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“The Real Meaning of Christmas”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Second Sunday after Christmas

January 3, 2010

Jer. 31:7–14; Ps. 147:12–20; Eph. 1:3–14; Jn. 1:(1–9) 10–18

Gracious God, as we prepare to reenter the routines of our lives, enable us once more to hear this miraculous, marvelous story of your coming to dwell among us. Hearing it, may we believe it, and believing it, let it shape our lives, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

On the Sunday before Christmas, in the church I served before I came to Durham, a member put the flowers in the sanctuary. We did not have lovely poinsettias as we do each year here at First Presbyterian Church. I was struck by the beauty of the arrangement and by the message that was placed in the bulletin:

“These flowers are given by the ____ family to the glory of God to celebrate the real meaning of Christmas.”

I tried to find the member after worship to thank her. I did not locate her, so I concluded she had already gone home. The next day, I gave her a phone call to thank her and tell her how much I appreciated the reference to “the real meaning of Christmas.” When I told her I tried to find her after church, she responded, “Oh, we were not at church. We had tickets to the Atlanta Falcons game.”

We in the church often glibly talk about “the real meaning of Christmas.” But on this tenth day of Christmastide, maybe it’s time for us as God’s people to be ready to consider what happened, the depth and the breadth of it beyond some romantic

montage on a mantle. How does it affect our lives? I think the Gospel of John nails it for me: “The Word became flesh and dwells among us ... full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). It is the great mystery of the incarnation. The Creator of the universe has pitched a tent among us.

What happens to this great mystery as we go back, back to school, back to work, back to the routine? Luke tells us that after the angels quit singing, “Mary treasured all their words and pondered them in her heart” (Lk 2:19) and the shepherds returned to glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen as it had been told them (Lk 2:20).

What are you and I going to do with this Christmas vision? Are we going to, as W.H. Auden suggests, “entertain it as an agreeable possibility; are we going to ponder it in our hearts; are we going glorify and praise God, or are we going pack it away for another year?” Will it have an impact on our lives in 2010?

The story has already had an impact on my life, as you probably have gathered. I found the Advent and Christmas worship here at First Presbyterian Church this past season to be particularly uplifting for me—uplifting for me in my life at a time when I needed to be lifted up. Now, that was probably what you’d expect a minister to say; it’s like a commercial right? But it was somewhat surprising to me because that doesn’t always happen to me. Sometimes I get so bogged down in the mechanics, the details of making sure all the bulletins have been planned, all the services are ready. Maybe this is an occupational hazard of being a minister, but on occasion, the message and the worship soars, and it did for me during this Advent and Christmas season.

I was particularly moved by the Lessons and Carols service three weeks ago. When I hear the story, the story we read during this season, the same story we heard again this morning in a more philosophical way, I have heard the phrase many times: “The Unfolding of the Great Mystery of the Incarnation.” This year, I responded, “Yes! Yes!”

I share this experience with you because I hope you will not miss the great mystery of the incarnation; you will not return, go back to your work, to your school, to

your routine without having been touched in the very depth of your being by this great mystery. It is not a mystery like “who done it.” No, it is a mystery like, “Wow, that’s too wonderful for me to believe!”

As Paul wrote in the letter to the Ephesians, it is the mystery of God’s will made known to us in Jesus Christ. Christianity is an unfolding of that mystery. In Jesus Christ, the Creator of the universe, the One who created a world that we are only beginning to understand, the Creator of all has taken a part in the play, if you would. God took a key role. That is the great mystery of Christmas. But not only did God take a part, as Martin Luther said often in his Christmas sermons, “I would not have done it that way, no, I would not have done it that way. If I had been God, I would have come in some regal form. I would have come as some great celebrity. I would not have been born to a peasant woman in a remote corner of the world. And the whole world would have stopped and recognized my coming.” It would have been like the entrance at the Academy Awards or some of these great events, the lights would have gone down low, and everybody would have shouted. He would not have come in a smelly stable in Bethlehem. It is the great mystery of the incarnation.

“I wonder as I wander out under the sky / How Jesus the Savior did come for to die. / For poor ornery people like you and like I.”¹ That might be poor grammar, but it is great theology: the unfolding of the great mystery of the incarnation that God is with us. God has come to save us, to heal us, to be with us. The danger is that we will treat this like a seasonal story. We will delight in it on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and then put it back on the shelf for the rest of the year. What would happen if we made as our New Year’s resolution for 2010, that we would strive as individuals and as a congregation to make this unfolding of the great mystery of the incarnation the centerpiece of our lives, the message that God is with us. We would continue to let that heavenly message that God has come to be among us, to dry our tears, to make the world a safer, more just place. What would happen if that would be our resolution?

¹ Niles, John Jacob. "I Wonder as I Wander". <http://www.john-jacob-niles.com/music.htm>

Robert McAfee Brown, a leading Protestant theologian in the last century, says it will make a difference, and that it can stick with us. He uses the analogy of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* begins with a clear, identifiable music pattern or theme. But what follows in the *Fifth Symphony* is a series of variations of the theme. The theme repeats in even more complex combinations. Sometimes, the texture of these combinations is extremely complex, but those who have heard the theme clearly, stated at the beginning, can still hear it clearly, can feel the music being organized around that theme.

In Jesus Christ, "the word became flesh and dwelt among us, lived among us, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14). That is the theme of all of life heard clearly by the ears of faith, and those who have heard that distinct theme can hear it being sounded whenever the music of life is being played. No moment can be so dark that we cannot see the light that shines in the darkness. No corner of human experience is so hidden that God's grace and truth is not there. No matter how tangled our lives become, the theme, "the Word has been made flesh and dwells among us," can still be heard.

When I was a young seminary student, I had the opportunity to read theology—it was my assignment, and one theologian who became important to me was Paul Lehmann. I came to appreciate his theology. Lehmann said, "When you have heard this theme, our purpose in life is to realize that, no matter how dark and difficult the world may appear, God is at work in the world, and our task is to find out what God is doing and to join God there."

Listening to the Word made Flesh in Jesus Christ, listening to God's presence among us, and figuring out how it affects our lives, we will hear it in the most unsuspecting places. You know the old adage, "The devil is in the details." Let me suggest to you this morning that if we believe the message of Christmas that the Word has become flesh in Jesus Christ, and God dwells among us in grace and truth, that God is in the details. God is in the getting up and going out, going to serve meals in the soup kitchen, working on a Habitat home, visiting someone who is ill—in the details, the Word becomes Flesh in our lives. If this message permeates to our very souls, then we will find ways, no matter how dark and dismal the past year may have seemed, how much greed and gluttony may have

been abounding, how much pain we may have suffered, we will find ways as we come out of this Christmas season, to let God's love be reflected in our lives and in the world around us.

I saw a movie this week about a woman who wrestles with what it means to be a Christian. It's called *The Blind Side*, and I heartily recommend it to all of you. It is a story about how this message can permeate one life and changes her and causes her to do things that she probably would not have predicted she would have ever done, to reach out to someone in need, and to make a real difference in another life.

If we have heard and believed the Good News of the gospel, there is no excuse for us not trying to find out what God is doing in the world and to join God there. God is at work, and if we do that, we will learn how to laugh more because we won't be taking ourselves too seriously. It is not really about us; it's not really about what we're going to do. It is about what God is doing. And sometimes we try to follow God, and we make horrendous mistakes. But that's no excuse for not trying to follow God. It is like the excuse of, "Well I'm not involved in that church because those people are hypocrites." Well, welcome to the club! We're all hypocrites in some ways because our institutions and our families and our lives are not perfect. That's no excuse for us not to let the light of God's love that has shined in Jesus Christ shine in our lives and to laugh at ourselves and with others when we don't get it right.

It will also help us learn to cry, to see those places where people are being hurt, the wounded, the outcast, the poor. If you have ever seen God's tears, God's tears shed in the life and death of Jesus Christ, we will be more willing to share with those who are broken and hurt, to reach out to those in need. We'll be less callous.

We won't reject those who differ from us. We will see God who came to us in Jesus Christ, standing at our side, welcoming, reaching out to those who are different from us. We might even carry ourselves a little taller, knowing in whose image we've been made and in whose company we are fortunate enough to travel. We might be more aware of wonder and of grace. We might see it all around us. Our misfortunes would hurt, but they would be easier to bear with someone's

comforting arm around us. We might avail ourselves of this great wisdom that we are not alone; God is among us.

Then we might try to take on the character of the One who came to dwell among us. If we were aware of the love that God has extended to us, how could we fail to love? If we were aware of the care surrounding us, how could we fail to care? It is a great mystery. God has come in human form to be one of us. He meets us here at this table, in our everyday lives, in the details. It is the *magnum mysterium*, the great mystery. Let it come alive in our lives, in our world, and in our life together. Thanks be to God. Amen.