now the men are laughing and cheering. What a terrific change from the gray, cold and monotonous days that usually characterize Berlin this time of the year.

### DEVELOPMENT

The show is nearing the end. Hope is introducing the last of his troupe...one of the most famous song writers in America - Irving Berlin. Funny about Irving Berlin. He can't read music. His voice is terrible. He carries a special piano with him for he doesn't know how to play on black keys. When he has to play a sharp or a flat he presses a special pedal that shifts the entire keyboard.

But as Irving Berlin begins to sing, the loudest cheers of the day begin to erupt. He's singing one of his own compositions and everyone is going wild. Even the coarseness of his voice and the limitations of the piano cannot spoil the effect as he sings,

"I'm dreaming of a white Christmas. Just like the ones I use to know...where the tree tops glisten and children..."

And as he sings, the thoughts of every soldier in that audience travel back to happier days...to family and friends and sweethearts back home.

### HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN IT?

How do you describe or explain what Christmas means in our lives? Norman Vincent Peale once told of two men who were standing at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 57th Street during the Christmas rush, waiting for a red light. One of them was quite irritated by the traffic and he growled to the man next to him,

"This town is totally disorganized. Look at this traffic! It's terrible. Something ought to be done about it."

The other man...more philosophical in nature...thoughtfully countered,

"You know, it's astounding, the romance of it. There was a baby born of peasant parents in a little out-of-the way place halfway around the world from here. The parents had no money or social standing, yet 2,000 years later that little baby creates a traffic jam on 5th Avenue, one of the most sophisticated streets in our world. This irritates you. Friend...it should fascinate you!"

And I agree...it should fascinate us. A baby boy...born in an obscure village, his simple parents no more than refugees and yet 'round the world during this special season of the year...millions of people are affected by His birth. And why not?

When we pause and consider what really happened that first Christmas, we see why the whole world seems to be singing Christmas carols. Just what is it that we believe about Christmas. What is at its very heart? Let me suggest several things in these moments we have together. Briefly, five things...

#### GOD EMPTIED HIMSELF

First of all, at Christmas (to borrow a phrase from St. Paul), God "emptied" Himself. This is a truth fundamental to everything that Christians believe. Remember that Oliver Goldsmith wrote a play entitled, "She Stoops To Conquer". There is a sense in which that can be said of God. He "stooped to conquer" this world.

Back in my college days when I was a great Thoreau enthusiast, I remember once hearing or reading that Henry David Thoreau once spent a whole day in Walden Pond up to his neck in the water. His idea was to see and experience the world as a frog sees it. But Thoreau did not become a frog.

Perhaps "Sesame Street" comes a bit closer to the Christmas Story for one time they had a skit of the old fairy tale where the beautiful princess kisses an ugly frog and the frog becomes a handsome prince. However, in the "Sesame Street" telling when the beautiful princess kissed the frog, she turned into a frog herself! I think that's closer to what we celebrate at Christmas.

God did not swoop down and survey the human situation from a safe distance. God "emptied" Himself. He put to one side His celestial robes and donned the simple raiment of a man. Divinity clothed itself with dust. And this is an incredible...a mind-blowing idea. It's so incredible that many Christians can only pay lip service to it. For us to say that Jesus Christ really is the "incarnation" of the Living God is to say that He is more than just another great teacher, more than an inspiring example, more than a worthy guide. As John puts it in his Gospel, "He is the way, the truth and the life."

#### HE INVADED OUR WORLD

Second, He invaded our world.

Ted Engstrom tells the story of Pat Moore. One Spring day back in May of 1979, Pat Moore - who looked like she must be 85 years old - opened the door of her New York City apartment and stepped nervously into the hall. She put her cane out in front of her and carefully felt for the first step on the stairs. Her legs moved gingerly and awkwardly. First one step...then another... then the third...all the way to the 12th step. So far so good. When she got to the bottom of the stairs, she saw her landlady who exclaimed, "Oh, I'm sorry....I was expecting someone else."

"Don't you recognize me?" asked Pat, her voice strained and cracked. "No, ma'am, I don't" said the landlady, staring at the frail woman. "I'm Pat Moore" she said laughing.

You see, Pat Moore, was not 85 years old at all. She was an attractive 26 year old specialist in industrial design, who was concerned about the needs of the aged. At least once each week for three years, Pat Moore would put on her masquerade of facial latex foam, a heavy fabric that bound her body, and a

very convincing gray wig. She visited fourteen states as an old woman. She met hundreds and hundreds of people who never once discovered her true identity. Pat Moore wanted to have a first-hand experience of what it was like to be an elderly person in the United States.

Friends, the journey that God made that first Christmas from the "throne of glory to the stable in Bethlehem" was such a journey. First, as Paul put it, He "emptied Himself". Second, He invaded our world...this world.

HE IDENTIFIED WITH OUR SITUATION

Third, He identified with our human situation. Yes, He became One of us.

Remember in that delightful story by Barbara Robinson, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, that a question is raised over what name should be given to the Christ Child. One little boy pipes up and offers the names found in Isaiah's prophecy, "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." One of the children, I think it's Imogene Herdman, speaks up and says,

"He'll never get out of First Grade if He has to learn how to write all of that!....."

Well, He didn't have to learn how to write all that, but He had other things He had to learn just as we do. For Jesus was a baby like every other baby. He was a baby who was nursed and Mary had to burp Him and His "swaddling clothes" had to be changed periodically and later while growing up in Nazareth, He was a kid like every other kid in that city. I'm sure that Mary and Joseph got upset on occasion as He got dirty and had fights and stole cookies and broke things the way the other growing boys did. And if you can't imagine Jesus involved in some boyhood mischief, then your understanding of the incarnation is not quite what it ought to be. When God "emptied" Himself and invaded our world, He truly became everything we are... and was tested, tempted and troubled even as we are. He became one of us in order to make us what He is.

King George the Fifth of England once paid a visit to the city of Leeds. The city prepared some elaborate ways to greet him. And excited crowds filled the streets to wave and to cheer. There was a large elementary school in Leeds with a playground which ran alongside the railway line. His Majesty agreed to wave to the children as the royal train passed by on the last day of his visit. The boys and girls crowded to the playground wall overlooking the tracks and presently, from a long tunnel, the royal train slowly emerged and gradually drew alongside the playground.

The King came outside the royal coach and stood on a small platform where they could all see him. He wore no crown or purple robe, but was dressed in a plain suit, just like an ordinary man. From his jacket pocket he plucked a bright handkerchief with which he waved to the cheering children. All too soon the train went by and disappeared. Then the cheers subsided into silence, except for one little girl who sobbed bitterly, so much so that one of the teachers asked her, "Why are you crying like that?" The little girl sobbed through her tears,

"I wanted to see the King and I only saw a man!"

People who came to see Jesus saw only a man. He lived as a man and He died as a man. It is through the eyes of faith alone that we now see Him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He "emptied" Himself. He invaded our world. He identified with our situation.

HE EMBODIED THE PATIENT, SUFFERING LOVE OF GOD, THE FATHER

Fourth, He embodied the

patient, sometimes the suffering love of God, the Father.

Dwight L. Moody, the great evangelist of another era, once told of playing a homemade version of the game, "Pictionary" with his family...a game the preceded charades. It was Christmas and they were gathered around the dining room table thinking up phrases and themes from the Christmas story which they could represent in drawings. His nine year old daughter, Sarah, drew the difficult phrase, "Glory to God in the highest". According to her father, the nine year old had difficulty representing "glory" and "highest". But not God. He wrote,

"Without a moment's hesitation she drew a human form - with face, arms, legs and then hands with nail prints. It was Jesus she had drawn to convey to us God...."

And that, of course, is WHY Jesus came among us. It's one thing to talk about love. It's quite another thing to show that love by nail prints in your hands and mine. Yes, He embodied the patient, sometimes suffering love of God, the Father. Perhaps there is one present here this morning who needs to hear that tender word.

HE EMPOWERS US TO A NEW LEVEL OF LIVING

Fifth and finally, He empowers all of us to a new and higher

level of living in the knowledge that the infant who once inhabited the stable of Bethlehem now resides in our hearts.

One of my favorite books in High School was George Elliot's Silas Marner. She wrote a moving story about a bitter old miser whose only preoccupation is his growing pile of gold. One day the gold is stolen. Silas longs to identify the thief and recover his gold. Instead, a young golden haired child finds her way into Silas' cottage and he grows to love her and eventually he adopts her. Eventually Silas Marner discovers through this child something far more valuable than gold. Later a friend of Marner's is commenting on the injustices that Marner has experienced and comments that the reasons such things occur are "dark" to such as them. Silas Marner replies in the vernacular of his time,

"...that doesn't hinder. Since the child was sent to me and I've come to love her as myself, I've had light enough to trusten by; and now she says she'll never leave me I think I shall trusten till I die...."

Silas Marner discovered what you and I discovered long ago in the child born in that manger. It is the discovery that at the very heart of this universe is love - a love that will never let us down nor let us go. "Light enough to trusten by". And that's what we are celebrating at this time of year. "I think I shall trusten till I die."

CLOSING

To me, it's no small wonder then that even a syrupy tune like Berlin's White Christmas could cause such an eruption of cheers behind communist lines in West Berlin on Christmas Day, 1948. Christmas means so much to us. At its very heart it is reminding us that God emptied Himself and invaded our world and identified with our human situation...all of our pains and troubles, trials and temptations. He embodied the patient, suffering Love of God, the Father and now empowers us to live with the knowledge that His spirit - the spirit of Divine Love - is alive in our world and present where we are. to have dealings with all that we do!

"Love came down at Christmas,  
Love all lovely, Love Divine.  
Love was born at Christmas,  
Star and angels gave the sign.

Worship we the godhead,  
Love incarnate, Love Divine.  
Worship we our Jesus;  
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,  
Love be yours and love be mine,  
Love to God and all men,  
Love for plea and gift and sign"

PRAYER

Let the message of Christmas move in our hearts, O God...and let it stir us to new and higher levels of Christlike living. As we brush up against Divine Truth once again in these coming hours, let its touch go in to the deep and dark corners of our lives with its light and its love. In the spirit of the Christ Child we pray. Amen.