

"TRYING TO GET THE PAGEANT RIGHT!"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
December 19, 1993

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INTRODUCTION

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Anyway, the day of the pageant arrived. The congregation had gathered for the special event. They had sung the carols well. And the little angel choir complete with haloes got through their first "big number" without a hitch..."almost on key and in unison". The moment came for the grand entrance of Mary and Joseph, with Mary riding on the donkey. She was "carrying what later proved to be a Raggedy Andy doll". Then it happened...

The donkey made two or three hesitant steps down the center aisle, took a look at the full church and locked his legs. The donkey would not move and the entire procession came to a halt. Joseph jerking on his halter didn't have any effect. Joseph began to look around for help. And some wicked kicking on the part of Mary had no effect.

Just then the President of the Trustees of that Church who was sitting near the rear of the church next to the center aisle and dressed in his Sunday best slid out of his pew and tried to help. The floor was well polished. With another man pulling the donkey's halter, the President of the Trustees crouched at the stern end of the donkey and pushed...slowly sliding the rigid beast down the aisle, inch by stately inch. Someone behind the scenes chose that moment to turn on a tape recorder which blared forth a mighty chorus from the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. And this, of course, scared the poor little donkey. Well by this time everyone was laughing. The organizers of that year's pageant left the church later that day vowing never to put on a Christmas pageant again. Some of you may know the feeling...

Robert Fulghum wrote of the experience,

"The memory of the laughter outlives the memory of the hassle, and hope - hope always makes us believe that this time, this year, we will somehow get it right!"

CHRISTMAS IS ABOUT THE UNEXPECTED

On this Sunday before Christmas, we need to go right to the heart of the Christmas story and when we do, we are struck by the utter simplicity of the message it brings. Three thoughts to "wrap up" and give to you.

Christmas, first, is all about the unexpected. This is what Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah, and John would tell us. The shepherds and the Wise Men and yes, even Herod. Christmas is about the unexpected.

I read about another Christmas pageant recently. Again, it was a children's pageant. And the innkeeper was played by a boy named, Ralph, who had had his heart set on playing the role of Joseph. But he didn't get the part and had re-

fused to be a part of the program, but his parents did the right thing and insisted that Ralph "do his duty" and be a part of the pageant. The director was pleased and asked him to be the innkeeper. Reluctantly, he consented...

But Ralph was still a bit sour about it and so he planned a bit of revenge. When that part of the pageant occurred in which Joseph inquired about a room, a grinning Ralph announced for all to hear,

"Come on in. We've got plenty of room! No problem."

The audience, especially Ralph's mother and the pageant director, sort of gasped. Joseph and Mary were stunned. "Come on in...we've got plenty of room". They expected to be turned away and the door shut. Obediently they walked into the Inn of Bethlehem. But the young man playing Joseph rose to the occasion and looking around said in a loud voice,

"Hey, Mary...this place is a dump. Why...we'd rather stay in a stable! Let's get out of here...come on, Mary".

What is life without surprises, without the unexpected. Some may be tempted to say, a lot less embarrassing. One more story to brighten up your 4th Sunday Advent celebration. You remember Adlai Stevenson, the much-respected gentleman politician from Illinois who ran against Eisenhower for the presidency back in the early fifties. He it was who spoke that memorable line at the funeral service for Eleanor Roosevelt, "Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness". A favorite line of mine for the outside bulletin board.

He told this story on himself. He said that when he served in the AAA, he wrote a marketing agreement for the walnut industry. (Agricultural Adjustment Administration). That Christmas the industry thanked him by sending him an enormous gunnysack full of packages of walnuts. This generous gift came just three days before Christmas and Stevenson had not been able to get out and do any shopping. So happily he took these packages of walnuts and sent them to all his Washington friends. Then he made the terrible discovery that inside each of the individual packages was a little card that read,

"Merry Christmas from the walnut industry to
Adlai Stevenson" (And the date was given)

Some surprises we can do without. But Christmas is not one of them. God comes into the world in the person of a tiny babe. Angels sing. Shepherds rejoice. Wise men come from afar. The world is forever changed. That's one surprise that our world is still coming to terms with.

CHRISTMAS IS ALSO A TIME OF ANTICIPATION

It's a season of the unexpected and conversely, however, Christmas is also a time of anticipation. It is a time of miracles and mystery.

In the wonderful Christmas Show presented each year at Radio City Music Hall there is that scene acted out from Dickens' Christmas Carol. The Cratchet family receives a wonderful gift of a prized turkey. Only Tiny Tim offers an explanation as to whom could have possibly sent this turkey. When he says the name, Mr. Scrooge, his mother says, "But why would Mr. Scrooge lose his sense and do something like this?" And Tiny Tim replies with one word, "CHRISTMAS!"

And that one word says it all. "Christmas". Even John the Baptist knew the truth of that "word" even though never once in his life would he utter that word. Christmas explains how stingy people can become generous and why tired people can be energized, and why lonely people can feel loved. And that is why we look forward to this beautiful time of the year with such anticipation.

Back to John the Baptist for a moment. He looms large over this Season of Advent. He caused quite a stir in the desert. People from all over went out to see him and to hear him, even the King was in his audience. Many were baptized, but some thought John was going too far. A group of priests and Levites came out to investigate him and they had one burning question for him. "Who are you?" They wanted to know why John was preaching about the coming of the Messiah and by what authority he required people to be baptized.

They went on and asked him if he might be Elijah for the Jewish people believed that Elijah would return immediately before the Messiah. Was John Elijah? "I am not", he replied. "Are you the Prophet?" they asked and again John answered "no". "Who are you?" they asked again and John, quoting the prophet Isaiah said,

"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness,
'Make straight the way of the Lord!'"

You see, John helped to build this sense of anticipation, and that powerful voice of his still echoes down across the centuries. Prepare ye...prepare ye...prepare ye the way of the Lord.

A STORY

Lewis Grizzard remembers one Christmas that was very special to him. He says that he and his mother and father only had one real Christmas together. Only one Christmas when they were actually in their own house with a tree, with coffee and cake left out for Santa, with an excited five-year-old boy awakening to a pair of plastic cowboy pistols, a straw cowboy hat and an autographed picture of Hopalong Cassidy.

That special Christmas, he recalls, that his father had to work until noon on the day before Christmas. He waited anxiously for his father to arrive home...waited at the screen door, sitting and staring until their blue Hudson pulled into their driveway. At the sight of his father, Lewis ran out of their house and jumped into his father's arms. His father asked,

"Are you ready for Santa?" "I've been ready since August" shouted young Lewis...very excited.

But before they could settle in for Christmas, his father still had one errand to run. He recalls that his father that day found a family whose,

"Old man was out of work (his words)...in need of a shave and a haircut, and his wife crying because her babies were hungry." (He remembers his father saying), "They're down on their luck and it's Christmas. Nobody deserves that...."

He went out and bought that family some groceries. They had several kids and he found and bought a toy for each child. He even found a barber who was willing to leave home on Christmas Eve and he took the man in for a shave and

a haircut. Writes Lewis,

"It was a Christmas a man can carry around with him for a lifetime. And each year at Christmas, with my own father long in his grave, I thank God that ONE CHRISTMAS is still mine to remember."

Christmas has its share of tender memories for us all. It is still a season of miracles and of deep mystery. A time of anticipation as well as a time of the unexpected.

CHRISTMAS IS ABOUT ADORING JESUS

And finally, and certainly most of all, it's about "adoring" Jesus. We sing "O come, let us adore Him". John was a witness, pointing the way to Jesus so that future generations might come and "adore Him". And as we do, may our faith in Him and in all that He has come to represent...may our faith grow and grow. In Him we see God coming to earth. Some will ask with Mary, "But how can this be?"

Today's scripture lesson, read so beautifully by Catherine, reminds us of how an angel spoke to a young woman whose name was Mary. She believed. At first, her response was, "How can this be?" to the Divine messenger who came and confronted Mary and took her breath away. The angel said this was God's doing, for "nothing is impossible with God". There it is. A young woman believed. And the world was forever changed.

Ruth Harnden tells a story that is entitled, "Let Nothing You Dismay". In it, an absent-minded old woman realizes with horror that she has switched two Christmas gifts and sent them to the wrong people. The thick, woolen socks she had made for her poor friend, Hilda, have been sent to her granddaughter instead. And the lovely lace and satin nightgown that she had bought for her granddaughter had been sent to Hilda! The old woman is mortified because her friend, Hilda, is plain, poor, simple and unadorned. Why, such a lovely nightgown would almost seem a mockery of Hilda's plainness.

But a few days later, after Christmas is all over, the old woman receives two letters. The first is from her granddaughter who thanks her for the beautiful and fashionable, homemade ski socks. And the second is from an ecstatically grateful Hilda. No one had ever thought to give her something so beautiful and so delicate. Hilda writes that she put on the nightgown and danced across her rough, wooden floor, and for the first time in her life, she feels pretty. She feels beautiful and even loved. It is the perfect gift.

You see, God knew the perfect gift for humanity. Only the "Word" made flesh could ever really point the way to God. Only ONE who has walked where we must walk could claim our love and our loyalty. It all began in Bethlehem centuries when God unexpectedly broke into our human history and gave us what the world "needs most" - love incarnate. We anticipate it again, His coming to us and so we lift our hearts and sing "O come, let us adore Him". That's what Christmas is all about. An angel spoke. A young woman believed and the world was forever changed!

PRAYER

O God of the star and the stable, of the manger and of Mary, send us home today filled with the spirit of Christ...of hope, of peace, of joy and of love. And then let it last...throughout the year ahead. Amen.

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