

THE BLUNDERS
AND
THE WONDERS

A Series of
Advent Sermons
from
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COMING AND GOING
(The Blunders and The Wonders)

“Ye do proclaim the Lord’s death until he come again.”
(I Corinthians 11:46)

Does it ever seem to you like I am only one tiny voice in a vast sea of Christian tradition and custom that is saying and teaching something quite different? That is not really true, of course. I have come to none of my own convictions and beliefs unaided. Abraham broke from the traditional understandings of Ur in Babylon, or there never would have been a Judaism. Jesus reworked so much of Judaism, and in such a new light, that it caused the emergence of Christianity. Paul believed and taught differently from the Mother Church in Jerusalem, or Christianity would never have reached the Gentiles. Luther, in more fear and trembling than most people realize, broke from the enormous authority of the Catholic church and the Pope, though Luther was at the time both priest and monk. I come from a long line of “reformers and seekers” who have wanted to understand more clearly and deeply the thing going on between God and us children – us earthlings – we humans who are obviously in so much trouble and confusion in this earthly realm. All of *you* come from this same long line of reformers and seekers. You do remember that, don’t you? Because sometimes it seems like a few of you resent having to think – and even resent it if *I* think. Others, of course, swallow every new notion that comes down the road, with even less thought than the traditionalists among you who hang on tight to what you already knew twenty-five years ago. That makes me appreciate the traditionalists – at least they hang on to *something*.

In any case, I am far from a lone voice. Sometimes around here it feels like I preach and teach and show you wondrous things – and you even give me the impression that you have heard them and that you are convinced. But three days later, I turn around and everything is right back where it was before – the same old blunders hiding all the Wonders, just like they have been doing for years. Instead of moving on to incorporate new understanding and to see new dimensions in the way we do things and in the faith we share together, it reverts back to the same old fear, guilt, and knee-jerk reactions to the seasons and challenges and opportunities that come to us. Or maybe some of you just have a higher tolerance for boredom than I do. But I think it is insulting to portray the Son

of God as a country bumpkin with an IQ under 64 who couldn't put two coherent sentences together to save His life. "Me Jesus. You saved."

I am not trying to be impatient. People grow when they are willing to. But sometimes I cannot help wondering how much longer I get to have with you. If then you remind me (advertently or inadvertently) that you have not heard very much of what I have tried to teach you yet, I just naturally feel like I need to say it more clearly. Some of you are never going to hear me. I know that. It's okay. You are just sitting it out, waiting for another. Hopefully God will send somebody into your life you can hear. But the rest of you seem to be trying. Sometimes you are very trying. So I will go on trying too.

The theme of the Advent sermons this year is "The Blunders and The Wonders." Mostly what I tell you has been taught in seminaries across the land since before I was born. I will be telling you things I thought I already taught you, though some of you keep talking and acting like you have never heard any of it ever before. I am no "liberal scholar" – liberal scholars teach people how to doubt. Many of them believe very little themselves. Many of them do not have much quality or consistent experience in a real church – a true faith family. Christians doubt in order to believe more strongly – in order to sift out the dust and debris that keep contact with the Holy Spirit vague and diluted. I am not a liberal scholar; I am a minister. I only talk about the blunders so we can clear them out of the way and get to the Wonders. I suppose you cannot help but worry, at times – if you are listening – that I will take away things you have tried to believe and then leave you with nothing. Does the fact that it is really hard to believe most of the blunders in the first place make you desperate to hang on to them even tighter? Is that it? You think that if they go, surely nothing will be left. On top of that, many of us have been conditioned not to question our beliefs, and have even been threatened with hellfire if we did. Who wants to *think*, if it brings on God's anger and the church's rejection? So then it's my job to tell you what they told me to tell you, and it's your job to believe it without asking any questions or causing any trouble. Is that life in the Christian church? I hate to tell you how often it is.

So a high percentage of religious people have been conditioned not to challenge their beliefs – by people who are afraid it will all blow away unless they make it "against the rules" to think or doubt or question. And I keep asking you: "Do you really think the Omniscient, Omnipotent, Almighty God is afraid of your tiny little questions? If so, you need to

get a new God! What good is a God who is even more immature and threatened than you are? Life is hard. If you cannot find a God you really trust, you are much better off without one. And by the way, faith is not about what you believe – it is about who you trust. (But that’s a different sermon.)

Maybe you think it’s a modern world, but most of the children being raised in Christian churches today all over the world will never be taught the truth. They will be raised to accept the traditional explanations, with incentives of fear and rejection surrounding the precepts in order to prevent them from questioning. And for that reason, even if they stay connected to the church, a high percentage of them will end up taking the teachings and stories with a grain of salt, pretending to believe them on the outside, while burying them in some inner dungeon called “faith” on the inside, though it is really only superstition. And it will all be relegated to a later time – an afterlife – that has little to do with life in the real world, here and now. All over the world, Christians are called hypocrites. It comes from trying to hold a whole lot of beliefs and opinions that have nothing to do with what we really think or how we live or behave or conduct our lives. If you believe something that makes no difference to how you live, what difference does it make? I know ... I just lost some of you.

In any case, Christianity is being taught that way. You are supposed to believe a whole lot of things which you do not understand and which have no relevance to how you live, and if you successfully suspend doubts and questions and just “BELIEVE IT” (whatever that means), somehow that will get you into Heaven. So most Christians think poverty is holy, yet they try to get rich. They believe virginity and chastity are holy, yet they prefer to get laid and, God forbid, even married. They believe Christ is coming soon, yet they are laying up treasures on earth as fast as they can – for their own retirement, for their children, for their grandchildren. They believe we should all obey the Ten Commandments, yet cannot name more than two or three of them. Thank God most of you are not stupid enough to pay any attention to what you believe. Mark Twain said, “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.” For a high percentage of the Christian world, that is uncomfortably accurate. And the only way to keep it from becoming obvious is to smear it all over with hellfire. The Loving God is gonna getcha! And they think the *Harry Potter* books are evil? Teach all the children to be afraid of a really fun story – in the name of the Loving Savior – but the *Left Behind* books are okay? And you think my mother should have washed *my* mouth out with soap?

The problem is not that there is no Christmas. Jesus really came. Incarnation – God with us. The problem is that our present-day celebrations obscure and hide the LIGHT: reduce it to glitter and magic that entertain but do not call us to give our lives to a new purpose and a new Kingdom that require all from us, and all of our living. If we do not repent of our mistakes, the mistakes take over our lives. So the theme this Advent is “The Blunders and The Wonders.” When I speak of the blunders, some of you will feel like I am taking Christmas away. But the blunders hide and obscure the Wonders, and if you hang in for the full message, you will get more Christmas than you ever have before.

It is important to know and remember that the blunders of Christendom all developed in understandable ways. Nobody was trying to make mistakes on purpose. Nobody was trying to mislead us or do damage on purpose. But the blunders obscure the Wonder of the Incarnation and put shields up between us and our Lord. Why we hang on to the blunders generation after generation may not be quite as innocent. The Light is awfully bright, and the urge to put distance between ourselves and Christ is sometimes nearly overwhelming. Nevertheless, the blunders filter the Light and cut the power and impact of the Wonder of Christmas, sometimes beyond recognition. So I want to talk about the blunders and the Wonders this Advent. I will have little time for Rudolph or wise men or twinkle, twinkle little star. And some of you may decide to go someplace where they don't know, and don't want to know, any better. But that is what's wonderful about the Reformation: we all have lots of choices.

So here we go. Some of you have wondered what it would be like to have been a Jewish Christian in that first generation after the death and resurrection of Jesus. All your life you would have been raised to think and believe one way – in circumcision, dietary laws, and keeping the Sabbath – and to believe that if you and all your fellow Jews could get it right and keep it right, then God would come save you and set everything right. Now suddenly you have this incredible but very scary new faith: Jesus is the true Messiah, though He is doing it all in ways nobody had ever imagined. And you are going to be saved because God loves you, not because you get it all right or do everything correctly. And though you couldn't believe it at first, after the death and resurrection you began to realize that Jesus has more authority than even Moses – which is inconceivable, but nevertheless. So that is what you are believing more and more each day, especially as you encounter the Holy Spirit of the Living Christ as you continue on in this new faith.

At first you try to keep it all together – the old and the new – but as Jesus warned: “You cannot put new wine into old wine skins.” So eventually you have to decide whether to stay Jewish or go Christian. Can you imagine the heartache, the travail, the chaos in families as some decided one way, and some another? And what if you were wrong? What if you trusted the authority of Jesus to save you, and Moses was right after all – and God will reject you for breaking the laws you have believed in all your life? After all, you have been told and taught to obey them, and warned about what will happen if you do not. Very, very scary!

Some of you are already able to identify with what it must have been like for the early Jewish Christians to “leave” their Jewish ways to follow Jesus. It is hard to break from the familiar and traditional, but Jesus has often required it, one way or another. He requires it still. Some of you caught on years ago that I am inviting you to be at odds with most of the traditional Christian world. They have it wrong. They are obscuring the real Message. A huge number of people in our world today think there are only two choices: accept the traditional Christian frameworks, or leave the church and Christendom. Thousands leave, and not because they are all evil or stupid (at least no more so than the rest of us). They leave because they cannot swallow Christianity as it is being presented, and they do not know there is an alternative. Yet there is, and I tell you about it all the time. Only, most of you let me tell you, but then you just let it end there.

I cannot carry this Message all by myself – never could. Now I am getting old and tired. So more and more, I am asking: Are you going to help carry the Message, or are you going to just let it melt back into the sand so nobody will know there is a different Christendom – a different kind of church – than the kind they see and hear about all around them? “But,” you say, “if I speak up, I might get into arguments. People might reject or dislike me.” No kidding, Sherlock! Peter, Paul, Origen, Augustine, Luther, John Cotton – and yes, of course, Jesus – would be so incredibly upset to hear that! And they would pat you on the head and say, “Oh, please forgive me. I’m so sorry I mentioned it. I would never dream of asking you to get into any trouble.”

Clearly, quietly, but insistently, I need to tell you that the Second Coming (as most people speak of it) is a blunder: a mistake, a wrongness, an untruth. I bring this up again today, the First Sunday of Advent, because Christmas is about “The Coming.” We don’t have to be coy, or pretend we don’t know the rest of the story, or act like we’ve never heard

it before. Christmas is The Coming. Incarnation: God comes in human flesh to be with us ... to communicate with us ... to encounter us ... to save us. There is mystery all around that – how much God can be contained in human form? Though we are permitted, even encouraged, to doubt and ask questions, our minds are finite and too small to understand all wisdom and truth. But we get part of it – more than we can handle – and plenty to keep us grateful and responsive for the rest of our lives here. Whatever the titles and however you describe your Christology, this Incredible Messenger/Messiah lived among us and taught, healed, and caused mayhem in a beautiful/terrible Way beyond anything we had ever seen before. And He died at our hands, and rose again, and now guides, comforts, and encourages any of us who will allow it and be open to it. Christmas is about *that*. Trying to reduce it down to the birth of a baby we know nothing about is to avoid it – to shield from it. A lot of Christmas in our culture is trying to celebrate the Message without having anything to do with the Message or the Messenger. If one thing is obvious and certain about Jesus, it is that nobody gets close to Him without either hating Him or loving Him – without either rejecting Him or having their lives changed by Him. And I don't mean nicked – I mean transformed.

Christmas, at its core, is THE COMING. *That* is the Wonder: His coming to be with us. What possible blunder could we make to obscure The Coming? Is there anything in the world we could do, say, or believe that would negate The Coming – that would distance us from it, obscure it, weaken it, allow us to go back to our old ways as if this Wonder had never happened?

Yes, there is one thing that could bury it all under rubbish so thick it would be as if it never happened. And it is called “The Second Coming.” Christmas is The Coming, but never mind any of that; now we are waiting for Him to COME AGAIN. Yes, He came, but we rejected Him – killed Him; it didn't take; nothing significant happened. So now we are waiting for Him to come again – to do it right; to do it *our way*; to smash and destroy everybody who doesn't “accept and believe in Him.” Never mind the Resurrection. Never mind the gift of the Holy Spirit. Never mind living the LIFE here and now. Never mind all the endless dimensions and relationships all around us that are a training ground for all that is to come. Wait for a “Second Coming” – wait for Heaven; hope for the Rapture. What a travesty! When did Jesus ever promise His disciples that He would take them out of the challenge – that He would help us

to escape from the ordeal of FOLLOWING HIM? What scriptural and theological trash!

The refusal to let go of the Second Coming is a refusal to let Jesus be the Messiah He is instead of the Messiah we expected. John's Gospel had already figured this out. So had much of the rest of Christendom by the end of the first century. But now, in our own time, vast segments of Christendom spend enormous time and energy on the blunder of the Second Coming, when they should be spending it on the Wonder of the presence of the Holy Spirit – in their prayers; in all they are facing and doing; in all they are trying to accomplish on a daily basis in the here and now, both individually and together with other Christians.

Not that Heaven is a blunder. Heavens no! Heaven awaits us, far greater and bigger and full of more wonder than any of us know. Only, Jesus is not coming here again in any way He has not already come. *We are going there!* And not in some far future “Day of Judgment” that will take place on some picayune little reworked earth. The moment you die here, you are going there: *“This day you will be with me in paradise.”* (Luke 23:43) *“In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”* (John 14:2-3) But not in some horrid “Last Days” physical scenario. In “Spirit calling unto spirit,” one-on-one, the moment you are out of here. Because He really loves you, He will “come again” – pick you up from wherever you are, at whatever level of development, and take you from there. What WONDER is His love ... and how we love to obscure it, make it scary, put it in some far-off future so we can go on doing things our own way in the present.

Waiting and waiting and waiting for Messiah to come, and then waiting for Him to come again – while the Messiah sits closer than the air we breathe, waiting on us to be willing to open our lives to Him, to spend time with Him, to plan and dream and think and act in partnership with Him. We wait for Him – He waits for us. Guess who is happy about this blunder? Satan! (And Tim LeHaye and Jerry Jenkins, who have made millions off of it.)

So where did this blunder come from? No time for full details, but essentially it was a mindset already in place before Jesus came to us. It is called “Jewish apocalyptic thinking.” Amidst the great discouragement from being defeated, enslaved, and controlled over and over again

(by Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, the Greeks, and the Romans), the Jewish people wondered more and more what had become of the plans and promises of God. Was there really a God? Were they really the Chosen People in special Covenant with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? The prophets kept telling them that all the trouble was because they did not keep the Covenant. But that explanation started wearing thin after a thousand years or so of mayhem. Those trying to keep faithful started hoping and dreaming more and more of a New Age to come, and of a special LEADER – a descendant of David, a Messiah (an anointed one, to fulfill the promise of a king in David’s line) – who would come and right all the wrongs, set everything right, and fulfill the promises of the destiny and heritage of the Jewish people. Surely God would not abandon them forever. This New Age – the Great DAY OF THE LORD, the Apocalypse – would justify all the years of discouragement and sorrow and dying and defeat.

This was the mindset of much of the faithful Judaism that Jesus was born into. And as happens, even to great leaders, Jesus was unable to break through all the prejudices, opinions, and expectations of His time. The followers made incredible changes, but they still heard some things through their old ways of thinking. They especially confused Jesus’ sayings about the coming destruction of Jerusalem with their own hopes for the Apocalypse. And much of Jesus’ vast picture of the glory and endless dimensions of the heavenly Kingdom, we reduce to the tiny expectations of a flat-earth cosmology, even today. I still get asked, on occasion, if cremation is unchristian. God won’t be able to manage resurrecting you if your soulless body is reduced to ashes and scattered? What a pathetic and helpless little god we sometimes try to worship.

We are beginning Advent with communion. What is the connection between Christmas and communion? Both are The Coming. Jesus comes to us. And the relationship we have with the Holy Spirit is what we celebrate in communion. Communion reminds us of the *real* Second Coming – God’s presence with us on a daily basis. That is the *real* WONDER. To say it too quickly and lightly: Jesus lived, taught, healed, called His followers, challenged the religious institutions of His time, and then died – all to reveal the true nature and purposes and promises of God toward us. And one of His biggest promises was that He would come again. There is no getting around it. That is what it was all leading up to. *He would come again!* He was with us so short a time and we need Him so much! But it would be okay – He would come again.

Can you not feel the blunder? Can you not hear your own soul screaming at the tragedy and pathos of the blunder? *He DID come again!* He has been here ever since. Only, He did not abandon us for two thousand years, as most of Christendom teaches. Humans are not that good with abandonment and rejection issues. Is that your notion of a loving God? Does that sound like the loving *Christos* you trust and worship? “Hang in – I’ll be back in two thousand years or so.” No wonder you don’t tithe!

Christianity is missing something big – HUGE! We are supposed to be mobilized, on the move, in the corps – working for the Kingdom all these years – not sitting around, doing our own thing in our own way, waiting for Kingdom Come. He did not abandon us for two thousand years. He left us for thirty-eight hours! Then fifty days later, Pentecost – to make it clear that we are also to be His church and not just isolated individuals. But He came back, as promised – Paraclete, Holy Spirit – tracking each of us wherever we go, through everything that befalls us. Talk about WONDER ... and love ... and true hope ... and peace beyond understanding. Please, if you have not already traded the pathetic little Christmas our world celebrates for the real one, *now* might be a good time.

OIL AND WATER
(The Blunders and The Wonders)

I like miracles. We all like miracles. They mean we don't have to be responsible, effective, or accountable. And since it is impossible in this broken world to be responsible enough, effective enough, or accountable enough to make a perfect world, miracles are truly appealing. In fact, most people, given the chance to choose between a miraculous explanation and a logical explanation of a biblical story, prefer the miraculous explanation, even if the logical explanation is also astounding, and far more meaningful. (Feeding five thousand; raising a dead child; colt for Palm Sunday; and on and on.)

In study groups, people at first jump to the conclusion that either I don't like miracles or I doubt the power of God. I encounter miracles every day (things I cannot explain and do not understand). It's a miracle to me that some of you do not take the Christian Faith more to heart, and make the Christian church a higher priority in your life. That seems crazy and illogical to me, like stopping our prayers when they have blessed us so much. I do not understand it. It's a miracle.

And God is always doing wondrous things all around and within us. I love that as much as any of you do, because it is so much bigger than anything we can do by ourselves. I am so glad it doesn't all depend upon us. But God went to considerable thought and trouble to create this place the way he did. I suspect that God will not break the precepts and principles that this creation is built on – returning us all to chaos and anarchy, to whim and fancy, to meaninglessness – by actually running things miraculously. So miracles, I suspect, are when natural law is suddenly revealed to have potential we did not know was possible. I remind you that if any of the twelve apostles could have seen you turn on a light switch, drive a car, or get on a plane from here to Denver, they would have been more awestruck than by anything they saw Jesus do. And as a matter of fact, Jesus said that would happen: “*Greater things than these will you do ...*” (John 14:12)

Most of the world is happy to celebrate a miraculous Christmas because most of the world does not intend to do very much about it anyway. After all, what obligations can magic place on you? Magic wands

don't ask you to learn or grow into anything; they don't ask for commitment or sacrifice or devotion. Just poof, and Cinderella is a princess. Then poof again, and you are not. So lots of folk love Christmas because it is only for a few days each year, and then back to the usual. But I cannot get away with that. Jesus is Lord and Christ to me, and never goes poof. That puts demands on my life that never go away. And I would be bereft if they did.

So sometimes I smile at the magic show. The lights are pretty. I love the exchange of gifts, no matter how crass some people make it sound. And the music is sometimes incredible, even when it speaks of things I don't actually believe. I love watching *Bambi* and *Dumbo* too, though I don't think they are factual stories.

But I think serious Christians should know the difference between the real Christmas and the magic show. However fun the magic show, it is a far deeper joy to get back to the real thing. If most of Christendom will never do this, I cannot help that. And some of you say to me, "Christmas is my favorite time of year. Why can't you just leave it alone? Why must you always ruin it?" And I reply, "But it has already *been* ruined. And Christmas is the offer of such light and truth and wonder that I cannot keep quiet when I see it being reduced to some little magic show for temporary amusement or entertainment."

At the core of the magic show is the Virgin Birth. Perhaps I could ignore the Virgin Birth and just work around it, as so many others do and have done for generations. But I am too concerned about what the Virgin Birth obscures, hides, and even denies. The Virgin Birth is a very big blunder in Christendom, and it steps in front of, and takes center stage away from, the incredible Wonder of the Incarnation – a much deeper and truer Christmas.

The Virgin Birth is only the focal point of this blunder. It is surrounded with shepherds, wise men, King Herod killing babies, angel choirs, and all manner of beasts standing around a manger in a stable. And all of it is built deeply into our psyches with art and music and carols and crèches and children participating in pageants in every little church all over the land. So you don't have to worry or be afraid that anything I say here will make a dent in this vast institutionalized Christmas celebration. Only, I talk to you as straight as I can because I think that is what my Lord requires me to do. And I think Jesus is not at all happy with Christmas. Partly that's because I have never known

anybody who was converted by Christmas – who got the Message of the Christian Life and Way from Christmas. Christmas does not ask anything of us, or invite us into a New WAY of Life, or speak to us of the Kingdom. The ingredients are there: John the Baptist crying “repent”; the gifts of the Magi; adoration all around. But it never seems to “take,” because the focus is on Mary and miracles. Yet Mary does not save, nor do miracles. Jesus saves. And in the wilderness temptations, why else would Jesus have rejected miracles as a foundation of His ministry? *“There can be no other foundation than the one already laid: I mean Jesus Christ himself.”* (I Corinthians 3:11)

I think if we wanted a true celebration of the real Christmas, we would all be down at the ocean getting baptized every year. The Holy Spirit came to Jesus in His own conversion and baptism. If we turn our lives over to Him and then follow Him into baptism, we also receive the Holy Spirit – and hear God calling us beloved sons and daughters too, before sending us into *our* ministries. That is the beginning of Christendom. Not a physical birth – a spiritual birth. *“Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew [not born of a virgin – born anew], he cannot see the kingdom of God.’”* (John 3:3) Clearly Jesus did not think Himself important as virgin-born. He never ever mentioned it (or had ever heard of it). But He knew Himself Spirit-born, and that is the key to everything He cared about.

So even if Jesus had been born of a virgin, I would be very sad that we decided to focus on that instead of on the baptism. Oil and water do not mix. Well, virgin oil and the water of baptism do not mix either. *“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”* (John 3:6) So whether it is virgin birth or natural birth, it is not the physical birth that matters. And I’m sorry, but virginity does *not* equal Holy Spirit.

So the Virgin Birth is a huge blunder that is hiding the true Wonder. And the true Wonder, as always in Christendom, is God revealing himself in Jesus Christ: God with us; God establishing ongoing, personal relationship with us; the Holy Spirit of Jesus guiding and comforting and inspiring us all the way, every day. The Virgin Birth puts huge distance between us and Jesus. The whole meaning of the Incarnation is compromised. None of us were born of virgins; that is not the way God created us. Jesus came to be with us – as one of us – but we couldn’t stand it and wouldn’t have it, so we keep trumping up all these stories

and ways to make sure everybody knows how special He was when He walked among us. Well, He *was* special, whatever we think or conclude about it. But if God wanted to keep special distance from us in physical ways, why did he come down to earth in the first place? Jesus was one of us – fully human (as the old creed says). That is why He has so much authority to lead us. And that is what grants Him the right to tell us we are special too – true children of God. Virgin Birth obscures and minimizes this, and that is not okay!

It puts too much distance between you and Jesus, and He came to take that distance away. It also inadvertently puts great emphasis on virginity itself, as if sexuality were somehow wrong or bad. The way we *use* sexuality is often wrong or bad, like everything else in this world. But you will never convince me that it is somehow holier to have never “done it” than to participate in the wonder and creation of life as God has designed it. Of course, you will tell me that Mary is both virgin *and* mother. But I will reply that *you* have no such option, and that we have a long history of convents and monasteries to prove that the Virgin Birth has caused a huge negation of sexuality and motherhood, fatherhood, and family life. Oil and water do not mix. And why do I keep running into Catholics (and others) who insist that Jesus had no natural brothers or sisters, even though the Scriptures clearly state that He did? (Matthew 12:46; 13:55; Mark 3:31; Luke 8:19; John 7:3-5) Why is it so offensive to so many people to think that Mary might have “done it”? The Cult of the Virgin is huge, and it obscures many things. Most importantly, it obscures the Incarnation. The blunders hide the Wonders! We keep trying to pretend that we don’t have to correct our mistakes, but they keep us from fullness of Life.

I also have another concern. What do you think is going to happen to Christians across the world when irrefutable evidence turns up that the Virgin Birth story was tacked on years later and is in no way historical or factual? The day will surely come. The evidence is already irrefutable, but never mind that for a minute. Do you trust Christians to be honest and always welcome truth? You do know how the church greeted the news that the earth was not flat but was spinning in space? You remember Galileo (1633)? You have heard of the Scopes Trial (1925)? You are confident, therefore, that if the Pope had information in the Vatican archives that the Virgin Birth was false, he would of course inform the world? What are you going to do with all the frescoes and all the stained glass? And that’s only the tip of the iceberg.

But what will happen to the ordinary Christian on the day when it comes to light that the birth narratives around Jesus are not true? Will you be there to tell them that nothing of importance ever rested on the Virgin Birth in the first place? That in fact, it was a blunder distracting us from far greater light and truth? Will you be ready to remind them that no early Christian ever believed in Jesus because of the Virgin Birth, but rather because of the Death and Resurrection and Pentecost? I wonder if anybody will have trouble believing for a while, having been misled and lied to by silence for so long. Many Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Methodist scholars, as well as biblical scholars from nearly every walk of life, know everything that I teach you about the Virgin Birth. They write about it, speak of it, and acknowledge it in many circles, but they keep quiet about it in the church. That is going to turn out to be no favor to the church.

So where did this blunder come from? Nothing very strange. No intended chicanery. Jewish culture in the first century put no emphasis on birth days, only on birth lines – genealogy. But then Christendom went into the Greek and Roman world, where they put great emphasis on birth days and assumed that any important person had a propitious birth. (Look up the birth stories they told of Alexander the Great and Augustus Caesar.) So people in the Greco-Roman world wanted to know: “What happened at Jesus’ birth? If He was the Son of God, it must have been an amazing birth.” But nobody knew. There was no information. Sometimes it is hard to admit that we have no information. So they went looking for some. Ultimately they were left with only one source to look in: Old Testament prophecy. Independently, what we call the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two chapters of Luke try to piece together – from Old Testament prophecy – what must have happened. But prophecy is far from an exact science.

There are a few given assumptions about the Messiah: He must be in David’s line. Strangely neglecting Isaiah 9:1-6, He should be born in the City of David – Bethlehem. And there must be something startling – signs and portents, as they say – to verify the importance of such an important birth. The Matthew and Luke accounts agree on only two things. One, He was born in Bethlehem. And two, they both locked on to one big and miraculous sign: He was born of a virgin. They both found this in Isaiah 7:14: “*Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.*” But it was a blunder – a mistranslation! The Greek Septuagint, translated from Hebrew, rendered the Hebrew word

for “young woman” into the Greek word for “virgin.” Even the most conservative scholar today will admit that this mistake did in fact occur. It is impossible to deny. No modern translation claims that Isaiah 7:14 should read “virgin.” Whether Isaiah 7:14 has anything to do with Jesus in the first place is another subject, and we don’t have time for it this morning. In any case, at some time in the first or second century, this very impressive “sign” was claimed to herald Jesus’ birth. But its source was a mistake in translation. Yet to this day, few are willing to deal with this mistake, or what grew from it. Maybe Jesus was born of a virgin anyway, they mutter – even though the source of the fable is wrong. So the church hangs on to the blunder. (For the record, we still have a Flat-Earth Society too, and I know a fellow who has spent his entire adult life trying to prove that the stars are reflections of light from our own solar system, bouncing back to us off the “shell” at the edge of our solar system. He came to this church three or four times, but I ended up telling him there were a lot of churches around here that would appreciate his kind of thinking a lot more than we do.)

Of course, the plot thickens. To get Jesus born in David’s line, we trace His genealogy from His father Joseph back to David – then turn right around and say Joseph was not His father. The genealogy shows the earlier tradition. Neither Matthew nor Luke knew what they were talking about, or at least if one did, the other certainly did not. Luke has shepherds, angel choirs, and no room in the inn, and we get Jesus born in Bethlehem because of a census. That’s because it was hard to explain why He was called a Nazarene, since that means He was born in Nazareth. Matthew has magi, a unique star so that Jesus will not have an astrology chart like any normal mortal, and Herod killing babies like Pharaoh did at the time of Moses (though there is no record of Herod doing this).

More troubling: Luke says the birth took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria. It is known that Quirinius was governor of Syria from A.D. 6-9, that Judea was incorporated at that time, and that a census was taken which caused the rebellion of Judas (Acts 5:37). Matthew says Herod was King, and that he tried to kill all the babies and had conversations with the magi. This Herod ruled from 40 B.C. to 4 B.C., when he died. So Jesus was born both in 4 B.C. and in 6 A.D. That is even tougher to pull off than being born of a virgin. The Jesus in Matthew was ten years old when the Jesus in Luke was being born. I have no doubt that God could have had Jesus born of a virgin if he wanted to, though I cannot imagine why he would want to, seeing as the whole point was to

come like one of us. But even God, no matter how omnipotent, is going to have trouble with the miracle of having Jesus born twice, ten years apart.

It gets clearer and clearer that probing Old Testament prophecy is not an accurate way to piece together factual history. Nobody knows anything about Jesus' birth; we never did and we still do not. If you are not afraid to look at the evidence – internal evidence from Scripture itself – you must end up admitting that the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two chapters of Luke are nonhistorical, and are not to be taken as anything other than a later and symbolic adoration of the birth. Why do we say “later”? Because Mark, the writer of the earliest Gospel (around 60-65 A.D.), makes no mention of the Virgin Birth. Do you really think he knew about it yet failed to mention it? I read to you two passages where Paul makes it very clear that he had never heard of the Virgin Birth, and in fact where he claims that Jesus was born naturally and that Joseph was the father. Paul is writing from about twelve to thirty years after Jesus' death, but he had never heard of the Virgin Birth? Or he didn't think it was worth mentioning, and even inadvertently denies it? Even if you could explain away one of these things, can you explain away all of them?

There are other indications of the birth narratives being superimposed on an earlier tradition that had never heard of the Virgin Birth. Fundamentalists, of course, will turn triple cartwheels trying to duck, dodge, and explain away all evidence that the Bible reveals such human flaws and real-life errors. The flaws are partly why I love the Bible – an honest record from those who came before us. But to many, for reasons I cannot fathom, errors in the record are seen as a threat to faith itself. It is better, I think, to put faith in God and in the LIVING Word – Son and Holy Spirit. But to each his own.

Christmas is about Jesus, not about shepherds or wise men or a star or Herod killing babies. Our best assumption would be that Jesus was born and grew up in Nazareth, in a devout Jewish family, and that Joseph and Mary were a normal, married Jewish couple. Jesus had five younger brothers and several sisters. Joseph was a carpenter, and he possibly died young, leaving Jesus to help Mary raise the family. Those are my best guesses. But we really know nothing about Jesus' life until He was about thirty years of age: when He was drawn to the reform movement of John the Baptist, was baptized, and had a profound spiritual

awakening – an awakening that has had profound impact on the world ever since. And we are all invited to follow Him into this baptism, and into a New WAY of Life. That is the WONDER, and it is far greater than the blunder.

Oil and water do not mix. Dump the virgin and follow Jesus into baptism – into your own relationship with God via His Holy Spirit. The blunder may look appealing on the surface, but it is empty and meaningless in comparison to the WONDER of Jesus' coming, and His continuing presence with us.

The point is: We are sinners estranged from God. (That is what “sin” means.) And we try to cover it up for as long as we can, in any way we can. So we rewrite history, even our own personal history. It doesn't matter how angry, lonely, tired, unhappy, destructive, negative, or depressed we become, we keep trying to cover it up. Don't take my word for it – look around; watch the news. We keep trying to pretend we are okay – “That's our story and we're sticking to it.”

Then Christ comes – He comes into our world – not knowing at first how huge His own identity and destiny are. And He comes still today – if we can tear aside all the veils that try to honor Him, even as they obscure Him. If you want to love Jesus – truly, deeply, and personally – concentrate on what kind of man He was, not on what kind of God others say you are supposed to worship. If that sounds strange to you, it is also the very essence of Incarnation.

Nevertheless, Christmas is never about our having a change of heart all on our own. We still stick to our story of being okay for as long as we can. Christmas is about God being unwilling to leave the great distance between us – about God not wanting us so unhappy and alone, and feeling abandoned and estranged and hopeless. So to reach us, God came down as one of us: Incarnation. But God did not do it from fancy or flashy. That was the whole point. He “invaded” one of us who was willing – as he is willing to “invade” any of *us* who are willing. That does not mean we are all equal or the same; quite the opposite. We are all unique, and there will never be another Jesus. Nor can we imagine opening to the Spirit as much as He did. Yet He invites us. And He comes as one of us so we will not be too frightened to listen ... or to follow.

Even then, the shields are so thick and the denial so locked in that it took a Cross to break through – to reveal the depth and extent of our rejection and alienation, and of our determination to be independent from our Creator. But it also revealed the extent of our Creator’s love and compassion and forgiveness. So it is always a close race between his love and our pride. Nevertheless, before and since, we have been busy piling up junk to put between ourselves and God. Blunder obscures Wonder. But it feels safer – better to worship and adore from afar, than to throw caution to the wind and GO WITH HIM.

Virgin oil and the water of baptism do not mix. You are more than you can possibly know; you are loved more than you can possibly believe. Jesus comes to tell and show and take you into the Way – into an eternal Life so full of Wonder and excitement and discovery and meaning that no words can begin to describe it. Only following Him can reveal it. The Virgin may comfort you where you are – pat you on the head, pray for you, make you feel better for a while. Jesus comes that you might have LIFE, and have it abundantly. That calls us out, challenges us, scares the bejesus out of us. But once tasted, who would trade it for anything else on earth?

THE WALKING WORD
(The Blunders and The Wonders)

I have suggested that the Second Coming and the Virgin Birth are great blunders that hide and obscure the True Wonders of the Christian Way. Well, perhaps it sounded like more than a suggestion; I hope so. In any case, lots of people get free from these blunders by simply paying no attention to the Bible in general, or Jesus in particular. If you detect a note of scorn in my voice, you put it there – I did not. I understand the sentiment: “Forget the theology and the endless biblical nit-picking, and let’s try to go do some real good for somebody. If there is a real Jesus, He would probably appreciate that more anyway.” Many people with such opinions are camped out in the church – the liberal church – paying attention to other things that seem more relevant than Jesus or the Bible: gay rights, saving the trees, women’s liberation, the world’s need for food and medicine and justice.

I do not believe that the outer problems of our world can be fixed, because I believe that something is wrong on the inside. We should still do what we can, when and where we can – *under guidance from the Holy Spirit*, who is smarter than we are and who sees further than we do. But even if we could fix all the outer problems, what about the inside? Christianity is always primarily an inside job. At least that is my conviction. I swear allegiance to a King who does not officially rule here. All my hope is in a Kingdom not of this world. Nothing here is what it seems to be; there is a spiritual dimension behind everything I see here – including all of you. And our experiences here are only an introduction to the true story that is unfolding. So both now and for the Life to come, I have to get my own heart right or I do more harm than good, no matter how much I want and try to help or be good. One shouldn’t say such things in public, but: Without Jesus, I don’t have a prayer of ever getting my heart right, never mind my soul. If you don’t have that same problem, I have no idea what you are doing here – I mean, in a Christian church: a fellowship of sinners.

In any case, many of you got free from a lot of the blunders for a while by simply ignoring them. But the blunders hide incredible Wonders, so if you simply ignore the blunders, guess what? (There used to be a phrase about throwing the baby out with the bathwater.) Then you came here – and started reading the Bible again (or maybe for the first time),

and started thinking about Jesus and learning to pray again. And guess what? There were the blunders, all lined up and waiting for you. Either from the religion of your childhood, or from the influence of fundamentalist Christianity all around you, or from the natural tendency of humans to be literalists and simplex (childish) with any new or unfamiliar information – there were the blunders, waiting for you. We have to either deal with them or leave the Christian Way, or they suck us right back in.

Long since, most of you have gone far beyond just listening to me. And you are deeply engaged in tracking your own identity and destiny in the presence of Christ. And I am incredibly grateful for you, and for all who follow the WAY, however imperfect we all feel about how well we are doing it. That is the true fellowship of the church, and this building and the organization that maintains it are just a “front” for what Jesus is really doing here with us, and in us.

But you still have to deal with the blunders, one way or another. Because I would so hate to be stuck with them myself, I want you to be free of them too. However, we still carry the Congregational heritage in this church. You do not have to agree with anything I say. If you want to keep the blunders, that is your privilege. I do not have to live with them, and I do not. I have not for years. The Second Coming and the Virgin Birth are not “friends” of the Christian Way. They obscure rather than reveal it. So I have told you in what manner they do damage, and where the mistakes came from in the first place. If you want to go on carrying the blunders, that helps to load up and keep their weight on others also. But as a friend of mine used to say: “Most people don’t like new wine. They insist that the old wine is better.” That is life in a broken world. I don’t hate you for it; it only makes me sad.

Today I want to talk about the worship and deification of the Bible itself – a third huge blunder that hides incredible Wonder. Oh my! That puts me in the very awkward position of warning you about the Bible as a blunder, when most of the time I am telling you to read it, study it, love it, and appreciate it *more*. So if you *want* to misunderstand me, today will be an easy day for that.

There is nothing which cannot be turned into an idol – except God. Your spouse, your children, the concept of “love,” money, sex, security ... anything can become an idol – except God. Only God deserves the place of God. If you cannot imagine God disagreeing with your spouse, guess what? Your spouse has become your god. If you cannot imagine God

disagreeing with your boss, guess what? If you cannot imagine God disagreeing with the Bible, guess what!?

The fact remains that in our time, at least in many circles, the Bible is being equated with God – treated as if the words on its pages were written by God and have authority equal to God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit. Not only is this idolatry, which would certainly be reason enough for alarm, but this is a great blunder that hides, obscures, and frequently even negates the very essence of the Christian Message. To caricature: “You have to believe what the Bible says, and the way I say it says it, or you are not a Christian and you are going to go to Hell.” Then one or two verses are quoted as if that settles everything – the secret elixir of life – and no Christian has a right to think or question or hold an opinion in the face of biblical authority.

A couple of summers back, one of our laywomen was preaching one Sunday morning. A visitor was alarmed, stood up in the middle of the service, and quoted First Corinthians 14:34-35: “*Women should keep silence in the church – it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.*” How could we so blatantly disobey the Bible, this visitor wanted to know. Presumably, he was a sincere Christian who wanted to be faithful. He read the passage straight – in English – and there it was, in black and white. Our laywoman preacher should sit down and be quiet. There could be no “ifs,” “ands” or arguments. The Book should rule our lives. End of discussion.

Now, we know from other passages that Paul had great regard and respect for women in the churches – that they were the leaders of some of his congregations; that they taught, preached, and were deacons; that sometimes the church met in their homes. Lydia couldn’t speak in her own home?! We also know that if this man would study his Bible a little more thoughtfully and not just conclude that God wrote it in English – “in black and white” – he would have discovered that Paul was concerned with orderliness in the worship services. Paul thought that women should not be doing a lot of chit-chatting while the service was going on. It was not about women never preaching; it was saying that *whoever* was preaching, the women should not use the worship service as a time to catch up on neighborhood gossip. (Rabbi Dresner said he wished that passage was in the Old Testament.) Why didn’t Paul think the men had the same problem? Well, I will leave that to your imagination. Paul did, however, say the very same thing to the people who spoke in tongues. Yet nobody concludes that people who speak in tongues should never be allowed to speak or preach in the church. Why is that?

So in this case – no matter how much we might wish to agree with what Paul *never said or meant* in the first place – the text and the context will not support it. But my question to you is this: What if it had turned out that Paul really was the misogynist he is so often accused of being? Should we then forbid women to speak or preach in our church? Or would we be free to say, “Brother Paul, you got this part wrong.” In short, knowing what you know about the love of Jesus, would you dare to stand against the word of Paul, who is not the Christ but only a very incredible, yet still very human, follower of the Christ? Or would you simply swallow it because it’s in “The Holy Bible” and we aren’t supposed to doubt it or question it or dare to seek the inspiration of the Risen Christ in our time – as Paul did in his?

How ironic that in this case, Paul did *not* get it wrong, but – as a result of the blunder of biblical deification – over half of the Christian world still thinks *to this day* that women should not be fully ordained clergy! Jesus must be so pleased.

A lot of religion, by the time humans get through with it, is not an invitation into the Wonder of LIFE in Christ Jesus – life and joy and growth, and finding out who you really are, why you are here, and all the destiny that awaits you. A lot of religion is not about a Living God who wants to relate to us, love us, and lead us on into an Eternal Kingdom. A lot of religion, by the time humans get through with it, is an invitation into a straitjacket. Everything is rigid and frightened – locked down and boxed up. Some people can only feel “safe” if everything is locked down tight: we know the truth; faith is knowing all the right answers, which automatically means not very many questions will be allowed; anything that doesn’t fit what we already know must be evil or, at the very least, false. Of course, things that are rigid and already perfect are also fragile and easily threatened. That kind of religion needs a static, predictable God, a sinless Jesus, an errorless Bible. You get “saved” by a three-step formula about as brilliant and deep as a recipe on a box of breakfast cereal. You get “saved” by getting inside the box. Once saved, the way to keep “safe” is to stay inside the box.

It all fits nicely: If you believe rightly, you go to Heaven. If not, you go to Hell. Jesus saves (we have no idea how) but only if you “believe in Him.” In fact, it is *your* believing correctly, not His love, that saves you. The Bible is the only truth in the world, and it contains no errors. Reading it helps you to believe correctly so you can go to Heaven – if you learn never to think. We have creeds that tell us the truth correctly so we

can say them and believe them, and never have to work out anything for ourselves. Jesus was born of a virgin so that we know He was pure enough and special enough and different enough to save us. It's like painting by numbers, only no other paintings exist – and if they do, they are evil.

Be careful. Some people need this kind of “certainty” to keep sane and balanced in this very scary world. And some of these people love Jesus a lot, even though, from my perspective, they completely misunderstand and misrepresent Him. Be careful again: A lot of people are badly damaged by this kind of rigid, judgmental, cookie-cutter religion. In any case, and quite obviously, there are churches everywhere for people who want this kind of religion. Without shame or apology, this is not that kind of church. That is not what you will find here. Nevertheless, those of you in Bible Study groups know we often still wrestle with literalism and boxes and passages that start to take us back to fear and the negation of Life. And those of you who are not in Bible Study groups, is it because you are afraid that's where they will try to take you?

Christmas is not about a book; it is about Jesus. How revolutionary is that! Christmas is not about a book being written; it is about Jesus being born – coming into our world. God chose to reveal himself in Jesus Christ. That is our claim: Incarnation. God comes to us in human flesh, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This does not mean that Jesus equates to God in all of God's numinous, omniscient, omnipotent Being. How much of that could we understand anyway? Have we no humility?! But Jesus is so filled with the Holy Spirit of God that to know Jesus is to know everything we humans can comprehend or understand about the nature, attitudes, motives, heart, and purposes of God.

I repeat: God chose to reveal himself in Jesus Christ, not in a book. *“The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.”* Not *“The Word became written down, and we all read it and learned to blindly believe and accept every word in it.”* Sometimes the written words obscure the Living WORD, even as sometimes they point toward it. And Christmas is a Walking WORD, not a written word. That is at the very core and essence of our Faith. Why did Jesus never write down His truth? He certainly could have, had He chosen to do so. Many others have chosen writing as a way to influence the world. [A bad old joke: When they said to Jesus, “Publish or Perish?” Jesus replied: “I choose Perish.” (Hard to know whether to laugh or to cry.)]

Why did Jesus choose to spend so much time and energy with His followers instead? Why did Jesus not help us get it right by writing it down so we could read it straight and not have to pore over stuff written in a different language thirty to sixty years later? Simple answer: That is not how we get it – that is *not* Life in Christ. It is not about intellect – an exam we pass or fail. It is about relationship – trust. It is about repentance and going with Him. We never get it “right.” But we come to Life and joy and purpose and love by getting to know HIM, not by knowing The Book. The Book only gives us some information about Him, enough to let us know that He is alive and present here with us, and that we can know Him and follow Him – receive comfort, guidance, love, and support from Him – whenever we care enough to pray, opening ourselves to His presence and influence. Lots of Christians are spending too much time with The Book and not enough time with Jesus – that is, not enough time in prayer. The two are supposed to go together; Bible study and prayer are supposed to enhance each other. But they cannot if we turn the Bible into an idol – if we deify and worship it. Then The Book fights Jesus for control over our lives, instead of helping us to see Him and go with Him.

Lots of people dead-end their prayers in just such a fashion. “Dear God, you can say anything you want to me ... as long as you don’t disagree with my parents, mess with my prejudices, try to change what I read in the Bible, or ask me to do anything scary or difficult.” No wonder their prayers take only five minutes and they do all the talking!

I trust the record – if I put it ALL together. Though nobody was following Him around with a video camera, I trust the record to give us an accurate enough picture of what Jesus was like, what He taught and believed, what kind of choices He made, and what happened as a result of who He was and how He confronted our world. No other religious story or record on earth has ever been challenged, doubted, pawed over, examined, and cross-referenced from every shred of information we can find – from secular records to archaeological digs – with anywhere near the meticulous and picky attention we have showered on the Bible, and especially on the New Testament. The Bible stands! But it stands as authentic *human record*, not as some magic, errorless manual from God. The Bible is *not* an excuse or license to stop thinking or to stop pondering our own relationship and experience with God. Most of all, it is no substitute for prayer, however often our reading it draws us to our prayers.

Never let anybody say to you: “This is what it says in the Bible, and you have to believe it or you are no real Christian.” You *must* go on to ask, and keep on asking: “Is this what God in Jesus Christ really intends, what he really means? Is this what he is really like, and what he really wants *me* to be like?” It is not all cut-and-dried. It is a *living* relationship. It is a Walking WORD. You do realize, do you not, that no matter how glowingly I might write down words, stories, accounts of what my son Brennan is like and what he means to me, *that is nothing* in comparison to who Brennan really is or what it is like to be with him?

God is so careful to not break our free will: to engage us fairly; to help us grow authentically. The Bible can be such an incredible tool to help us on our pilgrimage – on the Christian WAY. But the moment you make it sterile and rigid and perfect, it takes away free will. Then you cannot engage in the conversation. The dialogue stops, and you are only supposed to “believe it” in that mindless way only appropriate for slaves and robots.

The Bible reveals what the people who wrote it understood and comprehended – what they “got” from what was going on. It reveals what they thought was most important – what they gleaned from their best prayers and efforts. It is the truth as they were experiencing it, or at least what they could get into words at the moment of writing. The Bible is that and nothing more. And *that*, of course, includes a lot of inspiration from the Holy Spirit, as well as from encounter with Jesus. You can feel it. The record is incredible and wonderful. It is hard to imagine we would be here without this legacy from those who came before us. But does it not occur to you that there may be some things you know more about than the Apostle Paul did? What if you pray and study for as many years as he did? Can the Holy Spirit not inspire you as well? Is not Paul himself hoping that you will get into the drama, and live your own life of faith and service just as he was trying to do? Nothing in the Bible excuses you from being just as faithful and sincere a follower of Jesus as anybody else who ever lived. The New Testament was not written for spectators! Not only are you allowed to disagree with the New Testament writers, you *cannot* agree with all of them, since *they* don’t all agree with each other. And they don’t always agree with what *they themselves* have said earlier or in different times and places. They are pilgrims. They are learning and growing all the time. **Go thou and do likewise!** Life and truth and love never get handed to us on a silver platter. We must also get into the story, and find our own authentic awareness of His truth and presence.

This is very dangerous thinking. (People are always saying that to me.) No kidding! Why do you think Paul talks about working out our salvation in fear and trembling? (Philippians 2:12) What if we make mistakes? What if we have errors in our thinking? What if we don't make the right choices? Are some of you still imagining that the Christian Path is about getting it right and being perfect? Why do you think Jesus made such a big deal out of forgiveness and grace and mercy? Christians are supposed to be fearless because of the mercy. Why are so many of us still frightened and depressed and anxious? His mercy is our only hope! Why not trust it? You cannot follow Jesus if you will not trust Him to cover your mistakes. There is nothing in Christendom about IF we make mistakes. There is just a whole lot about what to do WHEN we make mistakes.

“Canon” means “measuring rod.” You do know what a measuring rod is, right? (It's like a tape measure.) The “canon of Scripture” means we have selected the most helpful writings from among a vast array of writings in the first and second centuries A.D. You are then supposed to use “the canon” to measure against your own experience and convictions. You place it alongside your own pilgrimage, and invariably it will raise questions and suggest dimensions you have neglected or perhaps not thought about yet.

The Bible is a tool. You are supposed to *use* it, not swallow it, worship it, or deify it. If you swallow it, it is of no further use to you. It will even gag you. So we measure our own experiences against Scripture, remembering that Scripture is never merely one verse or two. Do not put a frame around the tool; do not plate it in gold; do not throw it away or leave it to gather dust on the shelf. Use it. Is God less real to you than he was to those who *wrote* the Bible? If God delivered Daniel, does God deliver you? If Jesus talks about Gehenna – the city garbage dump outside Jerusalem – do you ever feel like you have landed there? And if Jesus tells stories so people can identify their own feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and uselessness and others turn them into a doctrine of hellfire, does that match your experience of the Walking Word – the Risen Christ who tracks your days through thick and thin, always ready to forgive, pick you up, draw you out of whatever holes you get into? The vengeful, angry Lord has never been my experience, not even through the worst of my drinking days. So I do not believe those constructs. They are a huge insult to my Lord, and His Cross, and His Holy Spirit. Some *people* treat me like Hell, but Jesus never does.

And a great deal of the New Testament talks about Jesus freeing us from the bondage and Hell we are already in – not about throwing us into Hell unless we shape up, as if we were all happy and wholesome before He came along and started ruining all our fun.

I am also very sad about this biblical blunder because it robs you of some wonderful friends. Why do we have books? A book is just a substitute for a real person. A book stands in for a conversation we might have had with a real person who is not available to us physically because of time or space. So it is wonderful to be able to have some conversations with Paul or Mark or Luke, despite the fact that they have gone on and we cannot talk to them in person. But they are dear Christian friends who have walked this Path before us. If you make them perfect or errorless or sinless, that's the end of it. What good is a friend you cannot talk things over with, argue with, share experiences with? With a book, we have to dub-in our side of the dialogue, but the dialogue is still what makes it valuable. If you deify the Bible, that is the end of the honest conversation. That is a horrible and ungodly blunder. And truly it obscures the Wonder.

Of course, there are no substitutes for Jesus. He is the Walking Word. He is the True Christmas. No book can stand in for Him. You have to *know Him* personally. We are back to the same thing over and over: Anything that hides, obscures, or minimizes the Holy Spirit is a blunder. The core, the essence, the dynamism of the Christian Life is our living relationship with Jesus – the daily contact possible between us and the presence of our Risen Lord. If that is not possible and real, all that is left of Christianity is an empty shell – ritual, formulas, robes, and candles – but nothing to change our lives, redeem us, inspire us, or fill us with love and purpose. If the dialogue with the Risen Christ is missing, then the only hope of anything authentic ever happening for any of us is the dim possibility that, after we die – and if we make it past the Judgment Seat – maybe something will change and it will turn out that Jesus cares about us after all. How many crèches and Christmas trees does it take to make up for the loss of the Walking Word?!

Blunders hide the Wonders. And that is very, very sad. Christmas as Incarnation is huge WONDER, so full of light and love and caring and guidance that it truly takes the breath away. It is the story of Messiah – God's Son coming to be with us. And of how the world and Satan, both unspeakably threatened by all of it, tried to take Him away from us. But they couldn't do it; they couldn't make it stick. They had

never dealt with such power before. Thirty-eight hours and He was back again. And so, unable to defeat the Christ outright, they did the only thing left to them: they tried to obscure it, to hide it, to tangle it up in all the guilt, fear, and human foibles that have always been so familiar here on earth and that have always kept us in bondage.

So we were waiting for Messiah to come. But now we are waiting for Him to come again. And He came to free us from the Law, and all the guilt, shame, and fear of judgment and damnation that go with it. But we have gone right back to the Law and Judgment, and most of our churches are every bit as rigid, unaccepting, and Law-based as any synagogue Jesus ever knew. And He came as one of us – fully human – and totally involved with us. But we wanted distance between Him and us, so we invented stories of a Virgin Birth, and we keep trying to picture Him as very holy but vague, distant, sexless, sinless, always nice, never angry – and very, very boring – even though the New Testament records support no such picture.

Ah, the blunders and the Wonders. Life with the Christ of God awaits every one of us – whenever we are willing to set aside our fears, swallow our pride, and go with Him – for His living presence is all around us, waiting only for us to want the contact enough to seek it. That is endless WONDER and JOY, and it reshapes and impacts everything in the life we are living right now, no matter what the circumstances. That is the real Christmas, and the real Wonder of His Love.

THE VASTNESS OF THE WONDER

(The Blunders and The Wonders)

Despite whatever you may have heard or said to the contrary, I do not care very much about the blunders. They are in the way. They throw people off track. They do a lot of damage. So in that regard, I care about them. But what I really care about are the Wonders: The Wonder of the Incarnation. The Wonder of Christ Jesus with us and guiding us personally in the here and now. The Wonder of beginning to discover our true identity and the eternal destiny that is ours, and that lights our lives. The Wonder of it is always more than we can comprehend, more than we can fathom, more than we can believe or know or respond to at any one time in this partial realm. It always draws us to far more than we have seen or realized, and to far more than we presently are. So I resent the blunders that minimize the Wonders: contradicting our Savior's love; hiding the glory and the mercy; putting distance between us and the personal relationship the Holy Spirit of Jesus wants to have with every one of us. I have no desire to cooperate with constructs that try to trade back guilt and shame and fear for the joy, trust, forgiveness, and New Life our Savior has won for us. I still wrestle with guilt and shame and fear – as all of *you* do, if you are being honest – but I know that Jesus and His Holy Spirit have come to heal and free us, not to load more of it onto us. Our world always believes that if we become guilty and frightened enough, it will turn into righteousness and we will act better and better. But that is a lie. Jesus came to be and reveal a far greater truth, and I think it's a shame that we keep turning His truth back into the world's lie. We are not saved by getting frightened enough and shamed enough to try to stay out of Hell. We are saved by being filled with His presence and His love. He is "Joy to the World" – not more guilt and shame and fear. We already had and still have plenty of that. So I have told you to be careful what kind of Christmas you go for. And I have told you of well-meaning but terrible blunders that put distance between us and the Christ who comes for us – blunders that reverse the Message, turning it all back from the Light of Christ into what has always been the way our world tries to think and believe about God.

Have you ever pondered the contrast between Hitler and Jesus? We could use others, but Hitler is both close enough to be glaring and far enough in the past that we have sorted out the records to some degree.

Hitler said his Reich would last a thousand years. Jesus said His would last forever. Think of Hitler and his top disciples at the Heaven-on-earth they had created at Berchtesgaden: incredible wealth, luxury, art, music, wine, women. They were within a blink of dominating all of Europe, and they had it all – everything most humans think they really want. And all it had cost so far were about twenty-one million lives, with of course more to come. Hitler's Reich, no doubt about it, was built on fear, suspicion, guilt, hatred, cruelty, lies. Twenty-one million lives for five years of frightened bravado and lavish but counterfeit pleasure. And the world, understanding such things, went along with it – even in Lutheran Germany – still singing Christmas carols and decorating trees.

Jesus got three years instead of five, but He insisted His Kingdom was not over – that it is, for us, only just barely begun. He had no wealth or luxury of the kind our world covets, and He used no human against his or her will. Yet we strongly suspect that Jesus took delight in life and people and friendship – and in all that was happening around Him – in ways far beyond anything anyone in the Third Reich ever experienced. His earthly reign cost one life: His own. After that, of course, it cost many other lives, as the world increasingly reacted to His followers and His Message, but none of that was coming from Jesus' will or cruelty. It was not His way. It is not His WAY still. He invites, frees, forgives, inspires, heals. And He is forever telling us that we are more than we think, more precious and important than we can imagine – that in fact the Almighty and Omnipotent God loves us and is determined to claim us for his own. Words which typify His presence in our world are reconciliation, invitation, awakening, transformation. On another level, these are supported by words like trust, truth, love, acceptance, mercy, gratitude, salvation. What words would we use to typify Hitler's reign?

It seems to me the contrast between Hitler and Jesus is stark, incredible, and compelling. I am still annoyed with myself, to put it mildly, when I find myself wanting or wishing for rewards, methods, traits, desires, or goals that fit more with a Third Reich mentality and approach to life than with those traits, desires, and goals that match Jesus and His Kingdom. I also don't appreciate it that our world keeps wanting to rework Jesus into a type of Hitler. Jesus came as a lamb, but many say it was only a disguise – that in the end, it will all revert back to what we understand, expect, and think are truly powerful and effective: Hitler, Hell, fear, coercion, and killing off any opposition. This is not just my imagination. We have Inquisitions, Crusades, excommunications, banishments, torture, exile, hatred – even our own careless moments – built deep into the history of the Christian church.

After the second sermon in Advent – the blunder of the Virgin Birth – someone said to me that despite all the evidence I had mentioned, they did not see how I could doubt the Virgin Birth when great church councils had formed our creeds, and surely the Holy Spirit would have been present to inspire those Councils and prevent them from making any mistakes. They mentioned the Council of Nicaea and the Apostle’s Creed. Actually, there is a difference between the Nicene Creed and the Apostle’s Creed, which came sixty-five years later (390 A.D.) and was not in the form we know it today until the eighth century A.D. I may be stupid, dumb, and wrong, but I am not ignorant. The monolithic unity of the Catholic church has never existed. The Apostle’s Creed was never accepted by the Eastern church, and nobody who knows anything deeper than its title thinks it had any link whatsoever with the Apostles who were Jesus’ disciples.

At the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., called by Emperor Constantine because he wanted Christians to stop quarreling with each other and help him bring peace to his empire, the two great antagonists were Arius and Athanasius. If I told you what they were arguing over and got you involved in their debate, it would split this church right down the middle still today. And after the great Council was over, the decisions made brought such unanimity and clarity that *both* Arius and Athanasius spent most of the rest of their lives either in prison or in exile. Far from resolving anything, the debates got hotter and harder. Like me, many of you would admire and respect, even love, both Arius and Athanasius if you knew them personally. But my point is: Why did we (His church) so quickly revert to the ways of our world – to coercion and persecution and political power plays – as if we could *make* people be good or think right? Did Jesus not teach us a better WAY?

Is there any way to truly get back to the Wonder of Christmas: the Wonder of His coming, and the Wonder of what He is really like? Part of the Wonder is that the Message itself keeps expanding as life goes on here. Despite the bondage and sin, we *are* God’s children, so we do have our moments of awakening and awareness. And God is always bigger and beyond all that we imagine. Many of us have moved from concepts of a tiny Heaven, no bigger than a remodeled earth, to a universe of endless dimensions beyond our comprehension. The Kingdom – and our future – is not earthbound, as we imagined in first-century expectations of the Messiah and the New Age He would usher in. It is not time-locked, as in the early concepts of a Second Coming, where everybody waits in the grave until the curtain opens on a tiny, static, already-

finished “new” day. Many of us no longer imagine a one-chance-only experience for everybody on earth, where you get a few years here (seventy-five if you’re lucky; maybe one or two if you’re not) to pass the final exam on life and if you don’t pass, you are flunked forever, or worse, and it doesn’t matter where you were born or what circumstances you were born into.

Likewise, many of us no longer expect a one-dimensional “hereafter” – that is, sitting on a cloud and playing a harp for all of eternity. Nor do we expect all our problems to be over once we get there, as if the sheer act of dying will make us perfect and there will be no need or opportunity to go on growing, learning, accomplishing, or loving. Or do you imagine that love will forever be static – that it will be what we call “perfect”? Freeze – don’t change a thing!

Jesus kept trying but was unable to tell us “the half of it” – for sheer lack of vocabulary, and because our experience and our minds are too small to grasp it. The Vastness is so great, we are disoriented. But that is part of the Wonder. And what a shame that we have locked down so much of the Wonder, we barely feel the vertigo of the Mystery itself. If we insist on keeping our shame, let us feel ashamed that after all Jesus has done and gone through for us, we still have such a small conception of the magnitude of His love, the magnitude of God’s designs and purposes, and the magnitude of the future that awaits us.

And Wonder of Wonders, that Vastness is not merely “out there somewhere,” beyond us and irrelevant to us. It is a Vastness we are invited into – a Vastness of dimensions we are designed to be in and be part of. That is what is staggering and beautiful and intimidating and wondrous all at the same time.

The Holy Spirit was and is the Great Wonder. It always has been. What burned the bush? (What is the highest symbol of the flame?) What spoke to Samuel when he was still only a young boy? What told Jeremiah that a New Covenant was coming, six hundred years before it walked among us? The greatest and the greatness of the heroes of our Faith have all come from the influence of the Holy Spirit, who was “*In the beginning ...*” The Spirit has always been after all of us – seeking all of us – but only a few realize it. Then and now, those touched by the Spirit disbelieve their own experiences – close down, turn away, think it’s too good to be true, mistake guilt for humility – and go right back to shame and fear instead of onward into obedience and love.

Something had to be done to make the Holy Spirit clearer and more available to everyone. Not that the Holy Spirit was not here, but that humans needed to be more open and willing and trusting to receive what was being offered. It is hard to break through our bondage – hard to blast through all the shields of our fear, unworthiness, guilt, idolatry. But something – some *One* – was needed to lead the WAY: some ONE we could comprehend, identify with, follow into the Light of God’s true love and caring and presence, despite all the pain and travail of a harsh and cruel world. After all, we do not like to go to school, and much about this Classroom Earth is not to our liking. So we all have reason to fear and mistrust, if not hate, the God who put us here, especially when it hurts so much – ourselves and all the people we love – if we do not learn our lessons or follow the rules. And then, of course, those in rebellion against the classroom itself also punish and hate those who *do* try to learn the lessons and follow the rules. So we needed some One ... desperately. We needed a Savior.

It is no wonder that before we get to know the Creator, many of us just want out. Yet at the same time, we are afraid of where “out” might put us. If it is this hard here, maybe “out” is a burning, fiery Hell. Plenty of people have claimed this is so, especially if you do not learn your lessons fast enough or follow all the rules well enough. But fear is like greed: the more you listen, the deeper it sinks into you. Trying to be right or good enough to keep out of Hell turns out to be Hell itself, as more than a few of us have learned the hard way.

So what will it take to break through the shields and reach us so we will dare to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit? One to walk among us, yes. But why would we believe Him? It will take more than niceness, more than kind words, more than a pat on the head and an optimistic attitude. “It is hard to see the dragon that has swallowed you.” Who will slay the dragon? We have no idea of the extent of the bondage – or the thickness of the shields – if we think some good advice or some human construct of philosophy or spirituality is going to make a serious dent in human fear, mistrust, and all the experiences that have convinced us to try to take care of ourselves and do things our own way. It will take a Cross to blow away our pride, and then a Resurrection to give us trust and hope when our pride is gone, and then a Pentecost to put us back into the real plan – when the shields are down and we are open to walking a new WAY. So Jesus came. Indeed He did! Wonder of Wonders!

Yet despite the incredible Wonder of the Incarnation, we and our world can still turn away or reduce it back to the familiar if we insist. And of course, the world will always try to close up the WAY that has been opened. The world will always try to turn everything back into its old familiar ways of bondage. What did the former slaves of Egypt say to Moses when they were free? “Hey, this is too hard. We would rather be back in Egypt. Slavery was at least familiar and we knew what to expect.” In the same way, we are frightened by the prospect of walking with the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord. Most of our world does not want to know anything about Jesus except for His birth. He came, but let’s leave it at that. Never mind why He came, what it was like for Him, what happened to Him, or what that means for us. Christmas is His birth; never mind the rest. But even then He is too dangerous and we need more distance between us. So let’s ring it with miracles so we know there is nothing we can do about it. He is born of a virgin – very different from us, and too divine to have any relevance to our condition. Let’s honor Him and lift Him up until He is so high there is no possibility of our “following Him.” And we will put it all down in a book, though He never tried to do that. Then we can study it, argue over it, and write thousands of books about The Book – so that we will not have time to pray, to encounter His Holy Spirit in our own lives, or to turn our own lives over to His true and living influence and guidance. And oh yes: Remember how safe it was when we were only *waiting* for Him to come? A little lonely and bleak, perhaps, but it was nice to be waiting. Then we could have HOPE without having to respond to anything directly. So let’s go back to waiting. We waited for Messiah to come. Now we can wait for Messiah to COME AGAIN. That way we can go back to the same old ways as if nothing has happened – as if He never came at all, and is not here beckoning to us even now as we live and breathe. And most of you realized, even as I just now said it, that this is true. That the Spirit is often calling to you, and that you frequently turn it off before it can take hold of you. It is easy to do that, with all the noise and busyness and distractions we keep handy.

The Wonder is so much bigger than all the ways we have tried to hide it, obscure it, and keep ourselves safe from its light. The WORD did walk among us, die for us, and rise again to be with us – inviting us into the Light of a New WAY, starting the moment we are willing to open to it. The Light of the WORD is the presence of God – the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ – available; eager for us; loving us more than we love ourselves; and (what many people miss) full of plans, purposes, and possibilities that match our gifts and our true identities and that lead us, no matter

what evil and pain we encounter here, toward fulfillment and abundant Life that begins here and never ends. Meanwhile, the caring God waits right beside us – twiddling thumbs, drumming fingers – waiting for the moment when our shields might go down for a moment so he can say again: “I AM here! Come with me! Wake up! Let’s go! I have so much to show you, and it is all filled with WONDER!”

If the Prince Charming of your dreams (or if the woman you have always hoped and prayed you would someday find) came for you – suddenly came into your life, though you had long since concluded that he did not exist (now, I realize this has already happened for many of you, but go with me for a minute, okay?) – if the Prince Charming of your highest dreams suddenly came for you, what would be your very best response? This is a little multiple choice exam:

- A.) Pretend you don’t even notice him.
- B.) Spend the rest of your life checking into his family tree and his pedigree, trying to decide if he really is who he says he is.
- C.) Spend the rest of your life developing definitions and a mission statement so that you will know who to invite to the wedding, which will never happen here but might possibly take place after you die.
- D.) Welcome him with sincere wonder and delight, no matter how scary it is to trust that he really loves you, and go with him for the rest of your life.

Of course, D is the only possible answer, the only sane choice. Yet seldom is it the answer we choose in real life. But don’t worry if you didn’t get it right. We get this same exam every morning of our lives.

“Behold I stand at the door and knock – but most of my people are too busy with other things or too busy playing theological or creedal charades to let me IN so we can have Life together.” Religion is more than right views. It is more than reciting creeds, saying you are born again, or naming the date when you were “saved.” It is also more than decorating trees, singing carols, or knowing that babies are really cute.

Go to Jesus in the quiet, when there is no possibility of hype or peer-group pressure or any of the other outer motivations. He will be there waiting for you, whether that seems obvious at first or not. And say to the presence of His Holy Spirit: “I have noticed what You were like and what You did when You were here as one of us. I am beginning to understand something of why You did it. As it gets clearer, so does my awareness of how much it cost You, and of the Wonder of Your Love. So even though the world around me takes such things for granted and lets such things ‘go without saying’ – and even though being loved this much, with no possibility of fully reciprocating, is embarrassing and unnerving – I need to tell You that I, myself personally, appreciate it. I am in Your debt. Words are so small, but I find myself loving You back. It seems audacious, and it seems like there is not enough evidence for You to believe it, but I love You too. In me, from now on, You will find a true and faithful friend.”

I am of the opinion that Jesus would happily trade that for all the statues and stained glass, for all the creeds we have ever written, for all the cathedrals we have built, and for all the ecclesiastical councils, hierarchies, and denominations that go with them.

A few friends are all He has ever asked for. Friends who would also befriend others in His name. And however imperfect I know myself to be, still I am one of His friends. All I truly care about is that you be one too.

The baby is born. The baby grows up. And nothing about Christmas matters in the least unless you become His friend.