

## "WHEN THE STAR FALLS"

### INTRODUCTION

The sermon this morning begins with this observation concerning ourselves that we all look forward to things....shining things.....exciting things. For instance, it may be a wedding in the family. The bride dreams about it for months in advance. The bride's mother may have been dreaming about it for years in advance. And even the groom thinks a great deal more about it than he is willing to admit, and both families work for weeks to prepare for the happy event.

We look forward to a holiday, perhaps. I was in conversation recently with a member of our church. He is a doctor, and he was telling me that he was flying to Europe for a three week vacation during the Christmas season. The gentleman was born in Germany, and came to this country as a young man. This was the first time that he had returned to his native land, and as he talked about it, you could almost see in his shining eyes a reflection of some of the landmarks of Hamburg and Berlin where he was going to be spending most of his time. He was going to have a few days in Paris, too, and as he told me about his trip, you could almost see a reflection of the Eiffel Tower in his eyes. I wished him well, wished him a Merry Christmas, and told him to be sure to send us a postcard. It may be a relatively small thing like a vacation, or it may be a much more important thing, like getting a diploma, an academic degree and being welcomed and launched into the wider world of a profession or a career. We look forward to things; we anticipate the things we want and strive toward them with all of our strength and energy.

We do this in our private lives as I have already suggested. We also do the same thing in the larger area of our public lives. We look forward to a city that's well managed, with clean streets and sidewalks and men with clean hands running its affairs, and we work to bring it to pass. We look forward to a country that is secure, not because of what the people have but because of what the people stand for, and to a world in which the tensions that exist between the nations are eliminated. We look forward to a better city, a better country, and a better world.

I think we can put this down then as one of the facts concerning ourselves: as human beings we are incurably hopeful. We dream, we desire, we look forward to things in the future. This is one thing that we all have in common.

### DEVELOPMENT

But there's a second thing that goes hand in hand with this, and that is this that when the thing that we look forward to comes to pass, we are often a little disappointed. Not always, not all of us, to be sure, but many of us much of the time are secretly, if not openly, disappointed. It is not exactly what we expected it to be, not quite so perfect, not quite so bright and shining.

For instance, we expect marriage to be an unbroken, romantic life of rapture. However, what we actually find it to be is a life of perpetual give and take, in which two entirely different personalities span a lifetime learning how to live together as one personality, as one person. This is quite a different thing. I

am not implying that there is no rapture in it, mind you. But it is rapture with a small "r", shall we say, in which there is mixed a considerable amount of routine discipline and downright hard work, plus no small amount of suffering and sacrifice.

Or what about the holiday that we anticipated with such great enthusiasm during the cold winter months. We thought that it would be an uninterrupted stretch of undisturbed pleasure. Actually, it turns out to be punctuated all along the way with small annoyances, spotted with bad weather, dull days here and there, and no small amount of poor digestion. When we were sick, we said to ourselves, "If only I had my health, I could do anything." And then we get well. We recover; we are robust and strong; and yet, at the end of the day, perfectly well and healthy, we come home, figuratively speaking with tired feet, a heavy heart, and often a perturbed spirit. The sheen of perfect health is easier to see at a distance than it is close at hand. Or we spend a lifetime working, and working hard, and we look forward to the day when retirement comes and then when it comes, it isn't quite what we hoped it would be. We find ourselves with nothing to do, with very little with which to fill the long hours of the day, and we begin to see the truth in the old saying that "work's a blessing".

So we put this down, too. Once the star that we have set our hearts upon comes within our reach, it doesn't seem to shine as brightly as it does in the sky. And, I suppose, it is one reason why some people don't see it at all when it comes. They miss it completely; and, if they do see it, they often send it back and say, "This isn't what we ordered....."

#### LOOKING FORWARD TO CHRISTMAS

Now some of you may have guessed by this time that I have been saying all of this with Christmas in the back of my mind, and the coming of Jesus into our world. We remember that people for generations had been looking forward to his coming. They had been thinking and praying and hoping that one day he would come. They knew that some day someone would come who would set them free. Politically free, outwardly free; some of them thought about that first. They were tired of chains. But also inwardly free, free from the tyranny of circumstance, free from the fear of death and from the guilt of sin; free from those inhibitions that make life something less than you know it might be if you could only be liberated.

They were looking forward to the coming of someone who would take away their chains. But when he came he was nothing like what they had expected. For one thing, he came to them from the bottom, and not the top. He was born in a stable, not a palace; he had poor and humble parents. You might say he came from the lower East Side, not from Park Avenue or Fifth Avenue. This was hard for them to take in because they thought of him as a royal figure, a descendant of David with royal blood in his veins, and possessing the power of a king.

#### DESCRIBING HIM AS HE WAS

He had power (there wasn't any doubt about that), but he refused to use it except under certain circumstances. He never used his power to

make himself comfortable or popular, and this they could never really understand. He refused to use his power to make everybody well. He made only those well who responded to him with what he called "faith" - those who answered to him, who went out to meet him.

Yes, he had power, but he refused to use that power to strike out at the Romans who ruled their country, and to set the Jews up where they wanted to be. He even advised them to pay the poll tax, and this was a great blow to their pride. He had enormous power, but he used it only to do what he called "the will of Him that sent me". It's a phrase that we run across from time to time in the Gospel, and whenever he used his power, he used it according to "the will of Him that sent me".

He used that power to open the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf; not, I think, so that they might see where they were going and hear what was going on around them, but that they might know what he was telling them about God. And he told them about God was this: He told them how good God was. There's a lot more to it than this, but that's a pretty fair summary of what he tried to make them see and understand.

He told them that God was too good to be satisfied with a good performance. Have you ever stopped to realize that you can give a good performance, and not be a good person. And that you can do it on the stage, or in business, or in a home, or even in a church. Ultimately, of course, the truth will come out, but sometimes the show will go on for years. You can give a good performance, and go through all the right motions and do all the right things and be completely wrong on the inside. And this is what Jesus dared to tell his people they were doing. He said, "You are putting on a magnificent religious performance. You are doing all the right things, but you are wrong inside, and God is too good to be pleased with that".

And then he went on to tell them the other side of the story, that God was too good ever to let a man go; no matter what he had done, no matter how far he had gone, God would never let him go when he once wanted to turn back. No sin was too black, no shame too great, no crime too terrible to turn God away from a man.

This then is how he used his enormous power - to tell the people and to show the people how good God was. And this, they did not expect. Here are two things, you see. He came from the bottom instead of the top, and he used his power in a way they had never dreamed he would use it. And to this, instead of coming to an end in a burst of glory, he ended on a cross between two thieves. So when the star of hope came within their reach, it seemed to have lost more, if not all, of its brightness.

Some didn't see it at all. They asked their friends: who is this? Isn't he the carpenter's son? Some did see it, but they sent it back. It wasn't what they ordered. They were looking for a life served on a silver platter; he offered them a life stretched out on a wooden cross. A few did see it from the beginning, but then they lost it. However, they found it again after they had had opportunity to think about it, to look at it. It's like music. When you hear a new piece of music, the first time you hear it it doesn't sound like much,

and you can't make much sense out of it, but then when you hear it again and again, you begin to catch the lines of its melody and meaning. And so after they had had a little time, they began to see, and they saw the star shining never more brightly than in the gloom that hung over Calvary.

CONCLUSION Everyone is looking forward to Christmas. Everyone is looking forward to the birthday of the Saviour of mankind. I say "everyone", but I could be mistaken. I think every one needs a saviour. Not everyone knows he needs one, and therefore I suppose not everyone is looking for one. I have in mind the people who are choked with the riches of the world, and who are looking for someone who will save them from being choked to death; the people who are starved for affection and who are looking for someone who will save them from the despair of not being wanted; the people whose lives are empty, without point or purpose, and who are looking for something to save them, for someone who will give meaning to their existence; who are lost, without compass or chart, or who are simply bored. I have in mind the people whose world is beginning to crack, whose world is in danger of going to pieces, and they may sense it, and they are looking for someone who can put it together again.

To these people who are looking for a Saviour, I have two things to say. The first is this: the only saviour you will ever find is the one who has already come. Who came long ago. You say, that little baby. That helpless thing. Yes. You say, that man who told me that the only way I would ever find myself was to forget myself. Yes, that very man. That strange man who ended his earthly life on a cross. That man whose glory is in his humility and whose humility is his power. That one? Yes, that same one.

The second thing is this: the saviour who has already come will come again. You may not see him at all. You may be too busy getting ready for Christmas. That is the tragic thing it seems to me about Christmas. We are apt to become so pre-occupied with all of our preparations for Christmas, with other important things, that we miss the meaning of it all and fail to see him. And if you do see him, you may not think much of him. You may be one of those who think, well, this was all right for two thousand years ago, but this isn't adequate for the world we live in; we'll send him back.

But there is always the possibility that somewhere along the line you may have learned to see the brightness of a fallen star. Pray that it may be so!

"He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not, He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God"

PRAYER: O God, may we simplify our lives that we be not so concerned with unimportant things that we miss the real thing. Open our eyes to him who is already among us, and who will come again into our midst on Christmas; that we may see his brightness, even in the dim surroundings, and recognize his greatness. Give us this second sight, O God, that our lives may be saved from meaninglessness and sin. Amen