

OUT-OF-THE-WAY PLACES

Do not settle for a Christmas where some Jesus comes who will make no difference in your life. Do not settle for a Christmas where all you get are slogans and pretty lights, but no relationship with the Living God. Jesus did not come – ending up on a terrible cross – so we could sing about a red-nosed reindeer and hang lights on trees. Which is not to say we should ban hanging lights on trees, or even stop singing about reindeer. Only, that is not the essence of it. That is not what it is about. Even in religion, maybe especially in religion, we have to learn to keep our eye on the ball or we won't be in the game for very long.

What I want to remind us of this morning – not tell you, but remind you, and myself – is that Christmas comes in “out-of-the-way places.” I do not know if it is God's sense of humor or if it is simply necessary to find some creative way to get past all our defenses, but God takes us by surprise. Building, hopefully, on the past two sermons and their reminders, I want to tell you this morning that you will not find Christmas by looking in the familiar places. You will not find it where you found it last year. You will not find it where most of the world's noise is focused and pointing. We have enough history now to know God's Christmas patterns. Christmas takes us by surprise. Christmas comes in out-of-the-way places. That means we do not know where to look, but we know where not to look. And we know we have to be alert – waiting and watchful – for the subtle, quiet, deeply loving surprise. When I was a kid, we used to call it “waiting on tiptoe.” I don't think the old body can handle that anymore, but the mind and the heart and the soul still can.

First of all, Mary and Joseph are themselves an out-of-the-way place. Partly because of our Christian heritage, and the democracy it led us into, we like it when our leaders go from log cabin to White House. It is still remarkable. It is still a surprise. We do not expect a great King, or the Prince of the Universe, to be born into a humble carpenter's family. He is even uprooted – a manger behind some inn, in a town where Joseph no longer has friends or relatives to take him in. Is it so familiar that we can no longer hear it? It is an out-of-the-way place. Only some weirdo astrologers with a miracle star to guide them would ever dream of looking in such an unlikely, out-of-the-way place.

But this story is for us too. God has been trying to reach us for generations – from the beginning. God cannot simply walk through the front door and say, “Here I am.” That would break free will. It would turn us into automatons. Besides, if God even hints at directly wanting us, the shields go up seven feet thick and we turn and run – or grovel so low that we cannot hear the message. The story is for you too. *Immanuel*. “God with us.”

As an aside, for a couple of friends: In Isaiah 7:14, the prophecy says, “... *and shall call his name Immanuel.*” But in Matthew 1:21, the angel tells Joseph he is to name the child Jesus. And in Luke 1:31, the angel tells Mary that she shall name the child Jesus. It is one of the few times in history that the angels gave a husband and wife the very same message. Talk about miracles! But if the prophet says His name will be *Immanuel*, why do the angels insist His name shall be Jesus? *Immanuel* means “God with us” (literally, “with us [is] God”). *Jesus* means “Yahweh is salvation.” Why is the prophecy wrong? Just one more biblical mistake? But you do not have to hear it like some rebellious youth looking for contradiction. The names play off each other. God is coming not only to be with us, but to save us. Can’t God up the ante if he wants to, or maybe hope that now we can get a bigger piece of the picture?

Bethlehem is an out-of-the-way place too. Jerusalem is where “it’s happening.” Bethlehem is the city of David, but that is only ironic. Bethlehem is just a village on the other end of the valley where they keep all the sheep that are going to Jerusalem for sacrifice. The name is full of charm and magic for us. But even in the prophecy in Micah 5:2 that names Bethlehem as the village from which a ruler of Israel will come, it is a big surprise. As the prophecy itself admits, Bethlehem is a no-account place.

I am taking too long and you’re already reminded, but Israel itself is an out-of-the-way place. The Roman Empire has conquered the world. Rome is the future. For this tiny little backwater country at the far end of the Empire, what puny glory it ever had is far in the past. The sweep of Hellenism, and the lure of religions far more sophisticated and appealing than its own, will doubtless eclipse what little is left of Israel and Judaism. One more generation and it will be gone. From a human perspective, you could hardly pick a more unlikely place for the Son of God to be born.

So that is the real story. What has that got to do with Christmas today? Well, many say that Christmas today has got nothing to do with the real story. But that depends upon us, does it not? On the other hand, what good is knowing the story if we do not learn from it? Every authentic story carries within it the innate principles that make it what it is. That means Christmas still comes – always comes – in out-of-the-way places. We will not find it at Macy’s. We will not find it at the parties. We will not find it in all the glare and glitter. We will not find it in the church services. By the way, “church” is not a good place to go if you are looking for Christmas; church is a good thing to *be* after you have *found* Christmas. In any case, all of these things may try to celebrate Christmas. They may honor or dishonor it. But they cannot bring it. Only God can bring Christmas.

Christmas comes in out-of-the-way places. Rarely does it come on December 25th, but you cannot be sure, since the real one did not. It comes where we do not expect to find it. God takes us by surprise. All we can do is stay alert, watch and wait – set heart and mind and soul on tiptoe.

Immanuel. God with us. God coming to save us. I know too many stories; you know more than you think you do. I will tell a few, and you must promise to remember to tell some of yours to those you know, before this season ends. These are stories of *Immanuel*. I do not necessarily presume that you will like them.

1.) I had a friend named Pat Pattenson. He was a conscientious, moral man. A good man. An agnostic. I only met him because his youngest son was in my high school youth group. I cannot tell it all, of course, but his middle son committed suicide. It was utterly devastating. There are no words for what the family went through. Some years later, Pat was a stalwart member of the church, a Deacon, one of the men I counted on most. We had not spoken of it for a long time, but one day Pat said to me, “The loss of my son is the worst thing that has ever happened to me. I thought it would make me bitter and angry forever. But I know now that what happened to my son was not God’s will. I would quickly give my life, or anything I have, to bring him back. But his loss brought me to God. And that is the best thing that has ever happened to me in my life.” *Out-of-the-way places.*

2.) Lionel (Lee) Whiston was one of the greatest living saints I have ever known. If you go to one of the prayer retreats I lead, a lot of what you hear will have come from him. When I was a young pastor, Lee led a retreat for clergy. It had a dramatic impact on my ministry. Among other things, he told us the story of his second conversion. At the time, he had been a minister already for about ten years – extremely devoted, working hard to make his parish strong and successful. Then he smiled and said, “The statistics looked pretty good, but it wasn’t much fun – not for any of us.”

One morning in his study, going dutifully through his morning prayer routine, Lee’s thoughts were interrupted by what seemed like a voice in his brain, which said, “What about the peanut brittle?” Used to unruly thoughts trying to interrupt important prayers, he shook it off. But for several days, no matter what he tried, each time he knelt to pray, that insistent voice said, “What about the peanut brittle?”

Finally, in total exasperation and frustration, Lee replied, “All right, damn it, what *about* the peanut brittle?” And the voice said, “You cheat.”

Lee had a custom in his family. He always kept peanut brittle on top of the refrigerator in the kitchen. Anyone in the family could help themselves to the peanut brittle at any time, except there was one rule: You could never eat it alone. You had to convince at least one other member of the family to come eat some peanut brittle with you.

Lee said to the voice, “You can’t be serious! I’m the father. I *buy* the peanut brittle. I work hard, come home late at night. I rarely have a chance to eat any before everybody else has gone to bed.” The voice said, “You cheat.”

After considerable further argument, the voice finally said, “Okay, if you are an exception and everybody understands that the rule does not apply to you, then go home and tell the family what you do.” Right then, Lee knew that he’d had it. There was no way he wanted to tell his wife and children that he had been eating the peanut brittle alone all this time. But the voice insisted. Lee said he never could have made himself own up to it, except he needed his prayers too badly in his work and, of course, the only prayers he could get now went straight to “What about the peanut brittle?”

Screwing up all his courage, he went to the dinner table one evening and told the family his dark secret. He figured that Irma, his wife, would probably forgive him eventually, but he could hardly stand the thought of how his children would react. He had certainly been heavy with the rule when it came to them.

To Lee's astonishment, there was no fire or hatred in the eyes of his family when he made his confession. Rather, after a strange silence, his youngest son told how he was the one who had stolen the pie that everybody had blamed on the next-door neighbor boy. He had hidden it under his bed and eaten it for two days, then thrown away the plate. It had caused an argument with the neighbors, and it seemed so serious to Lee's son that he had been too afraid to ever confess it. Now, with tears in his eyes, he told how ashamed he had been for stealing and lying, and how he thought it meant he could never be good again.

One after another, the stories came out around the table that night. Lee said, "It changed our family's life completely. We started trusting each other, bringing our problems to the table, helping each other with what was really going on in our lives. It changed what we thought prayer was about, and it changed what we thought was important to God. And after it got going in the family, I realized it was changing the church, and the very way I was going about my ministry. All because of peanut brittle." *Out-of-the-way places*. Do not settle for a Christmas where some Jesus comes who will make no difference in your life.

3.) I remember sitting on the floor, down an unused hallway, on the seventh floor of Cabrini Hospital in Seattle – the alcohol ward. I thought my ministry was over. I did not know how I would make a living, or who would take a chance on a known drunk. The only friends I hadn't alienated were down in California, and I realized now that they were drunks also. It was not certain, but I figured that by the time the dust cleared, I would also have lost my family. Who could blame them? So there I sat, with tears in my eyes and joy welling up in my heart – and I knew I had not felt so alive or so thankful in years! And the Spirit, who had never abandoned me through all the hell, was whispering, "Now maybe we can get somewhere again." *Out-of-the-way places*. *Immanuel*.

4.) I was talking to a young couple not long ago, and both were saying amazing things. He was struggling to give me a glimmer of how his life was suddenly so different. It had all happened so quickly, he said. Meaning: He had been in plenty of relationships and had his patterns

all worked out, and it was all going just fine, at least from any ordinary point of view. Then SHE came along and everything was suddenly different. It happened so fast. “I found myself apologizing when I thought I had done something stupid or wrong,” he said. “I’ve never done that before. I realized I couldn’t just walk away from this one if things didn’t please me. It’s like God has set this whole new life in front of me, and I don’t want to miss it.” *God takes us by surprise.* Yahweh is salvation.

5.) Someone discovered the diary of a discouraged Scottish pastor who lived in the late 1700s. The diary made quiet comment about how hard he had labored in his parish but nothing seemed to come of it. Things were so low one year that there was only one boy in the confirmation class – Wee Bobbie Moffat. Yes, well, “Wee Bobbie” turned out to be one of the greatest missionary saints of the nineteenth century. By the way, his daughter married David Livingston.

Shall we go on? Do not settle for a Christmas where some Jesus comes who will make no difference in your life. This is not about ritual or form or stories that dead-ended long ago. This is a Living Lord. He comes to save. But He comes in out-of-the-way places. He appears where we least expect to see Him. Stay alert. Watch and be ready. It is the time of *Immanuel*.