



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church

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The Rev. Sidnie White Crawford
Sermon for Christmas Eve (7:00 p.m.)
St. Mark's on the Campus
December 24, 2006

Merry Christmas! I want to go on record right now as saying that I love Christmas. I love the music, the decorations, the outdoor lights, the parties, the food, and giving and getting presents. I've always loved Christmas- some of my earliest memories have to do with Christmas decorations. My parents had a console tv; you know, the kind that was encased in fake wood, with a flat top. On Christmas they would set our Nativity set on it. I had a little stool, and I would put the stool in front of the television and climb up so I could see the top of the television (that's how small I was). I would stand there and play with the Nativity set, rearranging the figures and reenacting the Christmas story. My mother gave me that set a few years ago, so now I can do it again in my own house.

That story illustrates a lesson my parents taught me very early, by example rather than by lecture. Christmas was about the birth of Jesus, the Christ, the Incarnation of God in the world. Sure, we had a tree, and outdoor lights, and stockings, and presents, and all the other elements of this winter festival we inherit from the old celebrations of the Winter Solstice. But at the center of it all were the Christmas services at church. And boy, did we go to church! We went to the 5:00 p.m. service on Christmas Eve. Then my sister and I went to bed, and my parents went with my grandparents to the midnight service. On Christmas morning we opened our stockings, and one present from under the tree, and then we all went to the 10:00 a.m. service. On one memorable Christmas morning they got up and took me to the 8:00 a.m. service so that I could be an acolyte, the first girl to acolyte at St. John's Episcopal Church!

The point of all this reminiscing is that I believe it is possible to enjoy all the trappings of Christmas without losing sight of its central religious significance: that God has come among us in human form, in the person of Jesus, who was born just like any other baby. You all, by your presence here this evening, testify that you believe it is possible too.

I actually believe that there is a more insidious danger to the central religious significance of Christmas than its overcommercialization. We can all see that (we'd have to be really out of it not to), and seeing it, can resist it in various ways. No, the danger I am afraid of is the trivialization and sentimentalization of Christmas. Too often we hear well-meaning statements such as "Christmas is for children," or "Christmas is a time when families gather together and celebrate their love for each other." Last year, when Christmas fell on a Sunday, lots of churches cancelled their services with the explanation "This is a day for families." The implication was, I guess, that it was not a day for church. We look at the Nativity scene, and we see Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus, and we fetishize it as the ideal, God-given nuclear family. We even teach kids to sing "Happy Birthday" to Jesus.

At the risk of sounding like a latter-day Scrooge, bah, humbug! Christmas is not about family values (whatever that means). If we pay attention to Scripture, we see that a celebration of family values is the last thing that's going on in the story. Mary is an unwed mother; Joseph, her betrothed, nearly breaks his marriage contract with her, and they wind up in a cave, with Mary giving birth surrounded by a bunch of smelly sheep and goats. So much for sentimentality!

So what does the Scripture want us to notice, if not a perfect nuclear family? Well, let's look at that Nativity scene again. There is something there that we don't usually find in birth scenes- angels. Angels, the messengers of God, break into this unsentimental, un-family-values oriented, rather awkward scene, and say, This is God's doing, this is God's action, this baby is God's agent of salvation for the world. He's the one Isaiah was talking

about when he said: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this!”

That is not a sentimental statement or a story for children. No, that is a message for grownups. God has come into the world, and that fact should shake us to the depths of our souls. Light finally shines in the darkness; we can see this light, and it will change the world. Listen to what Isaiah says: “For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.” War shall cease. Oppression shall end. But not because of this little nuclear family picture in Bethlehem. No, the gospels leave that behind pretty quickly. Mark and John don’t even mention it. Matthew and Luke almost immediately make a might leap forward, and suddenly Jesus is an adult, preaching, healing, gathering disciples, going up to Jerusalem, and dying on the cross. This is an adult story. Joseph is gone, and Mary has only a minor role. Jesus is a man, who says to the people around him, as he says to us today, “Come, follow me.” That is not childish or sentimental. It is the greatest, most important, most adult thing we can choose to follow Jesus.

So the true Christmas story is a grownup story. It is a story that should move us to awe and wonder, not silly sentimentalizing. God is incarnate, made human, made flesh just like us, in Jesus. That is the fact that cleaves human history in two, that changes the course of the world, that will make everything that is wrong with the world right- if we choose to listen. For God-in-Christ does not act alone. No, a big part of the miracle is that he asks us to help him. He says to his disciples, “Come, follow me.” He says it to us, his present-day disciples, as well. Will we answer? Will we do it?

Let's do it. Let's choose to follow Jesus. We can begin tonight, and we can start, as the story does, at that manger in Bethlehem. We can pause here, and enjoy the celebrations—the music, the decorations, the food, the presents. We can enjoy the love of our families, both our biological family and our family that is here, that is the church. After all, God calls us to love one another, as God loves us. That love invites us to celebrate, make merry, enjoy the blessings God has given us. But tomorrow, after we have cleaned up the wrapping paper and slept off the dinner, and the day after that, and the day after that, let us continue to follow Jesus, wherever he leads us. Mary and Joseph couldn't imagine the road that lay ahead of their little baby in the manger, and we cannot imagine the road that God calls us to follow either. That it will include both sorrow and joy, we can be sure. But if we listen to Jesus, if we answer his call and follow him, we will find the fulfillment that we as adults yearn for, and the light and joy that God's angels promise at the very beginning of the story. That is the best Christmas present we can get.

So, Merry Christmas. May the New Year bring you the peace and joy of following Jesus every day of your life, and may the richness of God's blessings be upon us all, both tonight and always. Amen.