THREE THOUGHTS WORTH REMEMBERING

INTRODUCTION  The sermon this morning is the result of three things that happened to me this Christmas. I'm sure that they have happened before, but never before have I been so intensely aware of them or thought so very much about the implications of them. I'd venture to say that these three things may have happened to you too; perhaps not this Christmas, but they may have happened to you on other Christmases. You may not have thought about them. However, I think they are worth thinking about and worth remembering.

THE FIRST THING  The first thing that happened to me was this: I heard a great deal of good news. Most of it came in either those long Christmas letters that we all love to receive or written on the back of Christmas cards. A few samples will help you to see the sort of thing that I have in mind.

First there was a card from a young married woman living in Nashville, Tennessee. A few brief lines were written on the back of the card. She reminded me that two years ago she was living here in the city. One or two things about this young lady before I read the note that was on the back of the card. This particularly young lady had graduated from college the preceding June and around that time had become emotionally involved with a young man. I don't like to talk about these things from the pulpit but apparently this young couple went a little too far in their relationship with the result that the young woman soon found herself in the unhappy situation of having to leave her home, her family, her hometown and come to NYC for several months and her hideout in order to give birth to a child conceived out of wedlock. She went on to remind me that as an unmarried mother she had come to this church for help and received a great deal of kind support as she worked her way through the experience. This is what she said on the back of her card:

"I don't know whether you'll remember me or not, but I came to your church in the fall of 1957. I was quite desperate at the time and unsure as to what to do. Your help and the silent understanding of your wonderful people meant a great deal to me. I'm now living in Nashville. A little over a year ago I met a wonderful person and we were married by a Methodist minister. I'm expecting a baby in April. Although I'll never be completely rid of the scars of that NYC experience, I do feel that with God's help I have found a new life and the future isn't quite as dark for me as it was the last time we talked together."

That came to me as good news!

Then too there was a card from an old friend, a person I hadn't heard from in some time. This person was quite sick this past summer, and I didn't know anything about it until I read the message on the back side of his Christmas card. This is what he had to say:

"Dad's well, and I am too, now. I've been sick since June - 3 operations, weight dropped to 150 pounds and on August 15th I came home from the hospital to die. I'm not joking. Said I didn't have a chance. Had been there 7 weeks. Well, I'm far from dead, gained 48 pounds these past four months and really am fine."
I hope that everything is fine with you, your holiness."

As you see, we know each other quite well. Anyway, his note was filled with good news.

Another note came from the west coast. It was a Christmas card with a photograph of a baby on it. You know the type of card I mean. It has a picture of a child and along side there are apt to be these words: "Greeting from our house to yours". This card was from a couple that were married here in our church a year ago last summer. The bride at one time attended services here quite regularly. She married a man who had been married three times and divorced three times, and when they first approached me on the subject of being married in this church I was quite reluctant to become involved in the situation. However after two counselling sessions with the couple, I decided to go ahead and marry them. Even though the young man had been married three times and divorced three times, the young lady had not and I didn't feel quite right in closing the doors of the church completely to them in this respect. On the back of there card was something like this:

"Here is our pride and joy. (Referring to the baby whose picture appeared on the reverse side). She is now three months old. (One or two other sentences followed and then it closed with this bit of good news). Our love is growing, widening and deepening as we go on together."

That came to me as good news. I had been quite worried about this couple and wondered whether they would make a real go of it, and it meant a great deal to me to know that their love was growing, and widening and deepening.

And then too there was a Christmas letter from an old seminary friend and his wife who went out to India a year ago to serve as missionaries. They are connected with the American college in the city of Madurai, in South India. This was the first word we had had from them since they went out there last year. It was a wonderful letter. Three pages. I wish I had time to read it all to you. It was filled with good news all the way through. It would be a sermon in itself. They made mention of our president's recent visit to India and what they said was good news:

"The students here at the University with whom we have very close contact were deeply moved by President Eisenhower's visit. The things he had to say and the way that he said them has done a great deal to strengthen the ties that India has with the western world."

That came as good news. As these letters and cards came to us from friends all over the country, and in some instances from friends beyond the borders of our country, I couldn't help but feel lifted. I couldn't help but feel that there's a great deal more good news in the world than we ever read in the papers or hear over the radio. Sometimes I get terribly depressed reading the papers. So many of our papers seem to carry nothing but bad news. Take yesterday's paper for instance. Here are some of the headlines. (INSERT). I'm not criticizing the press for publishing bad news. After all it's their responsibility to report
the news both good and bad, and I'm not suggesting that we ought not to read bad news. What I'm trying to suggest to you is something like this that there is a great deal of good news that never makes the papers, that there's a great deal going on in the world beside all of the bad things that we read about and listen to.

If there had been newspapers in Jerusalem when Jesus was born, the headliness would probably have run something like this: Rome increases tax rate; uprisings in Galilee put down by mass crucifixions; Herod plays game with Rome - receives 'payola' for previous political maneuvers with Roman Governor; Ten men robbed and two killed by young Samaritan delinquents on the Jerusalem - Jericho Road. Of course there was one item of good news that would have put all of this bad news in a different light - a baby born in Bethlehem. But when you stop to think about, I doubt whether that would have made the headliness. As a matter of fact, I doubt whether it would have made the papers at all. And so just to bring this first thought that came to me this Christmas season to a head, it would be something like this: REMEMBER THERE'S A GREAT DEAL OF GOOD NEWS IN THE WORLD THAT NEVER MAKES THE PAPERS, A GREAT DEAL OF GOOD GOING ON IN THE WORLD THAT WE NEVER HEAR ABOUT.

THE SECOND THING  The second thing that happened to me was this: I was overwhelmed by the kindness and affection of people on all sides. This, I think, is a little harder to speak about in a specific way. I was made so aware of it not only as it was expressed to me and to the members of my family, but also as I saw it being expressed to other people around me. It was expressed in so many different ways. People wrote it, spoke it and put it into gifts. Honestly I've never seen so many packages under a Christmas tree as there were under our tree. So many, so many little expressions of gratitude came to us from so many different people for little things done for them by the church. Sometimes you wonder how they ever manage to remember it. Sometimes we think that people are forgetful and that their appreciation doesn't go very far, but then Christmas comes around and it somehow makes you realize that people appreciate what you do for them a great deal more than they sometimes let you know at the time.

I'm sure that this may have happened to you just as it did to me. But this year, as I witnessed this outpouring of affection and goodwill, I thought to myself that people are often a great deal better and kinder than we given them credit for being. I couldn't help but feel that there's a thread of goodness running through human nature. I couldn't help but feel that there's a warm place in the hearts of most people, and this time of year seems to bring that warm spot around to where you can see it and feel it.

How I wish that we as a Christian community could continue to keep that warm spot in view all the year long - removing the obstacles and taking away the barriers - so that the best wise of a person's human nature could be felt and seen. In the other months of the year when people are apt to be unresponsive and indifferent, it is worth remembering I think just how outgoing and responsive and concerned they were at Christmas.

THE THIRD THING  This then bring us to the third thing that happened to me this Christmas, and I'm going to speak about it only briefly, partly because there isn't time to speak about it at great lengths and partly because it is the sort of thing that is difficult for us to speak about at all. I'm not sure just how to express
it to you, but it would be something like this. God seemed to come closer to me this Christmas season than he usually does. I felt his presence quite deeply several times this season in very tangible things and at specific times. I don't know whether or not you were here at the Christmas Eve service or not, but as we sang "Silent Night, Holy Night" and the lights in the church began to go down and the candles began to burn, I felt God coming very close to us. I was deeply moved. It came as a surprise to me to see how God could use that carol that is all but hackneyed, and the candle-light, and the people sitting quietly in the pews - it surprised me how he could use all of these to make his presence felt in our lives.

As I administered communion on Christmas Eve, and watched the people come forward to the altar rail, some of whom I had never seen before - young people, middle aged people, elderly people - I couldn't help but wonder what might be in their hearts and minds and what might be happening to them on such an occasion, and somehow as I saw them come forward and kneel in order to be fed by the life of God, I felt God coming closer to us than usual. I felt his presence in other ways and on other occasions - standing in Grand Central Station on Thursday noon listening to some of the wonderful old carols being sung by a lovely negro artist who was standing in the balcony. Her voice just seemed to fill that place, and people who were rushing to catch trains paused for a few minutes and looked up and listened and seemed to be momentarily lifted up into the very presence of Him who is the father of us all. And then too I felt his presence Friday evening riding down Park Avenue and seeing the beautiful Christmas trees with their bright lights shining in the darkness and those beautiful memorial trees which ought to be the pattern of Christmas decorations in all places. I felt his presence momentarily as I saw the wonderful expression that appeared on my son's face as he saw the lights on the Christmas tree in his own home.

As these things happened, I thought to myself, God does come to us. He doesn't wait for us to come to Him. In a sense, he is with us all the time. He made the world and He is in it and He sustains it and keeps it moving all of the time. But in our understanding of it and in our experiences of life, God comes to us at particular times and in particular places. So often we spend a great deal of time looking for him far off in the realm of the intellectual and abstract. But then there are those moments when he seems to come very close to us. I suppose that this is was Wordsworth was thinking of when he wrote:

"And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime;
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky and in the mind of man -
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought
And rolls through all things."

At Christmas time, perhaps more than at any other time of the year, we become aware of the fact that there is a divine dimension to life. We feel it as we remember how God came into life at a particular time and place - in Bethlehem on Christmas Day.
These three things are very simple, but I think they are important things to remember, for if they are remembered, your whole outlook on life will be changed and you will see things from a different angle, from the Christian perspective, so to speak. These then are the three things:

First: there is more good news in the world that you would sometimes think there is from treading the papers.

Second: there is more goodness and kindness in people than we would sometimes think there is.

Third: there are times when God doesn't wait for us to come to Him, but He comes to us - quietly, silently, in so many different ways...at particular times and in particular places just as He came to us on that first Christmas in the form of an infant child...in the manger of Bethlehem.

Let us pray:

As the Christmas season passes once again, Our Father, may the light of it linger on in our lives so that we come to see the world in a new way and from a different point of view. Give us the grace and the will to trust the best in others and to look constantly for thee, not in the sky, but in our lives. Amen.
This Majestic Impartiality

NEVER has there been such radical appraisal of men! Whether rich or poor, learned or unlearned, strong or weak, irrespective of race or nation—in the eyes of Jesus every man is of eternal worth. With towering impartiality He regarded all men, equally, as the children of God.

To be sure, some men receive rewards and some punishment, but not because they are natively of unequal worth. Some suffer want and others enjoy plenty, some are ill and die early while others are robust and live long—but not because of the caprice and favoritism of God. Through all these variables, God’s love of all people remains constant.

There is no other place to discover this over-all love than at the foot of the cross. There is no clue in the ebb and flow of the fortunes of men or nations. The only constant, fixed point is the love which is revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the sins of all men. Failing to find it there, man will be left with the spectacle of a God who lavishes favor indiscriminately and who inflicts hardship indifferently.

We who are followers of this Christ are under compulsion to resist every impulse, every force and every social structure which violates the high intrinsic value which He placed on all men. To the degree that we rise above the segregations that threaten our common life together do we witness to the fact that we are indeed children of God.
FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS  
December 27, 1959

ORDER OF WORSHIP

ORGAN PRELUDE  "Song of the Star"  Guilmant
"Noel"  Guilmant

CALL TO WORSHIP

HYMN No. 90  "As with gladness men of old"  Guilmant

INTROIT  (Seated)  "The Morning Star on High"  Praetorius

PRAYER OF CONFESSION  (The people seated and bowed)

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. But Thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us. Spare thou those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore thou those who are penitent, according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord. Grant, O merciful Father, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous and sober life; to the glory of Thy holy name. Amen

SILENT MEDITATION

AND WORDS OF ASSURANCE

THE LORD'S PRAYER  Choral Response

*** (Interval for ushering)

THE RESPONSIVE READING  Page 621

THE GLORIA PATRI

THE AFFIRMATION OF FAITH  Apostles' Creed  Page 512

*** (Interval for ushering)

THE ANTHEM  "Break forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light"  Bach

THE SCRIPTURE LESSON  Matthew 2:1 - 12

VERSICLES AND RESPONSES  (The Minister and the Choir)

THE PASTORAL PRAYER  CHORAL RESPONSE

THE OFFERTORY SOLO  "Darkness Shall Cover the Earth"  Handel

THE PRESENTATION OF TITHES AND OFFERINGS WITH DOXOLOGY

HYMN No. 102  "We three kings"

SERMON  "Three Thoughts Worth Remembering"  Mr. Clarke

HYMN No. 109  "What child is this?"

BENEDICTION  Choral Response

ORGAN POSTLUDE  "Adeste Fidelis"  Andrews

THIS WEEK AT PARK AVENUE METHODIST CHURCH

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 27

9:30 A. M. Church School Classes for all ages.
11:00 A. M. Divine Worship. Sermon by Mr. Clarke.
12:00 Noon Coffee Hour in Fellowship Hall.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 28

8:00 P. M. Woman's Society Christmas Party will be held at the parsonage apartment of Rev. and Mrs. Philip Clarke, 1680 York Avenue. A cordial invitation is extended to all of the women of the congregation to attend this festive occasion. An exchange of presents ($1.00) will be part of the program.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 30

7:00 P. M. Choir rehearsal.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 3

11:00 A. M. Divine Worship. Holy Communion. The Rev. Mr. Moody, our Assistant Minister, will bring the communion meditation.

OTHER NOTICES

A coffee hour will follow the service of worship and whether you care for coffee or not, you will enjoy the friendly experience of greeting old friends and meeting new friends. The hostesses are Miss L. Johnston, Miss G. McLaughlin, Miss A. Johnston, and Miss T. Younkin. Both members and friends are invited to attend this friendly gathering in the Fellowship Hall, (3rd floor).

The church staff wishes to take this opportunity to express their appreciation to all those who remembered them with Christmas cards and other gestures of thoughtfulness. We deeply appreciate these acts of kindness. To serve such wonderful people is both a blessing and a privilege.

The ushers are Mr. J. Bowater and Mr. C. Paech. Mrs. G. McKenney and Mrs. K. Sundstrom are in charge of the Nursery Care Hour which couples with infants and preschool children find of such great help. It meets on the 4th floor from 10:45 to 12:45.