

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 7, 2008
Lessons: Hosea 11:1-5, Micah 6:6-8, and Luke 1:46-55

THE REAL MEANING?

Every December for as long as I can recall, there has been an overflow of talk about recovering the “real meaning of Christmas.” Slogans have abounded. “Put Christ back into Christmas” devolved into “Jesus is the reason for the season.” Then came the Christmas culture wars: *Wish me a merry Christmas, not happy holidays, or I’ll rant at you and storm out of your store.* In what I suppose is a backlash, some now delight in pointing out that Christmas was established by the church to replace pagan celebrations with the Mass of Christ but in the process adapted pagan customs to accommodate the people’s traditions. Against political attempts to re-establish Christianity as the social norm, a few now advocate dumping Christmas and returning to a celebration of the winter solstice.

My question does not concern the holiday so much as the faith, the gospel, the living message to the world. To store salespeople who wish me happy holidays, I say, “Thank you,” and return the wish, thinking of their extended hours away from their families and need for patience with short-tempered shoppers. This morning my concern for “real meaning” focuses on what we call the Incarnation. “And the Word (of God) became flesh, and lived among us, and we have beheld his glory, the glory of the only Son come from the Father, full of grace and truth.” I believe we can say before even going any further that the message we share with the world and the manner in which we share it should be filled with grace and truth. For the Bible, truth is commitment to being faithful, not pride in being right. Certainly, there is no grace is bullying people or flexing political muscle to prove we can still force our holidays and customs upon the whole society. We Christians are no longer culturally dominant, but freed from that presumption of pride and from the delusion that a nominally Christian society bore God’s stamp of approval, we can minister and serve much more faithfully in the way of Jesus, God’s Christ – the way of grace and truth. God is still the one who brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things but sending the overstuffed away.

In the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, the star and the messengers from heaven are signs of the grace and truth embodied in a very ordinary baby, who grew into a normal child, however bright and however tuned to the “things of God.” That child matured into a very humble man whose humility was his strength and who did remarkable things quietly and

taught in a way that touched people's minds and hearts even as it got him deeper and deeper into trouble with the authorities and powers of the day.

I am reminded almost daily of the human factors beneath issues, trends, and big matters of concern, whether they are being debated hotly or endured silently. From a long-distance discussion of educational concerns comes the anguish of a father over his son's struggles with life and the father's gratitude to God for the gentle, unseen hand of help when he himself felt helpless. Beneath the huge and distressingly complex issues of our current recession, simmer the fears of people young and old who never thought they would have to feel such personal distress or have to hold themselves back from panic while also trying to keep their heads above the dark waters of depression. Human factors, we call them. What a sterile-sounding name for "the hopes and fears of all the years" as Philips Brooks put it in "O Little Town of Bethlehem." But that's what I'm talking about here. The Incarnation is the human factor. It is God's way of entering into the hopes and fears of real, living people struggling to deal with life in this world. Thanks be to God, one of them, one of us, was Joshua, child of Mary and Joseph, whom we call by the Greek form of his name, Jesus, and whom we call also the Son of God.

If we want to find the "real meaning," we need to look at the humanity of this Son of God, because humanity is exactly what the Incarnation is all about. He was born to be human and rescue us from our inhumanity. Micah the prophet speaks for people seeking freedom from God through religion. They want to be rid of guilt so they can live their lives without having to worry about God's judgment. They want God off their backs, and so they respond like resentful adolescents and even get sarcastic with their, *How much do I have to do to please you so you'll leave me alone?* Micah replies by addressing them, not as Israelites, the covenant people, but as human beings. What is required of them in their humanity but to do justice and make it happen where it is being denied to the weak, to love kindness and mercy, and to walk humbly with their God? The word translated "kindness" is what John calls grace. To be human is to live by God's grace and mediate that grace by sharing it with others. For us as Christ's church to be incarnational is to share his grace and kindness that will draw people to God. We don't have to hammer them with our doctrines, let alone bully them with our holidays. What they need is God's love, the same as we do – every day.

A great Jewish teacher, Abraham Heschel, wrote that we have lost something we need to find again: our sense of wonder. Heschel found deep wonder all around him, not only in the grand spectacles of nature, but in a tiny pebble or grain of sand. But before we dismiss the man as a misty-eyed sentimentalist, we need to know him also as the deeply committed advocate for stopping injustices done to the vulnerable and healing the wounds in human society. True reverence for God is not self-conscious quiet in the sanctuary but compassion with its sleeves rolled up to work in the streets and alleys of the world.

Surely, our first and enduring reaction to God's Son sharing our flesh-and-blood life in this world, with all its hopes and fears, must be wonder – the dumbstruck silence of finding ourselves unexpectedly in the presence of God. Wonder is not self-contained but emptied of self before the grace of God. It is a silence that almost aches in the presence of something beyond our comprehension but present for us. That, I think, is the starting point for understanding that Galilean man whose birth we celebrate each year in this season and whose humanity gives us hope for recovering our own. The wonder confronting us is love. God knows how it feels to be you, and God actually cares.

The early church, of course, knew nothing of Christmas because the holiday didn't exist yet, but the human factor, the Incarnation, did exist in a love so gentle it would reach out to the weakest and most cruelly broken without hurting them, and yet, a love so terrible it would lead to the horror of crucifixion with cries that echo through the centuries from Auschwitz to Darfar, from sobs of grief and shame to screams of terror in every time and place of this world.

Jesus has told us where to find him. Look at faces holding back tears. Look at young parents this year trying to give their children a "normal" Christmas while hiding the adult realities of lost jobs and mounting payments due. Look at the fear or shame of the young father from Mexico cited for jaywalking so his papers can be checked. That's him, the child of Bethlehem and man from Galilee. Can't we see him? In our Session meeting Thursday evening, the Mission Committee recommended and the Session approved raising the local mission allocation for the Cumberland Women's Center, in part because we realize that as economic conditions worsen, domestic violence increases. Now her face is bruised, just like his. He, the Jew from the hinterland of Galilee, was also beaten and mocked to "make an example" of him and keep his kind in their place.

What does it mean for Christians to be incarnational, to live in a new way because the Son of God is one of us? In the ancient world of Greece and Rome, the world Jesus walked, the man of wealth and bearing wished to be acclaimed as a benefactor. That was the mark of a man not only successful but great. From his accumulated wealth he would hand down alms to the poor, the lesser people of society. The benefactor represents for me the Christmas that is not the real thing but just a pale imitation of it. From my childhood, from the back pages of our youth hymnal, come the words, "Not what we give but what we share."

The Incarnation is not just God's gift to us but God's entering and sharing life with us, in our days of joy and pain. God wants the human factor. That's what matters: our true, human responses to God's love for us and, then, for others. Not what we give but what we share. Amen.