

Matthew 11:28-30
John 5:39-40; 7:37-49
Luke 2:8-16

HOW WE COME

Let us go gently into Advent this year. Along the way, perhaps, we can re-ask what it is all about. Why does Jesus come? How does Jesus save? Do we believe it? How do we speak of such things with one another? But for now, let us go gently. How do we come to Advent?

I hope you enjoyed the Scripture readings. A strange juxtaposition of passages, I grant you. And yet they do tell the story. Jesus says, “*Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens.*” I certainly do not think of myself as weary, at least not all the time. But I know the meaning of the phrase. It has happened; it will happen again. As for heavy burdens, most of the people I know are carrying heavy burdens. That is not to say that they don’t carry them well. I do not pretend to know which burdens are to be carried and which are not, or even who should be carrying them. But life does seem to come with heavy burdens. What I hear most is Jesus’ invitation: “*Come to me.*” That interests me. Considering where I have been, what I have seen, and what I know, that interests me. Advent interests me. It does not interest everybody, but it interests me.

It is a remarkable thing that the Son of God should come to us. And it is even more remarkable that, upon coming, He would extend to us an invitation. That is the essence of Christmas. Advent is preparation time. We try to get ready to receive Jesus and His invitation. Advent before Event. That is to say, if we are aware of Advent at all, we are aware that someone has come to invite us. To be invited *means* you are in one place, and somebody invites you to another place. To invite is to call – a promise of welcome; a request for us to participate in something, to come to a place where we are not. Who is this who comes to invite us, and what is He inviting us to? Well, the answers to those questions encompass the whole story. I do not see how we can go gently into Advent if we try to deal with *everything* head-on. For the moment, let us leave it in the early morning light, not in the blaze of high noon. Jesus says, “*Come unto me.*” The reason for Advent is that someone has come to us, and He has invited us to come with Him and to follow Him.

The second passage says, “You refuse to come to me.” “*You study the scriptures diligently, supposing that in having them you have eternal life; their testimony points to me, yet you refuse to come to me to receive that life.*” That’s the story of religion in one sentence! We keep putting things between us and a direct relationship with Jesus – even things like religious ritual, church organizations, and the Bible; even sometimes the way we pray; even the way we celebrate Christmas. We are going to find “life” by the way we decorate, the way we give presents, the parties we plan?

We are not talking about people who do not like Jesus. Those of us who do will still do almost anything except accept His invitation. We have cathedrals, vast organizations, huge budgets, dedicated efforts, and enormous generosity going on all over the globe. But what about *walking* with Him? What about New Life in Christ Jesus? What about humbly following Him in our everyday life? What about accepting His invitation?

Nevertheless, that is also the reality of Advent: our refusal to come; the refusal to accept the invitation. Otherwise it would all be over. The story would be told and the world would be transformed into its true purpose and glory. There would be no drama left around Christmas or Easter or the whole plot of life on earth, with its alienation, incompleteness, travail, and heartbreak. But the Kingdom has not yet come on earth, and therefore Advent is still relevant, still activated, still in process. And the outcome, at least for each of us in this moment, is still uncertain. One comes who invites us. Some accept the invitation, and some reject it. Even that is a little puerile, isn’t it? Most everyone here *has* accepted the invitation, in one way or another. So why does the drama go on? Why isn’t everything already settled, at least for us?

To be sure, some people *have* rejected the invitation, and the One who brings it – rejected it outright. They want nothing whatsoever to do with Jesus. It’s a free universe, at least on this level. We do have free will. We do not have to accept invitations if we don’t want to. But that’s not our problem, at least not in any such starkness. We like Jesus. We even tend to believe in Him. We *want* to accept His invitation. Yet what we keep discovering is that right in the midst of accepting the invitation, we also reject it. Right in the middle of coming to Him, we also turn away – turn back to our own way – frightened by His goodness, and the light it sheds on how we go at life. We start looking for loopholes, excuses, and reasons for keeping some of our old feelings and attitudes and approaches.

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We don't merely "have" our fear, anger, resentment, doubt, self-pity, and determination to win over others, we nurse them. If they start to go away, we run after them and grab them back. We think that without such things, we wouldn't survive here for very long. After all, He didn't. So we gather it all back to our bosoms and hang on tight to the way we are. At least I do! That is exactly why Advent interests me. It may not interest others, but it interests me. Advent before Event. Preparation – get ready to receive a New Life. At least that part is certain: we do *receive* an invitation to a New Life. The rest is uncertain, but that part is certain.

How tired do you have to be before you are weary? How heavy does a load have to get before it is a burden? Most of us do not like to be whiners, do we? We do not admire quitters. I am not talking about the whole world; that's too big for me. But most of the people around here who miss Advent and reject the invitation do so because they are brave, courageous, and of good heart. That is, they still want to believe in this world and they see a lot of goodness in people, and they think that if they can just keep it all spinning long enough, maybe it will come 'round right. It does seem to be on the verge of being wonderful at times, don't you think? Just one more push, one more effort – especially if we would all push together – and things would click into place. And there could be justice, peace, prosperity, and love for everybody. A war to end all wars. Just one more push and I will have my degree. Just two more months of all-out effort, and the company will be on its feet and I can start thinking about family and friends. We don't need Advent; we don't need Jesus. We just need to try harder – try together. We need to all put our shoulders to the harness for a better world.

Watch out for the false Advent and the false Christmas. I am not telling you to have nothing to do with them – you live here. But in this church, in your own family, keep it really clear what you believe and where your hope lies. The truth is that the Grinch was trying to steal the false Christmas and he ended up getting converted to the cultural lies. Most Christmas "celebrations" today are still reversing the meaning of Advent and Christmas. They pretend that everything is just fine here, at least just under the surface. And that the only problem is with people like the Grinch who won't get with the "do-gooder program" – who won't cooperate with the "We are all wonderful" campaign: Life is really beautiful, we all love each other, and everybody is generous and wonderful. All we have to do is realize it and let the good come out, and everything will be fine. In other words, we do not really need Jesus,

or the real Christmas, or a true transformation or conversion. If we just brush away some of the surface greed and sin, everything will be beautiful. Even Scrooge and the Grinch can get with the program if they just dig beneath the crust and shields of their emotional pain and let their natural compassion and goodness shine through. They do not need Jesus; they just need to let themselves be kind and loving again. They do not need God's love; they just need to reawaken their own caring. Never mind God's gift – we just need to give and receive gifts from each other.

I know that many of you, and many thousands of Christians everywhere, are offended by such cheap-shot substitutions for the Christian Gospel. Sometimes we even wonder if we should simply reject all Christmas celebration as false, rather than constantly trying to salvage some truth out of this sea of humanistic slush. We know a wolf can wear sheep's clothing – that while Christmas celebrations use a lot of nice words, they are often not really about Jesus. In fact, they encourage human greed and pride. They also encourage waste, debt, and a shallow pretense of love. But Christians have worked hard for many generations to transform the ancient pagan festivals. It seems a shame to let it all go now. Besides, there can be great joy and benefit in the gatherings of families and friends. And there have been huge improvements in the celebration of Christmas in the last 175 years. Humanism is not Christianity, but it is a long way from the bottom rung. New York City's first professional police force was organized in 1828 in response to Christmas-celebration riots. Christmas celebration was not about family or children or friends back then. It was about drunken revelry and hoodlums demanding food and goods under threat of gang violence. The notion of giving gifts was a conscious effort to change the focus from demand for self, to thoughtfulness toward others. I may want you a lot more conscious of the real Christmas than the society around you today, but in all fairness, it's a lot better than it was back then. Many folk in our generation are trying to get Christ back into Christmas, not realizing that, in reality, He has never truly been there. In the early 1800s, people like Washington Irving and Clement Clarke Moore (*A Visit From St. Nicholas*) were struggling just to get a little order and decency into Christmas – trying to get it off the streets and into the homes.

There is more than one dimension to life. We can be grateful for civil order and economic prosperity without mistaking it for the essence of Christianity. So how do we come to Advent? I don't know if we can keep

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it gentle, but we come weary and heavy-laden – we come broken-hearted – or we do not come at all. I don't mean we are nonfunctional. I don't mean we have stopped working or hoping. I don't mean that we walk around miserable or downcast all the time. I simply mean we have stopped pretending that we are just fine or that our world is just fine. If we do not find and follow a Savior, there is no hope for us. And since we cannot find Him, He has to come to us. And we want to be ready so that we will *continually* recognize and follow Him. The operative word is *continually*.

Lots of people do not like that. They want to find Jesus once and for all. “Only One Way – Only One Christmas.” Only one dimension, and it is always over. They want to be converted once and be done with it. Well, a lot of people are converted once and then they *are* done with it. They never take another step or think a new faithful thought ever after. You could take a snapshot right when they give their lives to Christ, and that would be the end of it. They never learn anything new or do anything different ever after. And if you talk to them once, you need never talk to them again, because it would be the same old thing, in the same old words, repeated over and over. Though it's not what they mean to say, what we often hear is: “Life sucks, and God is really boring.”

Life apart from God – life without the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit – really does suck. But God is never boring. You don't think it's boring when you are creative, do you? What about the Creator? And never put that in the past tense. The Living God is always present, and always creating. Therefore, Christmas is never over. Advent is never finished. Preparation means being *continually* alert to recognize and follow Him. Every day is new. Every day *following* will be a new experience. Yesterday's prayers are never enough for today. Yesterday's faithfulness is never adequate for today. Conversion is a doorway, not a destination. God is *not* the same yesterday, today, and forever – except in love and purpose. We are the ones who are afraid to grow and change. We are the ones who think “perfect” means stagnant, finished. We are the ones stuck in ruts and habits we think will protect us from danger and destruction. Lots of people believe that this world is exciting, that sin is fun, and that God is trying to lock us away somewhere so we won't hurt ourselves or others. Where do we get that? From watching Jesus, or Peter, or Paul, or Mary Magdalene, or any known follower for the last two thousand years? Jesus is the One inviting us into Life. We are the sticks-in-the-mud!

So why am I weary, or heavy-laden? My body isn't tired; if it were, it could recuperate just fine if I sat down for a little while. My brain cannot be tired; I don't use it enough. It is my soul that is tired. My inner being wearies of this broken world. Do I simply mean that I don't like pain and trouble? Well, I don't like them, but sometimes they are just a challenge. Am I simply talking about being a wimp? No, it's bigger than that. You read the newspapers – you know what I mean, but some of you don't add it up. A couple of hints:

I do not like cancer. Some among us struggle with it. More of us will before we are through. To me it is more than disease; it is a form of evil – cells turning against their host, working against their reason for being, becoming alienated from their true purpose. Sounds theological to me. Why are some of us more susceptible to cancer? We don't know. Why are some of us more susceptible to alcoholism, gambling, greed, or jealousy? We don't know. Our fast answer is that we are bad, but that is not true. A high percentage of those I have known who fought cancer have been beautiful, even saintly, souls. And many have won. But what really bothers me is this: The people most qualified – the people trying hardest to be helpful – brutally treat those with cancer. Chemotherapy and radiation are things no sane person would do to a healthy human being. It would put a healthy person in severe jeopardy. Yet it is the best we know to do for cancer. I live in a world where some of the most caring, highly trained, deeply dedicated friends I have ever had are doing severe damage in order to try to counteract an even more severe damage.

What does it take to pull the mask away? So many of our responses are like that. Have you ever had an innocent friend interrogated by the police? Have you ever had a friend who was a police interrogator? The system is trying to respond to evil – trying to stop damage. It is brutal. It is dehumanizing. We don't mind so much, perhaps, if it happens to the guilty, but this is what we do to try to figure out *who* is guilty. Like chemotherapy, we hope it reaches the renegade cells and that somehow the healthy ones will recover when it is over. We kill to prevent killing, lie to trap liars, scheme to outwit schemers – all while the world is full of beautiful, generous, sacrificial efforts to help others. Most of the time, for one reason or another, such efforts are a waste, or they actually make matters worse, leaving the very people we wanted to help weaker, more dependent, more bitter. And while this all happens on the individual level, it also happens in families, organizations, corporations, nations. Have

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you ever heard somebody say, “After all the United States has done to help other countries, why aren’t we better loved throughout the world?”

What does it take to pull the mask away? We live in a broken, alienated world, far away from the presence and will of God. Don’t you know that those who do good will be hated, envied, rejected by many? Have you noticed that something in every society and organization is always trying to bring good people down? Martin Luther King, Jr., was a dead man long before they got him. So was Gandhi. So was Anwar Sadat. We all knew it was inevitable that they would be killed, and said so. And was there any way to stop it? Have we not heard of Adam and Eve? Do we not know the story of Jesus? No matter what’s going on at the surface of life in some nice moment, the soul is weary, heavy-laden, broken-hearted – unless somehow it can truly and deeply connect ... reconnect ... continually connect ... with God. There are many ways to sleep in this world, but if I am not asleep, my soul gets weary and heavy-laden here. My soul does not like it here.

Some are not interested in Advent. But I am very interested in Advent. One comes who, though crucified here, invites us to live in a different way for a different reality. “*Come unto me,*” He says. And if I am weary enough and burdened enough, I may just decide to listen.

Is this “going gently” into Advent? Oh yes! These few words are very mild – very gentle in the face of our reality. We have to have some honesty about the conditions and circumstances and issues of Advent. We cannot make the journey without noticing the darkness into which this Light comes.

It is the essence of Advent that the invitation is always open and ever new. “*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’*” So we get ready again for an Advent journey. One comes to invite us. The choice to come is endlessly offered, and it is always alive with new possibilities and new dimensions. Jesus is able and willing to get us into the Kingdom – able and willing to straighten out whatever is wrong between us and God. But never against our will. Invitations must be received and accepted. So we head gently into Advent.

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In a mild way, I have set up a contrast between the “how” and the “why” of Advent. The “how” and “why” seem fascinating to me, no matter what the project. Both are critical in any human enterprise. Method and motivation tell the story. There is a third factor equally critical (timing), but no time to talk about that this year. One of the keys to understanding life is learning to notice how the method and the motive are getting along with each other. If I want a really peaceful home and think I’ll beat the wife and kids into submission to get it, there’s going to be a problem between motive and method. And if I just back away from all the conflicts and issues and try to stay peaceful myself, there’s still going to be a problem between motive and method.

Frequently, we cannot find a method to match our motive. At least we think we cannot. Method is all mixed up with practical realities, as we perceive them. Motive has to do with what we think would be wonderful, desirable. Method has to be possible. What can we actually *do* to move toward the desirable goal?

It’s an endless plot being worked out in every village, family, business, and nation throughout the world. In nearly every community, there are churches prospering and churches dwindling toward complete ineffectiveness. Those prospering often have very different theologies and approaches. Some that prosper seem to suddenly turn a corner and go downhill. We always have a list of excuses and explanations for this, yet there are always other churches in the same community that belie those explanations. The truth is, they run out of motive – Jesus is no longer important enough to the people. Either that or the motive and the method turn out not to match each other.

Every individual can sit down in a quiet moment and ask, “What is my motive and what is my method?” If the two match, we have a highly effective person regardless of the motive. If the two do not match, there is too much stress and confusion for much forward progress, no matter how good the purpose.

What about the motive and methods of Christmas?

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MOTIVE: To honor and celebrate the Incarnation, the Word become flesh, the incredible love of God becoming manifest in our world, at least in the hearts of those willing to receive it. That is motive. What is method?

METHOD: Buy presents, shop 'til you drop, get frantic, fill your calendars chock-full, go into debt. Does method match motive?

SECOND APPROACH: Stay aloof, get no presents for anybody, do no decorating, never smile, be ready to give speeches on how stupid it all is at every opportunity. Does that method match any better?

It doesn't take much to shift us from celebrating LOVE to complaining about all that is imperfect. It doesn't take much to shift us from celebrating God's LOVE to trying to buy love, earn love, impress friends, "make" the children happy (now there's a phrase for you). If we are not very careful, something will split the motive from the method when we aren't even looking. Then this season which should be so full of peace, returning, acknowledging, expressing joy ... will be turned into a frantic race of frustration and frenzy, or a bitter cry of cynicism and blame. But it doesn't have to happen this way. Lots of us are catching on to that more every year. But I, for one, have to stay conscious and awake and keep on my guard, or I am back into it like a shot.

Advent and Christmas are so beautiful – so full of the joy and hope which make life worth living – that I never again want to let it be dragged off into a secular, mindless feeding-frenzy. I am equally sad that, for so many, it has become a "reverse hope." It reminds them of all that is missing in their lives, instead of being a great invitation. They see what is lacking instead of what is being offered.

Some of you may not track what I'm about to say, and that's okay; I don't mean it to sound heavy. If it doesn't click inside, let it flow on by. Some of the problem with many Christmas celebrations is that we have made them more and more for the children. Christmas really is not for children, you know. Over the last two thousand years, the focus on the children has come in the last two hundred years. At first, this may have been a wonderful addition. But increasingly, the celebrations have become child-driven. Never mind the Incarnation; what will please or interest the children? I know it sounds old-fashioned, but children grow up by emulating the adults around them. If there are no adults to emulate, they still grow, but not "up."

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If we design our Christmas celebrations to please the kids, we rob them of Christmas. It is no longer about God coming to earth in a special way; it is about trying to please them, and they will sense and know this. They are not stupid. But they *are* too young to handle the poison of too much self-centeredness. If you love Christmas for real – if you celebrate it yourself for the love and power it truly represents – then your children will feel it and be drawn to it, though not in every moment that you may wish it or want it. Keep drawing your children *toward* Christmas, rather than trying to *use* Christmas to please them or “make” them happy, or to prove that you love them. The real Christmas – not our celebrations – has the power to transform any who touch it, any who open to it, any who will receive it. I hope that is what we want most for ourselves and for our children. Sometimes we have to trust Jesus – get out of the way a little – even with Christmas.

Most of us come to Advent – come looking for God – with more than one motive, just like in the real story: Some wanted healing, some wanted fame, some wanted to get rid of Roman oppression, some wanted a Messiah to fix all the things that were wrong with the world so they wouldn't have problems anymore. Some hungered for truth, others wanted to debate the Scriptures, others were mostly interested in keeping whatever privileges and influence they already had. I don't think it's hard to identify with any of these motives today. I think we still come with many of them, and even mixtures of all of them. I think it is important to know that, to see it clearly, and to start laying them all down. At least I know it is important for me. Come, Lord Jesus. Let all the rest fade into the background.

But before we get too specific, remember that Advent is a promise, and Christmas is the fulfillment of the promise. I am talking about the psychological impact of Advent and Christmas on all of us who claim this tradition. Advent is the promise of everything we want, even if we don't know yet what that is. Christmas symbolizes the fulfillment of everything we have ever dreamed of, even if we have not dreamed of it yet. Do you recognize what I am saying? Advent and Christmas symbolize the promise and the fulfillment of all our hopes and aspirations. That is why it is such a powerful and volatile affair.

When we talk about Christmas in our society, for most people we are not just talking about Jesus – not unless Jesus is for them the fulfillment of all their hopes and aspirations. But Jesus or no Jesus,

for most people in our culture, Christmas symbolizes all the hope they have left of realizing their highest and dearest aspirations – even, I remind you, if these are vague and misty. Who hates Christmas? (I'm not talking about people who disagree with its religious context or theological significance. They don't hate it; they just don't participate.) Who hates Christmas? The cynic. The pessimist. The discouraged. The disillusioned. Anybody who has given up hope, given up aspirations – who has decided to settle for life as it is, and I mean without hoping or trying for any improvement in themselves, in others, or in any of the organizations and institutions around them. These are the ones who *hate* Christmas. The symbol and proclamation of hope are fire to the hopeless. For those who have given up hope, the claim of hope and the call to hope are so irritating and annoying that they cannot stand it. They have put their souls to sleep, and Christmas keeps trying to wake them up again. If it succeeds, they know it will cost them irresolvable anguish. So this greatest symbol of hope is infuriating to them. Consciously, they think that people who fool with Christmas are unbearably stupid and naive. (Have you ever watched a cynical, disillusioned spouse married to a Pollyanna, sentimental-Christmas spouse? It is one of the great deservings.)

Advent and Christmas symbolize the promise and fulfillment of our highest hopes and aspirations. And if we are not merely part of this society but are also Christians, then this hope is specifically linked with the coming of Jesus: a spiritual Leader who invites us to live in a Kingdom not of this world, yet beginning right now – a spiritual Leader who is present with us as Holy Spirit, even now. The hopes and the aspirations are about this unseen Kingdom, and are intertwined with the relationship we have with this unseen but very present King. We live in the physical world, trying to honor and show our allegiance to our unseen King. That does not mean we ever win here, or that if we do, it matters greatly. It also means that nothing that goes on here can ultimately destroy our hope or separate us from our King. Advent and Christmas are an ever-renewed and renewing acceptance of the invitation to live in a new and different way because we recognize this unseen King and His Kingdom.

The little boy came to the Sunday dinner table with dirty hands, as usual. As usual, he was asked to show his hands and, failing inspection, was instructed to go wash them. As usual, he protested, and as usual, he was reminded that dirty hands were not appropriate at meal time,

and why. As he went down the hall toward the washroom, he was heard to mutter: “Germs and Jesus. Germs and Jesus. That’s all I ever hear, and you can’t see either one of them.”

It is unnerving to dedicate more and more of life to things unseen ... until we remember that everything we have valued and cared about most – all of our lives – has always been unseen: love, friendship, truth, righteousness, Spirit, integrity, meaning, purpose, God. They have called to us since long before we knew their source or had any language by which to speak of them. Though unseen, they still manifest in ways powerful and dramatic in our physical world, but the “things themselves” are not visible to the naked eye. We live for them anyway. Life would not be worth living without them. Jesus merely brings it into focus, reaffirms it, raises it to a higher dimension.

Why do we come? We get weary, lost, and broken in this world. We come because we cannot find the way alone; because we cannot heal or forgive ourselves well enough to survive; because on our own and by ourselves, there is no hope worth having. And this One loves us, forgives us, heals us, invites us. So we respond. We come out of the negatives of life – out of the negatives of our own evil and pride and failure – whether they show on the outside, or because we can no longer stand them on the inside. We want our motives to be better, and they are not; we want our lives to be purer, and they are not. We want sometime, somehow, to love somebody just because it wells up from within, and not just because we are supposed to, or because they need it, or because it will work better, or because we will get something from it. So we come to the Lord of Life ... because we are not the lords of life.

There is another reason why we come. It is all bound up with the first reason, like walking takes both legs. Just so with the negative and positive motives by which we come to Christ.

If we say that the evil drives us to Jesus, we can also say that Jesus is light in the darkness. If we say that we are lost, proud, defeated, or lonely, we can also say that His love is pure and boundless, and we cannot help but want to move toward Him. If we say that there is darkness and evil within us, we can also say that the soul within us loves light, and that always, for as far back as we can remember, we have wanted to be good and to do good, and we have wanted a “higher,” better life. We have felt the tug of a great power drawing us toward light.

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In fact, if the light within had not been so strong, we would never have been so badly devastated when we got sidetracked or failed to live by the light.

So we come to Advent and Christmas because our souls sense what is in Jesus and behind Jesus. We are drawn to it with a power that surprises us. It is so strong that we literally fear what it might do to our sense of reality, and we constantly try to dilute the power and protect ourselves from ... what do we call it? Going off the deep end? Getting too religious? Yes indeed! It is a fear few people can identify with any real clarity: the fear that the soul within will kick over the traces and go for what it really loves and cares about. How terrifying!

So we also come to Advent and Christmas because what Jesus says and does is so beautiful and authentic – and what He calls us to is more important and compelling than all the other games and goals that are being played out on this earth. We want to be part of Him, we want to respond, we want to know and love Him. That is also why we come.

Jesus replied: *“Anyone who loves me will heed what I say; then my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”* Why does that make me want to cry – beyond all intellect, beyond all theology, beyond all reason or common sense? It is so poignant and appealing that I immediately start to ward it off. The mere suggestion of it catches in my throat and heart with a longing I can hardly bear. And yet it is as familiar as the Gospel which keeps offering it, as familiar as the Bible which keeps proclaiming it, as familiar as the communion meal which invites us into it. Shall we not come?

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How we come and why we come to Advent are surely interesting, at least to us. But it pales to insignificance in comparison to how and why Jesus came. How we come is broken-hearted. Why we come is because we seek healing for all that is wrong within and around us, but also because we are creatures of LIFE and LIGHT, and the light of Christmas draws us with an unearthly power. Nevertheless, how and why He came are both the reason for our coming and, as always, dimensions beyond us.

I certainly would not want to minimize the importance of our response to Christmas. While it is true that all prior generations have managed to live their lives, search for truth, and make their witness without any help from us – while it is true that all the deeds, proclamations, writings, and expressions of faith which have guided our steps have come before we got here – it is nevertheless true that little of this power and light will seep through to coming generations unless we awaken to it, respond to it, and carry it in our time also. A chain with a missing link has already come to its end.

I think, for instance, of what the Christmas celebrations will be like in Turkey this year – in Asia Minor, where the early church was shaped, formed, found its wings and, with blood and travail and hope and an incredible faith, spread its news of a New Life and a New WAY across its own land and into all the known world. What will Christmas be like in Turkey this year – in the land of the Ephesians, Colossians, Galatians, and Philemon; of Antioch and Tarsus; of Nicaea and Constantinople – the land of Paul's birth and most of his ministry?

Christmas in Turkey will be a vast and profound silence. It no longer matters there how many lived and died for Jesus' sake, how many found the light of Christ, how many wept for joy at the new freedom that was theirs, how many found love and joy in the midst of the incredible chaos and alienation of this world. There came a generation which no longer carried it, which no longer responded to the light of Christ, which no longer was willing to live or die for it. Now Christmas and Christianity are silenced in that land. No indeed, I do *not* want to minimize the importance of our response to Christmas.

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Turkey is a wonderful place, with wonderful people, and they have a great religion of their own ... so what does it matter? What does it matter? I'm not the only one to ask or give answer to that question. All of us give answer to that question every day of our lives. Every generation gives answer to that question, whether they intend to or not.

Nevertheless, we are not the only ones who come to Christmas. Another One comes – He who makes it what it is. The great mystery and power – the source of the light that draws us – may be reflected but are not found in the how and the why we come. They are found in the how and the why our Lord comes. Indeed, it can be said that one of the strangest and most surprising things about the true Christmas is that it tends to draw us beyond ourselves. That is miracle and mystery indeed. And when that begins to happen – against all our instincts and assumptions and expectations – *we like it!* Life somehow becomes cleaner, more joyous, more alive, full of promise, and laced with excitement and adventure. Against all expectations, we like life better when it is Christ-centered than when it is self-centered. Some of us even like life better Christ-centered than nation-centered, job-centered, or family-centered. Idolatry is not simply wrong; it ends up being not much fun, either.

But I dally, and I don't have much time today. So I need to forget all subtlety and finesse and just tell you as fast and straight as I can what the message is for today: HOW DOES JESUS COME? It is a vast and fascinating topic. Why that point in time – that particular year in earth's history? Why that place on earth? Why that family and town? Why teacher instead of soldier or politician? Why suffering instead of power, and death instead of conquering? *How* He came is a vast and incredible subject. Even if I were to preach for thirty-five or forty minutes *every day for a year*, we couldn't cover it all. Today I have time to mention just one of the dimensions of HOW HE CAME: Christmas came as a surprise. Jesus was the ultimate surprise package. We thought we were expectant, ready, eager, and waiting for Messiah to come for almost a thousand years. But He took us by surprise.

Shepherds did not expect angel choirs. Magi did not expect an impossible star. Herod did not expect the wise men to outwit or defy him, or he would have killed them, banished them, or had them followed. Mary did not expect a private audience with the Archangel Gabriel. Nobody thought it would be in a manger, in a stable. Joseph did not

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expect ... Well, it goes on and on. All the stories insist that it was a total surprise. Humans were not producing this drama. Nobody knew what in the world was going on. But nothing *earthly* was causing it, planning it, or making it happen.

Celebrations, by their very nature, are choreographed and planned. They honor the past. Only, this “past” refuses to stay in the past. Celebrations lock-in, solidify, define and, without meaning to, fossilize. Jesus is never content with “came.” *He comes!* We are celebrating dynamism. If we come anywhere close to celebrating the real Christmas, we are in for a big surprise. Do we think we can contain it with a calendar? It will happen at seven o’clock in the morning on the 25th? We are “ready” when the last item on the shopping list is crossed off? What incredible chutzpah to attempt to celebrate Christmas! At least we might remember that the parties and presents and decorations – and especially the worship (when we really are trying to be thoughtful and reverent) – at best only point toward what is far beyond us.

Christmas *always* comes as a surprise – it comes in unexpected ways. How does Jesus come this year? The only thing we know for sure is that it will be a surprise. Much as we have stylized our celebrations, and however many and beloved our traditions, Jesus always comes in a way we do not expect, from a place or direction where we are not looking. Time and familiarity and custom do not change it. It always catches us by surprise, off guard – extra and outside all our preparations. Its impact is always a shock, however pleasant or unpleasant the repercussions. If no such thing happens to us this year, then we sat it out, watched from afar – missed it, or refused to receive it.

So I have had my say, and told you what I was sent to tell you. The rest is just musing about it. But I like to do that. There is more than one Christmas carol; more than one story we tell; more than one candle we light; more than one present we give. Christmas has many facets and endless dimensions. Whether it annoys or delights us, we have four Gospels telling us about it, not just one. And of course I was talking about a much bigger surprise than just intellect or information, but I am constantly charmed by the stories themselves. I thought I knew the Christmas story pretty well by the time I was in seventh grade. Sometime toward the end of college, I started to realize that it was a lot bigger than I had thought. It has been surprising me, even on the intellect level, ever since. Lots of people think they know the story much

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better than I do, so they are kind of bored with it. But that's because they think the Christmas story is just about the birth of a baby – a nine-month to year-long saga – back somewhere in the year 1 A.D. (a mistake we won't go into). If you know it's bigger than that, then you are not bored with it either. You are intrigued like I am. And we still get very excited about it.

Like, what do you think of the Christmas story in John's Gospel? Have you ever tried to do a crèche scene from his Gospel, instead of from Matthew and Luke? It is full of surprises. One surprise is connected with the probability that John wrote around twenty years after Matthew and Luke wrote their stories. In other words, it is very hard to imagine that John doesn't know the stories from Matthew and Luke, and yet he *chooses* to tell the story very differently. That is surprising to some people, even disturbing. They don't want to let him do that. It shakes things up, and threatens to make us think, go more open, expand our possibilities. Christmas is bigger than we realize and John knows it, and he hungers to let us in on it.

John's Gospel mentions Bethlehem once (7:42) but only to point out that people were troubled because Jesus had come from Galilee (Nazareth) and not from Bethlehem, where they thought Messiah was supposed to come from. They were surprised! It was a surprise that Messiah came from Nazareth. John writes *after* Matthew and Luke – presumably he has read and pondered the Gospels of both – but he chooses to tell it differently. Have you ever listened to the Gospel of John – heard the way John tells it?

From John 1:45-46: *“Philip went to find Nathanael and told him, ‘We have found the man of whom Moses wrote in the law, the man foretold by the prophets: it is Jesus son of Joseph, from Nazareth.’ ‘Nazareth!’ Nathanael exclaimed. ‘Can anything good come from Nazareth?’”* That's a joke, by the way – Nathanael and Philip are buddies; Nate is teasing him. (You're supposed to be laughing.) Only, Philip is not kidding this time. *“Philip said, ‘Come and see.’”* Does John give us any hint that Philip is mistaken? No. Philip is expressing John's view too. Have you ever listened to John's Gospel – let John tell the story his way? (John is the last, and many say the most profound, of all the Gospel writers.) Christmas is full of surprises, on many levels.

What about Christmas for us this year? Will we force it back into what we expect, so that everybody can stay comfortable, undisturbed,

and assured that all the miracles are in place and nothing very demanding or challenging or life-changing will happen? John never mentions a virgin. Do you think that means he doesn't believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God? Surely you jest! Did you hear this morning's Scripture reading?! John's Christmas is greater and more widespread and far-flung than any of the other writers have imagined. "*In the beginning*" Not nine months ago – *in the beginning!* This love and this salvation were in the mind of God since before the Creation – since before time began. Before anybody ever heard of a Jew or a Gentile or a Christian or a Muslim, God was imaging the children – ALL OF THEM – and loving them, knowing what this entrance into life and free will and individuality would portend. And God determined, in love and mercy, to track them through whatever was necessary to bring them to fullness of life – ALL OF THEM – to save them. Until ultimately, "*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.*" THAT is what John thinks is Christmas. It is so vast it takes your breath away.

John doesn't put any trust in the virgin birth; John trusts the baptism – the descent of the Holy Spirit. In John's Gospel, Jesus says: "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit.*" (3:6) In other words, the physical birth – Jesus' and ours – is not the relevant thing, much as we would like it to be if we are proud of our ancestors, or think there is something especially holy about virgins. Sorry, says Jesus in John's Gospel: "*You must be born anew ... born of the Spirit.*" (3:7) It is not about virgin birth – not for me, not for you, not for Jesus. It is about being born of the Spirit. "*But to all who did accept him, to those who put their trust in him, he gave the right to become children of God, born not of human stock, by the physical desire of a human father, but of God.*" (3:12-13) John doesn't like the virgin-birth stories that are starting to sweep through the early church. We want Jesus to be born of a virgin so He can be more nearly born of God, more obviously the Son of God. But John insists that if we are born of the Spirit, like Jesus was, we are all born of God. You cannot follow a Jesus born of a virgin – that Jesus is not like you are! But you *can* follow *this* Jesus. "*Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?*" (6:42) Have you ever listened to John's Gospel – ever let him tell the story his way?

Every year, there are people who accuse me of being no true Christian, or of trying to ruin Christmas, or of not loving Christmas, or of not really believing in Jesus. They are all mistaken. It most certainly

is true that I don't believe it the way some people think I'm supposed to. I hope you don't either! The love of God and the breadth of Christmas have been squeezed down to a tiny little glimmer of what John is talking about – no bigger than one culture, one church, one age, one nation, one world, or one group of people – whatever whoever is doing the talking happens to approve of. John says Jesus has come from a dimension beyond anything we can think of or imagine. “*Through him all things came to be; without him no created thing came into being.*” (1:3) And now WE are going to decide who this Being will ultimately love, on what basis some people will be saved, and the only right way for all of us to believe so we can “get” *ourselves* saved? I pray for the day when you will all love Christmas and believe in it as much as I do. Only, it is a lot bigger than I can say or comprehend – or what any other human on earth can say or comprehend. That is one of the most important things to know about it.

Therefore, it is full of surprises! Like you and I getting to be in on the newness, the differentness, and the continuing life-changes that Christmas endlessly brings. Like the fact that as followers, in small ways that we can never fully predict, the very pattern of Jesus' life becomes the pattern of our own lives: baptism; receiving the Holy Spirit; walking a new WAY with the Spirit in charge, where before we used to be in charge; finding our own ministry and service and suffering and defeat – and finding that these keep breaking forth into new victory and new possibilities ... until, through the whole series of deaths and resurrections we experience here on earth, we follow Him into the big one.

The Messiah was also a huge surprise because He wouldn't beat anybody up. He would not coerce anybody, force anybody, *make* anybody repent or believe. The expected Messiah was supposed to be the toughest military/political leader the world had ever seen. How else could he right all the wrongs and make a perfect world – bring “Peace On Earth”? Jesus was such a disappointing Santa Claus – oops, sorry (Freudian slip) – Jesus was such a disappointing Messiah that thousands of Christians are still waiting for the Second Coming, waiting for Jesus to come and do it again the way they think He should have done it in the first place: stop being a wimp and *make* everybody be good, or kill them off or roast them forever. All of Judaism still insists that Jesus could not have been the true Messiah because He did not do it right: He did not bring “Peace On Earth,” and He did not beat up all their enemies.

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But the real truth is that most of the world did not notice or care about any of it. Will we ever get used to that? Maybe one in every sixty people in Palestine at the time had any awareness of Jesus whatsoever [see the supplement at the end of this sermon]. Most people did not know or care – just like today. I’m talking about the full-spectrum Christmas: the Incarnation, the full life and ministry, the death and resurrection. But most people did not notice or care. It was business as usual. (“How silently, how silently”)

It is true that those who had glimmers – who felt the threat of His existence and tried to stop it – were unable to prevent it. They thought they had it stopped – at the birth, then in the middle, and then when they killed Him – but they were dealing with a power and an intelligence so far beyond them that they had no clue what they were up against. But they were a tiny handful. Most did not know or care.

Has it changed at all? Christmas still comes as a surprise. We do not produce it. We cannot stop it. Only a tiny handful notice or care. If you celebrate the true Christmas this year, you are in a small minority. Are you okay with that? Are you reconciled with that? One in sixty. If you think this is about going with the crowds, you will never get beyond “Christmas Past.”

Christmas comes as a great surprise. It so caught us off-guard that almost nobody lifted a finger to save the Messiah in His hour of greatest trial here. His very best friends – those who believed in Him most – all deserted. Or at least nobody died with Him. Nobody said, “Where are you going with our King?”

Later, when the shock wore off – when those who loved Him had time to recover a little, figure it out, and get past some of the dismay and confusion – they tried to make it up to Him. *Then* they began to die – with Him and for Him – by the thousands. It has been going on ever since. Yet it is still only a handful. Most do not notice or care. If you celebrate the true Christmas today, only a handful of those you know will celebrate with you, and understand, and go with you into the celebration that keeps transforming from past honor into present devotion – into the pilgrimage of those who love Him: the disciple bands of today. (Do you begin to understand why I don’t really care who or how many join this church? I am just very, very glad that *you* did.)

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When I was young, I thought we ought to pass a law that, upon pain of death, nobody could put up a Christmas tree or lights or any other Christmas decorations, or give or receive Christmas presents, unless they were a member in good standing in some Christian church – tithed to it, served in it faithfully – “seeking in grace and praise to discover God’s will for their own lives on a daily basis.”

But I did not understand our Messiah yet, did I? No coercion! It is not His WAY. He will not be our King until we *choose* Him. It’s like our covenants: Even as we write them, we become full members in this church. In the same moment that we choose Him, He becomes our King. Only the lucky ones stumble into it and find the truth within and behind all the glitter and noise. The chosen few. They rejoice in and beyond all words and anthems. And they go right on celebrating – trying to find appropriate ways to declare and spread the news – long after everybody else thinks it’s over.

SUPPLEMENT

How many people are there in the New Testament story of Jesus? How many friends and followers did Jesus have at the height of His ministry? He fed five thousand. On Palm Sunday, there were enough supporters to neutralize the temple guard. What do you think – maybe ten or twelve thousand? (I'm trying to guess high.) Maybe half of all of Jesus' supporters showed up. So maybe twenty-five thousand people had heard about Jesus while He was on earth. (I mean all the way from Peter to somebody who just vaguely remembered having seen or heard Him.) It's probably half that, but I want to make sure you don't write me off as a pessimist.

How many enemies? I would guess maybe two or three hundred who were really concerned enough to want to put Him out of the picture. Let's do the same exaggerating and say five hundred. There was no telegraph, telephone, daily newspaper, radio, or television newsroom, so news could not travel like we assume it does today. If Jesus had twenty-five thousand supporters (from actual disciples to people who knew His name favorably) and five hundred enemies (from people sworn to kill Him to those who thought Him an inconvenience), then Jesus' movement was *enormous* in the Palestine of His day.

Are you picking up my point yet? How many people lived in the Jerusalem area in Jesus' day? Not the swollen crowds of Passover, just normal population? Seventy-five thousand? A hundred thousand? Three out of every four people in Jerusalem had never even heard of Jesus. (More likely nine out of ten.) And that's the hub – where things are known. And that's if we swell the figures as much as possible. I estimate, at the best scenario, that one in every sixty people in Palestine had even a slight awareness that Jesus existed (over twenty-five thousand knew Him; population of maybe one and a half million). Silly figures, I know – we cannot be sure. But the point I'm trying to make was real then, and it still is today.

Does the majority rule, even if it only sometimes votes? How do most people approach Advent? It is the same today as it always has been: The vast majority do not approach Advent at all. They don't have a clue. If they have heard about it at all, they don't really care one way or the other. There are bills to pay, games to watch, and trials everywhere. A lot of farmers were watching the weather; a lot of Roman soldiers were

wondering where they would be assigned next; a lot of religious people were studying Scripture, sending their kids to school, and trying to keep their synagogues prosperous and healthy. The whole thing with Jesus came and went and they didn't know or care one way or the other. (Jesus wept over Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, you remember, because "*they did not know the time of their visitation.*") Does that make you shudder? It does if you have a shudder in you.

How many people today pick up the paper or listen to the news each morning but don't care about Jesus one way or the other? He is still here; the invitation is still being made – it is still open. Yet they really don't care one way or the other. If He was the Son of God, fine! Pass the toast. If this is the time of our visitation, fine! I'm going to be home late tonight – I've got a meeting of the meeting people.

The vast majority of people have responded to Advent in the same way down through the ages. If they have heard the words at all, nothing has registered. If they know, they do not care. They are too bored or too busy to really care about God. They believe in God, of course, but they do not *care* about God. Some people have a serious but very different approach to God (Hindu, Buddhist, etc.), but that's a different category altogether.

I am not saying that any of you are in this group. But some of you can look in the mirror and see people who used to be. I am not telling you to go do something about it either, unless you end up believing you are called to that. I'm just saying that if you want to understand Advent, you have to know this. We all need to know and remember it. Remembering that most of the world does not care is an important perspective to our own approaches to Advent. Otherwise we start making a lot of false assumptions and getting a lot of wrong expectations. If you awaken to the Savior's coming and hear the invitation and respond this Advent, you may hear the bells, but most of the folk around you will not. They will not rejoice with you, nor will they understand or cheer. It is important to know that. Christmas is not run by majority rule. Not the real Christmas.

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Christmas is many things. It is many different things to different people. But for Christians, it is first and foremost the Incarnation: the coming of God in human form to bless us and get close to us – if we will allow it – in ways clearer and more powerful than ever before. The Incarnation is never just the birth. It is the full-spectrum story. We have been musing about this and some of its implications on our way through Advent. But we have not asked WHY HE CAME. We have been celebrating Christmas, but we are never finished with the mystery and the wonder of what we are really celebrating. It is both simple and profound: I think He comes because we need Him.

A funny thing, but lots of people don't like to bring real life into nice places like Christmas – they don't like to bring all the gore and cruelty and senseless evil and unimaginable stupidity that stab their way into every day, every newspaper page, and every suffering life that we encounter. But if things were really “nice” in this world, Christmas would never have happened. If this were a happy, healthy planet, God would never have interrupted the life of the Son to send Him here – God would not have needed to interrupt our lives by sending Him here. And Christmas is a huge interruption, as you know, for everybody who pays any attention. The great joy we now sing about and celebrate is ultimately and inevitably the proof of our truly desperate situation.

If you learned that a terrible plague was coming and that it threatened the life of every man, woman, and child on earth, you would think that a desperate situation. Well, the plague is called “sin” – alienation from God – and it guarantees the death of every man, woman, and child on earth. It is a desperate situation. He came because we need Him! And I do not mean just to fix the faucet or give us a few simple slogans, or to tell us to buck-up, light just one little candle, or be nice to each other. It has gone way beyond that. The world and everybody in it is in deeper trouble than that. It is not going to be fixed that easily or we would have seen to it ourselves, long before this. But the real Christmas is so powerful that it is not afraid of life or death. If we stop trying to protect it, and stop trying to hide it away in a fantasy world, it comes to redeem us in our real situations.

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Things are dying all around us, including people – dying in all kinds of ways, dying to all kinds of life: marriages are dying; friendships are dying; businesses, schools, churches, forests, cultures, and nations are dying. And they get sick and suffer a lot on the way to dying. Often we don't really know why. Often the very ones we need the most are dying. It's not just "bad" marriages, friendships, businesses, churches, forests, cultures, and people that are dying. To be sure, new things are also coming to life; I did not say there was no light or joy or love at all. We just have to stop pretending that there is no shadow, and stop pretending that we can get to the light all by ourselves, whenever we want to. And we have to stop pretending that we can heal things whenever we decide to.

Of course, I understand why we want to keep Christmas out of real life and turn it into a fantasy celebration. What if we try to believe it and it turns out to be as false as all our other favorite stories? Like the ones about Santa Claus, and the Tooth Fairy, and the Fairy Godmother; and the one about if you work hard and stay responsible, you will be successful; and the one about if you are good and do good things, everybody will love you. We have already had about all of that we can stand. But our fear separates Christmas from its true purpose. That means we miss the only HOPE there is for real LIFE – in the real situations – where the struggle between life and death is actually going on. He came because we need Him. Seeing and admitting our need is the only way we will ever get past Santa Claus to Jesus Christ – past all the surface glitter to the offer of a very new and different WAY of Life, one that does not end in death.

Christmas is full of a very deep gratitude for a life-changing hope and a purpose-changing presence. We don't start out on a bed of roses, or that gratitude could not be the truth. Today I want to ask and urge you – I cannot demand, but I ask and urge you – to bring your joy and gratitude to its apex by thinking *on purpose* about WHY He came. What is the impact – the purpose – of His coming? To put it more in the framework of Christmas celebrations: We take time to be thoughtful, send cards, write Christmas letters, buy gifts for many people we like and care about. Might we also go to Jesus and tell Him personally, *in our own words*, why we are grateful to Him – what we know and recognize about what He has done for us? Of all the things we have done for and about Christmas this year, I suspect this is still the most important of all.

Truly I cannot do such a thing for you, but perhaps I can help get the process started. I want to remind you of the three major categories, or images, concerning the WHY of Jesus' coming. Then it's up to you to search for your own best expression and gratitude.

WHY DID JESUS COME? WHAT DOES JESUS REALLY DO FOR US?

This is not going to be three long and erudite explanations. It will be an oversimplification, a cursory introduction. I still hope you are willing to listen really fast.

I.) RANSOM is the first image or category. The earliest thought-frames of the Christian church put and answered this question in terms of what Jesus did to Satan, to Hell, and to death. The early Christians had a personal, one-on-one relationship with all three. Satan, Hell, and death were the enemies. Early Christians often personified them, and they took all three with extreme seriousness. From this first category, we get many words and concepts, but the big one is RANSOM. In the thought-frames of this perspective, we are captive to Satan, held in bondage, crushed under the weight of sin, fear, loneliness, and death. There is no escape by human power. Jesus comes to defeat Satan, to win us away from death and Hell. Jesus goes to the Cross and death so that Satan will take Him into Satan's own realms. Unable to resist such a prize – thinking he can destroy the mission and ministry of Jesus – Satan helps to engineer the crucifixion. Claiming victory, he takes Jesus to death and Hell. Only, it doesn't work out like Satan thought. The powers of Hell are not strong enough to hold Jesus captive. In a blaze of light and power, Jesus bursts all the bonds of death and Hell that try to hold Him. We sometimes hear the ancient phrase: "He descended into Hell." And what the early Christians thought Jesus was doing in Hell was dancing down the halls, ripping all the doors off their hinges, breaking all the shackles, disintegrating all the chains – and setting everybody free! That was their theme. Jesus died in our place, as an undercover agent, in order to RANSOM us from sin (Hell), death, and the Devil. It didn't matter if you had gone to Hell – Jesus wouldn't leave you there. *Jesus did not like Hell, and He meant business!* Not like the namby-pamby Jesus of today, who keeps a few people out of Hell but leaves the place operating at full-bore for everybody else. The early Christians thought Jesus was cleaning the place out, putting it out of business for good. This was before Christianity became a religion for women and children – before the church needed the threat of Hell and Satan to control people

and try to *make* them be good. Early on, there was a lot of Pecos Pete and Paul Bunyan in our Savior. RANSOM! That was WHY Jesus came: to set everybody free – here, now, and everywhere. Not some little, “Well, not unless you are a Christian and belong to our church, and accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, and say ‘pretty please’ like we tell you to.” Peter and Paul and two generations of Christians would have laughed in your face. You think they converted a pagan empire by acting like some private theological club? *Jesus* was Savior – not the theologians, not the church, and not some humanly contrived little formula. Of course, it’s true that they did not mean freedom to do your own thing, like we usually do. They meant freedom from Satan’s bondage so that we could serve God in a realm of truth and light and love forever.

Anyway, that is the first category. With a little translation and meditation, I love it, claim it, and rejoice in it. I *know* about captivity to sin and Satan. It doesn’t take me very long to comprehend that Jesus’ coming is about freedom from bondage to death, Hell, and Satan. But it is a translation. It is not my native language. I had to learn it before I could realize how profoundly it applied to my own life. Now I ask you: Is there any language or imagery from this first category that you use when you celebrate Christmas? When you come to Jesus to thank Him for why He came and what He does for you, is there any trace of an old concept called RANSOM?

II.) The second category focuses on God and Heaven rather than on Hell and Satan. It has been right there all along, but after the first hundred years and through most of church history since, most of the language and imagery come from a second image and category: ATONEMENT. Humans break the covenant. Humans break God’s laws and precepts. Humans, by their rebellion and desertion and defiance, deserve death. They end up so far into the minus side of the ledgers of Life that somebody has to pay *for* them what they cannot pay for themselves, or they are goners – in debt forever, too deep to ever get out. This second category has been around too long – been used and explained in too many ways by too many people – to be neat and tidy. It has many expressions, comes from many angles, and uses lots of words: expiation, redemption, sacrifice (“*The lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world*”). But over all, cutting to the core, it sees salvation as a problem of RIGHTEOUSNESS. Heaven is a realm of justice, peace, and love. God is a God of justice, peace, and love. (Who would want it otherwise?) The issue is that we do not match – we do not fit with God’s ways and plans – not the way we

are here. If God let us in the way we are, it would destroy Heaven. If we bicker, quarrel, pout, rebel, preen our egos, nurse our anger, try to out-do each other in Heaven like we do here, what would happen? Instead of Heaven on earth, we let earth into Heaven. Pretty soon, it would be just as bad there as it is here.

With many variations of emphasis, the second category pictures us as unfit for Heaven or eternal life – we are unqualified and disqualified. Jesus takes on our detriment: pays our debts; pays with His righteous worth for our hopeless debt or sin (most poignantly depicted in images of the crucifixion mixed with the meanings of the altar sacrifice). ATONEMENT is a moral/spiritual transaction wherein Jesus pays with His life to prevent our destruction, and to give us another chance at relationship with God. Jesus stands surety for us – He guarantees that our forgiveness will result in newness of life. All ATONEMENT concepts assume that we will change enough – get holy enough from now on – to prove that Jesus’ sacrifice was worth it, that His faith in us was well-founded. In the more advanced concepts of this category, Jesus stays with us, once we have accepted His mercy, and works with us toward our sanctification, now that we have been saved from destruction. Of course, God is not content to lose Jesus, so He is resurrected back into Life. Nevertheless, ATONEMENT constructs always reek of a righteous judgment. Grace is partial, and salvation still depends on us finally getting it right. Most of Christendom has never accepted Jesus as full Savior. Their belief is that He only delays the judgment; He buys you some time, but you are still under LAW – you still have to clean up your act, or Hell is waiting for you.

Quite obviously, I am heretic to most of Christendom. Oh, I’m far from alone, and I am not the author or designer of any of what I try to teach you. But with many Christian brothers and sisters down through the ages, I claim that unless you trust Jesus totally – accept the fullness of His total grace and love – you cannot feel His presence or His Kingdom enough to know real freedom and redemption, or to catch a glimmer of your own true identity. I believe He will go on working to save you anyway, but you will not know it or feel its true power yet.

Note that in the first category, the action is between Jesus and Satan. In the second category, the action is between Jesus and God. In the first scenario, Satan wants to keep us, and Jesus will not let him. In the second scenario, God cannot afford our presence, and Jesus

offers a price God cannot refuse, in order to give us another chance. In both cases, Jesus is the active agent of a major change. Jesus makes all the difference. There is a great deal of *mythical* content in the first category, and a great deal of *mystical* content in the second category. That is, Jesus is doing things and making arrangements and fighting for us on levels far beyond this earth, and far beyond our capacity to fully understand. But people of the first or second category, when they say “Thank you, Jesus,” they are not kidding! When they celebrate His coming, it is not just a sideshow – it is the whole ballgame, and everything depends upon it. I am asking: When *you* go to thank Jesus for coming, what are you thanking Him for? Why do you think He came? What does He do for *you*? Some of you may be comfortable with one of these constructs. In theology, RANSOM is called “The Classic View,” and ATONEMENT is called “The Latin View.” But I suspect most of you need to get past some of the images of the old formulas or it doesn’t get personally real. You need to talk to Jesus in your own words. I know I need to.

Personally, I don’t speak the language of the second category very easily. You have picked that up, I suspect. I had to learn the language in order to understand many of my Christian friends from the past, but it is not native or natural to me. I have great regard for some of the images and concepts when I rework and reapply them. But I have never been able to accept the construct that Jesus and God are adversaries over our salvation – that Jesus is appeasing God, or paying God off with His life to buy us a new chance. I am actually very sad that this is what most of Christendom believes. It seems clear to me that we need more than one new chance, but this view of ATONEMENT leaves us very quickly with the same old picture of a wrathful God, and the same old grim efforts to win salvation by our own efforts to get righteous. ATONEMENT can be better than it is usually pictured, but for millions of Christians, Jesus is a temporary reprieve – nothing has really changed, and GOD’S GRACE AND LOVE are quickly muted. It’s the same old wrath and the same old rules, and in this construct, only a handful of outstanding spiritual athletes ever get any real benefit from Jesus’ coming.

I flat-out reject the doctrine that God needed or wanted Jesus to die to appease God’s own wrath or to placate his righteousness. I do not believe that Jesus’ coming was preordained by God to end in crucifixion, or that Judas had no choice but to betray Jesus, or that Jesus had no choice but to stay in Jerusalem and die. That is not what the blood or the

Cross or His coming means to me. If I had to believe that to be a Christian, I would *not* be a Christian. But since this is the familiar language and doctrine of the vast majority of Christendom, I wonder what language you yourself use to thank Jesus, to celebrate Christmas, to think or talk about WHY He came.

III.) The third image or category focuses on RECONCILIATION. It cares about what Jesus does *on earth*. Now the spotlight has swung away from Satan and Hell and away from God and Heaven, and it focuses on what Jesus did and does for human beings like you and me, here in this world. There is still mystery, still more power and love than we can comprehend. God and Satan and Hell and eternal LIFE are still in the picture. But Christmas is not about beating up Satan *or* appeasing God. It is about a gift God gives to us: The Presence ... *Immanuel* ... God with us.

In the third category, Jesus is not killed because of Satan. He is not killed because of God. His death is not contrived by outside forces. WE kill Him. We finally admit it. He is not paying some mythical or mystical price in some off-worldly market. He dies because *humans* cannot stand Him. He dies because human institutions of law and justice cannot tolerate Him. Our world is not ready for and cannot handle His goodness, and so WE reject Him. In the third construct, Jesus is not tricking Satan or appeasing God. Jesus is dealing with *us*. We are the ones with the problem – an anger and a rebellion toward God (and all authority) so fierce that we cannot love God or Jesus or ourselves or each other, not very deeply or consistently or for very long. We want control, we want to run things our own way, we want to be God – that is the real anatomy of “The Fall.” In killing Jesus, we discover in blazing clarity what we have always most wanted to deny: the true extent and condition of our alienation from our Creator – and the resulting terror (however much we try to mute it), the resulting anger (however much we try to justify it), and the resulting idolatry of all the ways we try to fill our empty lives with *external things* and *internal excuses*.

Jesus does not come to reconcile God. He comes to reconcile us! The blood – His Life – is given: first, so we can see ourselves as we really are; second, to win us over – to show us that we are mistaken about the mind and the motives we have attributed to God. That is the greatest of all projections: we read into God the motives and fears and hatreds we have inside ourselves. The Cross (and there is no Christmas without the Cross) is the emblem of God’s Message and Messenger – God’s heart –

WHY HE CAME

pushed to the wall. So finally we see what the true content and purpose and motive of the Message and its Source really are – what God’s attitude toward us really is. Is it anger or disgust? Vengeance or retaliation? Judgment or punishment or wrath? If ever in all the universes it would be any of those things, surely they would come front and center at the crucifixion of the Son. BUT THEY DO NOT! That is not God’s heart or mind toward us, though we have always secretly thought so.

For those who notice – for those who “hear it” – something twists so deep inside that the self can never recover. We were in error. With all our assumptions – all our fear and anger toward the Almighty – we have been *mistaken* about God. Forgiveness and love – where we least deserve it and least expect it – change our hearts. RECONCILIATION. The tears come. The veil drops. The anger dies. The terrible warfare between us and God melts away. “Abba – Daddy – is it really YOU? Thank God! I can breathe again and dance again – risk and fail and laugh and love again. All is well, despite all our surroundings. Hope and Life and Light are real! Wow, Jesus, you finally got through to me! Abba, I have been wasting so much time and life. I have been so angry and afraid.”

RECONCILIATION. The “Waiting Father” has been worried about us and waiting for us all along. And the Resurrection not only shows us who Jesus really is, it is God’s quietest way of saying: “In case you are confused or forgetful, it was not for lack of power that I did not strike back. It was not from helplessness that I absorbed all your scorn and hurt and punishment. I know you are lost, frightened, angry. I know you think I’m mean because your life is hard. I cannot explain it all to you yet, but I am trying to let you know that I truly love you – and I am reminding you forever that your realm is only a brief and tiny part of the full story.”

Three categories – frameworks for thinking about WHY HE CAME. I have only hinted at them in the hope that you might use them, and go beyond them. You want Christmas to get real, sink in, and stay with you this time? I think we each need to go to Jesus and tell Him personally, *in our own words*, why we are grateful to Him – what we know and recognize about why He has come and what He has done for us. You have said and done and sent to everybody else you care about. Shouldn’t He be on the list too?

* * *

WHY HE CAME

P.S. Some of you do not respond well to mental constructs. That's okay. Here is a scene or image you can use instead. It comes from Matthew. *"And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'"* (Matthew 3:16-17 (Mark 1:10-11; Luke 3:22-23)) Other translations read: *"This is my beloved Son in whom I take delight."* Or, *"You are my beloved Son, on you my favor rests."*

Perhaps you have pondered this passage many times and heard it in terms of Jesus. But have you heard it through Jesus for you, yourself? That's why He came, you know – to bring you with Him, to draw you into Life with Him. This is the true Christmas: He came so you could hear it, feel it, and experience it too. Baptism, after all, is following Him onto the Christian Path and WAY.

You do not need water. *"John answered them all, 'I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.'"* (Luke 3:16) Go into the wilderness and do not come out until you hear the voice descending on *you*, saying, "You are my beloved daughter ... you are my beloved son ... in you I take delight ... on you my favor rests." *That is the true Christmas! Immanuel – God with us! "You are my beloved, on you my favor rests."* Without that moment, and that incredible reassurance, is there any chance at all that we can walk the WAY that Jesus calls us into?

BASKING IN THE GLORY

Many of us have awakened to reality because of stories that have moved us and gotten into us. I loved my father, and still do, but he had a hard life, and he pulled us out of poverty and slums by faith in God mixed with severe personal discipline. It left the marks of a rigid work ethic that never left him, and so he had no time for stories. He thought reading fiction was a waste of time. Made-up stories that never really happened were for other people who had time on their hands and could afford to squander it. One time I asked him what he thought of the story of the Prodigal Son. He smiled, but he never answered me.

My mother loved stories – read them, told them, made them up. Opposites attract, if I have failed to mention that before. A bit of wisdom bequeathed to us from astrology. Astrology itself is an interesting mixture of fact and fantasy. But then, so is history, economics, political science, and even physics.

Many of you have loved the writings of C.S. Lewis. Did you learn more from *Mere Christianity*, or from *That Hideous Strength*? A silly question; both are wonderful. But C.S. Lewis was a strange mixture of serious scholarship and wonderful fantasy. Many people believe in Satan because, instead of arguing theologically, C.S. Lewis described the way Satan thinks and works. The shock of recognition, especially in *The Screwtape Letters*, was more compelling than well-framed arguments.

There are loads of trashy novels, and reading them is a waste of time and life. Even though I mean that, I suppose it's my father speaking. But there are great and wondrous stories that reveal and remind us what life is really about and what's going on here. If I go too long without reading great fiction or fantasy, I get so dull that I start forgetting why any of it matters. I have gotten so dull, a couple of times in my life, that I even started reading newspapers. If you ever go to the library, get a newspaper from today, from ten years ago, and from twenty years ago and lay them side by side. If you change the names and dates, you realize that most of it is the same old stuff. Nothing has changed very much on the surface of life. Yet I have friends who pore over the newspapers every day, thinking that if they keep up with the news, they will comprehend the trends and be able to make better decisions by discerning what's going to happen in the future. And they think astrology is soothsaying?!

Some of you have been reading interesting articles in *TIME* or *Newsweek* that mostly corroborate things about the birth narratives of Jesus that we have been teaching around here for many years, and for many years before I came here. My father and mother learned much of it before I was born. The information is nothing new; it's merely unmentioned in most churches. And it is information available to anyone who doesn't refuse to look at the evidence. "There are none so blind as those that will not see." (Jonathan Swift) "They never will hear, but turn a deaf ear." (Also Jonathan Swift) In any case, the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two chapters of Luke are clearly contrived – made up, added on later. The internal biblical evidence is overwhelming. It was not chicanery; it was honest men trying to provide information that nobody had, and seeking it in Old Testament prophecy. With the leads they took from Old Testament prophecy, they told very thoughtful stories. The problem – the reason I will not stay silent about it – is that some of our worst theology has come from these stories: Jesus was not human; sex is tainted, if not downright evil; Mary, and even her mother, is as necessary to our salvation as Jesus is; we are saved by a physical miracle rather than by spiritual rebirth. The baptism is obscured. Following Jesus is minimized. Christmas was banned by the Protestant Reformers and forbidden by the Puritans for some very good reasons. We know why Macy's wanted to bring it back, but if *you* are going to bring it back and keep it as a major and central holy day – a central celebration and time of worship in your life and in the life of your family – you better know and remember what you are doing and why. Otherwise there will not be anything left of the true Christmas.

Among many, many wondrous stories, I like *Harry Potter*. It is instructive as well as amazing that the reaction of the more conservative wing of the Christian church is that the *Harry Potter* series is evil, while the *Left Behind* series is considered wonderful. And yet, in my humble opinion, *Harry Potter* is filled with great insights, faith, and moral teachings, while the *Left Behind* books are pure, unadulterated Christian trash. My sister, deep in the grief of the recent loss of her husband, was enthralled by *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. Sometimes grief, or any kind of trauma, makes us more open to meaning than we would normally be. For instance, there are Dementors in the story – the guards of Azkaban. They draw the joy out of you; if nothing stops them, you will be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life, without any good feeling or any happy memories – nothing worth living for, nothing worth striving for. In the end, if you receive the Dementor's kiss, you are left as soulless and evil as the Dementors are themselves. Then you get

to do unto others what you have allowed to be done unto you. Does it take some kind of genius to realize that J.K. Rowling is putting into story form the realities of “depression,” the only disease of our time more prevalent and more devastating than cancer?

Harry saves himself and his friend from the Dementors because he has learned a great spell: *Expecto patronum!* Only, you cannot just say it. Even the wand will not make it work unless you actually mean it from deep in your soul, and say it while focused on faith, joy, and believing you are loved. (See John Granger’s *Looking for God in Harry Potter*, pages 139-145.) Of course, the spell works on many levels, all the way from Harry remembering the love of his parents, to total trust in the authority of Christ. *Expecto* – from the Apostle’s Creed – means “I long for my Savior and deliverer.” *Patronum* means authority, father, guardian. Harry’s *patronus* comes in the shape of a stag or unicorn – both traditional symbols of Christ. For Harry, it starts with remembering his father, then escalates from there. And I repeat: this must be said – uttered – in joy and faith that cannot be pretended. Even his teacher (Lupin) is dumbfounded by the power of Harry’s spell, for he himself cannot say it with the faith and joy that Harry uses to utter it. No true depression will run from a feeble attempt at positive thinking, or from trying to pretend an earthly optimism. But indeed it will run from the power of Christ’s light and love and resurrection.

So the story did not teach my sister anything she didn’t already know. But it reminded her. It made it clear again what was really happening in her life. And when the dark moods try to come and suck her life away, she smiles and cries: *Expecto patronum!* That is how we are supposed to hear and use fantasy. That is what stories are really for. Not an escape from life, but a *reminder* of what is really going on – what is at stake – and how we may respond. And without the stories, we often forget, get confused, or lose track of the real plot.

Do you say it too? “In joy I long for and await my Father’s coming.” No Dementor can stand in the face of *that!* Yet longing for it is not enough. “Await” is the key. (And yes, subtly but powerfully the story makes clear that while it starts with Harry remembering the earthly father he never knew, but knew loved him, it moves quickly beyond that to the True Father.)

The big drama of Christmas is that Jesus was born – He whom God chose as his special vessel; Messiah, yet with His own full choice (free will); Spirit-filled, obedient, and divine Son of God; revealer of God, and reconciler to God; beyond anything our world has ever imagined; beyond anything we have ever seen before or since – Jesus our Savior came to be with us, to live among us, to die at our hands, to rise again that we would know where true authority really comes from. And many of us have realized that apart from His presence and love, we *do* fear and serve Satan, whether or not we ever mean to. Ah yes, the stakes are higher than we like to admit. Higher than we want to know – at first. And while the evidence has always been all around us and all throughout history, it gets clearer and clearer the longer we live here.

That is the big drama: the Incarnation – God with us.

Now, I believe people have a right to expect honesty and candor from their pastors. What a concept! Here, where you are free and responsible for your own faith, the benefit of our freedom is that we can be honest with each other and share our real faith, and even help each other to keep growing in our trust and understanding. Whatever our theological constructs, what really matters is how much we trust Jesus – and because of Jesus, how much we trust God. Only, in our time it is not enough to merely say “Trust God” and mean it in some generic sense. We trust God, each of us individually, for personal caring, for destiny, for direction, for Life. Otherwise it is mere theory without content or effect.

So I will be as clear as I can be (not necessarily right, but clear). If you were paying attention, you heard the words that lift Jesus beyond all other human beings and truly claim Him as Savior and Lord. Most of you know that I really mean them. That doesn't matter, in the final analysis, except to me; to me it means everything. But you also heard the hint of what many would call “heresy,” only it's a heresy better than orthodoxy: Jesus is not the same as God. Jesus of Nazareth is still an earth being, and you cannot pour the fullness of the Almighty, Omnipotent, Eternal God into the tiny if wondrous frame of a physical human being. (Some of it, yes, but not the fullness.) Jesus is more than Jesus of Nazareth. And all of *you* are more than you know too, as Jesus kept teaching and insisting. But Arius was correct and Athanasius was wrong – even though Athanasius ended up winning the creedal battle, after many years of debate and the thing going back and forth. When it takes sixty years for the best minds of Christendom to debate a matter and they never truly agree because the arguments are both close and

subtle, then only history and fear of the topic itself can pretend that we really figured it out or got it right. Jesus is not God, but the Son of God. Jesus did not come to reveal Himself, but to reveal God. Jesus did not come to reconcile us to Himself, but to reconcile us to God. Jesus, I believe, would be horrified by the ways we forget His own teachings and purposes. Always He pointed us to the Father, even though it was to a God we had never really understood or trusted.

Actually, I am not as heretical as some would suppose. All too frequently, there is a failure to distinguish between here and eternity. I know Jesus' identity is not the same in the higher realms as it was here on earth. Do you think yours will be? If in John's Gospel Jesus says, "*I and the Father are one,*" is that one in truth and purpose, or one in substance – that is, is it intentionality, or identity? And in John's Gospel, Jesus also prays, "*That they may all be one.*" (John 14:20) Him in God, us in Him – one big happy family. Then the Trinity is Father, Son, Holy Spirit ... and the Body (the church, the *ecclesia*). The church is the bride of Christ, and the two shall become one. If I'm not over your heads, I sure as Heaven am over mine! Meanwhile, who still remembers that Jesus of Nazareth came to earth and was human here?

"When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one." (I Corinthians 15:28) Does Jesus pray to Himself, or to God? Does Jesus obey Himself, or God? Does Jesus worship Himself, or God? Do we even remember the Lord's Prayer? So the theory is: When Jesus gets to Heaven, He turns back into God. Who decided that? Who was there to see it, that it is claimed with such certainty? Creeds are for clarity, and to stop arguments. But they are also for those who are afraid we will not believe enough unless the claim is closed and our minds are shut off to question or comprehension. Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and even much Protestantism in our time are afraid Jesus will not be great enough – that He will not have the power to save us (even with God's help) – unless we turn Jesus into God himself.

So you might want to tell me that I don't really believe in the Trinity, but you would be mistaken. Three-in-one can be ONE in purpose, mind, and heart. "God in three persons" can be God in three manifestations. And is God not manifested – revealed – in endless ways? Who decided that we have to define it all as if we understood all mystery and all knowledge, and that anybody who dared to question or think about it

was damned? Was it Jesus who taught us to be this way? Not ever! That is, Jesus did not live, teach, or act this way Himself. It was *after the creeds* that we decided it was more important to write doctrines about Jesus than it was to follow Him. But if He is not divine and perfect, then why should we follow Him? I don't know about you, but I follow Him and believe in Him because of His life and death and resurrection – because of the WAY He lived. The more we pay attention to His life among us, it gets ever clearer that God really sent Him, really lived in Him, really revealed himself in and through Him. But in that case, it becomes more and more important to live in our own obedience to His Holy Spirit – to dedicate and devote our entire lives to Him, not merely to sing pretty carols once a year and honor His memory with accolades that sound good but have little to do with how we live or choose or manage our own lives.

“He who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth will proceed by loving his own sect or church better than Christianity, and end by loving himself better than all.” I should have said that, but I did not. Samuel Taylor Coleridge said it, over two hundred years ago. (*Aids to Reflection – Moral and Religious Aphorisms XXV.*)

So here in Luke is a story about a mother. And the part I know is true is that Mary pondered things in her heart. Despite my failure to revere virginity above maternity, I do know that Jesus had a mother. If we could ever get past the virgin thing, it would be fun to start thinking about and remembering that Jesus really did have a mother who cared for Him, loved Him, worried about Him, and had a huge influence on His growth and development. And every mother worthy of the title wonders, ponders, prays, and dreams about what her child will be like – what they will turn into, achieve, become. And the story about Simeon rings true as well. There are always those in the wings who seem to have special insight into the nature and destiny of every child who is loved and cared about. There is always an uncle, a grandparent, a godfather, a friend, or a relative somewhere who realizes that this child is special. The story rings true because we all identify. Each life is a miracle, and though often we forget, we ought not to forget.

In any case, I want to urge you this morning to bask in the glory of Christmas – the glory of the Incarnation – the coming of the strangest and most wonderful person who ever walked this earth. And you cannot do that unless you get past, or loose from, all the creeds and formulas that separate us from really caring about Jesus, from what He is really

like, and from how much He really loves us, human to human. And as long as we keep turning Him into God before we even get to know Him, we will never really love Him back – not enough to really follow Him into the New Life He reveals and invites us into. And that is because, though His WAY is beautiful and wondrous, it is also rigorous and so very different from anything our world believes or understands.

I suspect we are not back to normal yet; we have not recovered from Christmas yet. And I hope you will not rush out of the magic this year and back into normal life. It is a season to ponder, to wonder, to drink it all in. It is a season to consider what *He* did more than what *we* are going to do, at least for a little while. We are still with the magic of Incarnation, if we are open to it, if we are willing to claim it, if we are willing to let it into our own lives. It is important not to be in a rush. There has already been so much rush. Let the rush be over. Take walks alone. Turn off all the noisemakers around you. Turn off the cell phones, the television, the ball games. Cancel some of the obligations and appointments that can wait until next week. Take time just to be with Jesus – to ponder His coming, what He was really like, how much He really cared. Even to ponder how different He was, and how differently He lived, from the normal values, motives, and purposes of our normal world. If our faith is real – if our faith is true at all – Jesus is still available, still here as Holy Spirit, still eager and willing to make Himself known to you ... you yourself. But not if you are in such a hurry and such a rush that you cannot hear or notice. If the Holy Spirit shouted above the din and haste, it would break our free will – it would no longer be from choice or our own desire for this relationship; it could no longer be a love-bond. So He waits ... until we want it too – the connection, the friendship between us. Bask in the Glory of Christmas. Wait for Him, as He waits for you ... until you feel and hear the dialogue that forms deep within, in the quiet and true caring of your soul. “How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.”

Christmas is love far beyond anything we have ever seen or known before. All the lesser miracles pale to insignificance in the light of who He really is, how much He really cares, and what He really asks of us and makes possible for us. Bask in it. Drink it in. Let it fill you.