

"THE SCENIC ROUTE"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Let me tell you about what's happening in our house - and I'll wager in your house, too. We're in the throes of what I call an annual litany. The Thanksgiving holiday having been put to rest - perhaps with a bit of help from an alka-seltzer - we have now invoked the annual litany to get all systems into a "go" condition for the launching of what we all know is surely the year's most commercial holiday.

Now I don't want to waste your time this morning decrying the commercialism of this year end celebration, but I do want to try and remind ourselves of this season's meaning. As I said last Sunday, I do happen to believe that given certain preparation, the Advent and Christmas Season can also be one of the year's most spiritually moving and therefore renewing seasons.

DEVELOPMENT

Now this litany that I am talking about includes all members of our family as participants. It usually begins with solemn words spoken by the head of the house - not me, but my wife, and her solemn words are followed by antiphonal responses. It's apt to go something like this:

"Dear, I don't mean to disturb you...sitting there watching the basketball game, but we ought to be deciding what we are going to do about Christmas."

"Yes, dear."

"You aren't listening to me!"

"Yes, dear."

Then, depending upon the number of family members present, this litany continues, with varied statements from each member about his or her wants and needs - usually in that order...and they're apt to go like this:

"Dad, I'd like a trip this year...a few days in the sun."

"Yes, dear...."

"Dad, how much are you going to give me to spend this Christmas?"

"Yes, dear..."

And so on and so on, until the day arrives. And behind all of this antiphonal dialogue, there's a soft refrain from Bacchic Chorus of merchants singing in the background something like this:

"Hark, the registers are ringing,
Glory to the credit card.
We, the merchants, are a-singing,
We love the way you worship God!"

Now if that description of the annual pre-Christmas litany sounds slightly cynical, it's meant to be. It is difficult - as I said last Sunday - for the Christian who takes the coming of God into the world seriously, not to be at least ambivalent - and even cynical - over much of the season's trappings. And we are

no different from past generations and times. There have been periods in history when the Christmas holidays became such a bawdy times of revelry that the celebration of Christmas was outlawed by both the state and the Church.

More seriously, though, I do believe that it is incumbent on us as believing Christians to probe beneath the commercial scene, to take the time and energy to fasten upon the deep spiritual and renewing significance of the season. This season can be a season of grace, if we choose to make it so, to give God the opportunity to come into our lives more fully. That's what Advent means and is all about. God's coming. God's caring. The question, of course, is how can we open ourselves to God? How to probe beneath the glitter and tinsel of the season?

TROUBLE IDENTIFYING THE MESSAGE

At first blush, the task of identifying the message of this holy season seems difficult in our day and time, in our generation. Some people like to excuse their indifference to the season's meaning by hiding...hiding behind a kind of worldly sophistication. They might say,

"Why of course the King James Version of Scripture is some of the best English literature, but you don't actually believe the story, do you? In this day and time? You've got to be putting me on...."

So, as God comes to us today, He comes to a different kind of person. He comes to persons surrounded by new walls and barriers that must be penetrated. We proclaim the Christmas story to a people who are often Biblical illiterates - unlike some past generations who knew their Bible from "kiver to kiver" - as the old folks use to say. "Kiver to kiver"...

We say that the Christmas story falls on ears that have been instructed in scientism and scientific methodology, and therefore we no longer really believe in angel choruses, or virgin births, or stars appearing in the East and Wise Men riding camels. And we are trying to tell the story of "peace on earth, good will to men" to a generation that has known only war - hot war, cold war, detente, arms race, nuclear freeze, containment, limited war, first strike, the day after...

So it is for these kinds of reasons that many people are immune to the spiritual values of the season, permitting the marketplace to overwhelm the manger in their lives.

TAKE THE SCENIC ROAD

This morning, in the midst of this Advent Season - I certainly don't pretend to have a total solution to any spiritual decay or deterioration in our society. I come with a very simple message or recommendation that may help overcome resignation to spiritual decay, a recommendation that may help us to plumb the real joy of this sacred season.

It occurs to me that those who miss the deeper joy of Christmas may well do so because they approach it from the wrong road. And I'm advocating this morning that we take the scenic route as we travel toward Christmas and Bethlehem and the manger. And I make the recommendation on good authority, because that is exactly how Christmas came to be.

I began to think about the time when God first visited man in the flesh of Jesus Christ. He came even then to a world that - like ours - was no stranger to wars and hostility...to a world in which religion had been commercialized. In fact, Jesus once cleansed the Temple of the commercializers. So God came to that kind of world and for some reason, despite those conditions, He was received. He was followed. He was adored - so much so that His followers searched for a vessel powerful enough to connote the importance of His coming. That's what the season is all about. But we may miss its significance, because we haven't taken the same scenic route; we haven't travelled the same road as those who created the Christmas story, those who walked the roads of Galilee with Jesus of Nazareth.

For many years - more than my wife would care to count - we have driven the distance between NYC and Portland, Maine usually around the 1st of August. You have a choice in terms of how you get there - what roads to drive. You can take the commercial route, travel the Interstate highways - 95, 86, 495 and 95 again. It's fast that way; you can do it in about 5½ hours. This Summer I purposely chose to take a different way - call it the scenic way, if you will. It took us through towns like Bennington, Brattleboro, Keene, Concord. It took us over and around some beautiful mountains, some dirt roads. Took us a bit longer, but what a joy the scenic way proved to be. I had forgotten how breath-takingly beautiful it could be. I felt blessed by that route.

And so it is with traveling to Bethlehem's manger. We can take the commercial route - and many will. We can take the interstate highways, which means you don't have to start as early...but we still get there on time. But in both cases we are apt to wind up in Bethlehem, standing before the manger saying, "what's happening...what's it all about?"

IT ALSO OCCURED TO ME

It also occurred to me, that when God came to man almost 2,000 years ago that He came into the midst of a people who had been prepared by a history and by a culture to receive Him - a people whose ancestors had been delivered from slavery in Egypt; a people who had listened to God's prophets through the ages calling them to the "plumbline" of justice; a people who had heard the prophet Isaiah say in the midst of their affliction:

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted..."

So God, in that First Century, came to a people prepared by their history of affliction and delivery to expect God's Messiah. They were prepared...

And if we really want to understand and know the deep joy of this Season, then we too have to "prepare" ourselves by recalling to our minds just such a history. Refresh our memories of this God who acts and promises to act again and again.

THROUGH THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

And it is that scenic route through both the Old and the New Testaments that leads us into eager expectancy. And I don't mean to suggest for one moment that we simply leave that story of God's acting in the First Century. Even as we travel that ancient road we will find the scenic route evoking parallels in our own experience as individuals and collectively, too.

Eventually, when we have travelled through the Old Testament and have recalled the shepherding of God's people from Egypt to Palestine, eventually that

scenic route will introduce us to Jesus of Nazareth, travelling the highways and by-ways where men first encountered Him - minus the wrappings and glitter that have subsequently come to adorn Him.

The scenic route to the manger doesn't begin with the myth and poetry, but focusses on the flesh and blood of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jesus living with the anxieties and tensions, the greeds and lusts, the commerce and disease, the pain and death in His world and time - the same things we wrestle with in our day and time.

The scenic route follows a Jesus of Nazareth who made the blind to see, and the lame to walk, who taught with a strange and uncanny authority, who rescued the underdog, and forgave sinners seventy-seven times seven.

That scenic route would carry us to Jerusalem via Gethsemane, where we would hear the cries of real anguish give way to a strangely peaceful cry of "not my will, but Thine be done."

The scenic route, unlike the commerical route and the by-pass and the interstates will allow us time to hear the corner's report of that First Century, detailing the death of that Jesus of Nazareth. And it will let us hear the eye-witness report of three days later, when that same Jesus of Nazareth, burst the bonds of death that had sought to heal Him in the hard realities of this life - life we know in so limited a fashion. Or, as the Apostle Paul once said, "Now we see through a glass darkly, but then - face to face!"

ADVOCATING THE SCENIC ROUTE

And so, my fellow travellers, it is the scenic route that I'm advocating for us this morning as we move a little bit closer to Christmas.

If we travel that road not only to Bethlehem, but travel it in our daily lives - taking the time to stay in touch with Jesus, taking the time to hear and follow His words, "Go and do thou likewise", taking the time to be our brother's keeper, taking the time to love, taking the time to share what we have been given. Take such time and we will discover the profound truth of the manger.

And what is that truth? It is the amazing, the astounding, the almost incredible truth that dawned upon men who were no strangers to materialism, no strangers to commercialism, no strangers to the historical facts, but men who nonetheless dared to insist that in Jesus of Nazareth, God had visited humankind in the flesh.

Let me close with words of a man who lived during our lifetime, a world reknown scientist, physician, musician, scholar - the late Albert Schweister. After a lifetime of traveling that scenic route, he wrote these words about Jesus whose coming we await:

"He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou Me!' And He sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings, which they shall pass through in His fellowship; and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience, who He is!"

