

“When Christmas Becomes Real”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

December 12, 2004

Text: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

The cover story of *Newsweek Magazine* this week is entitled, “The Birth of Jesus: Faith and History-How the Story of Jesus Came To Be.” In this article the author describes the accounts of the birth of Jesus that are found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The author goes on to state that for many years there has been a debate about the historical accuracy of these stories. For example, there is no mentioning of the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. Nor does the Gospel of John describe the actual birth of Christ. We have no outside historical witness that Augustus Caesar ordered taxation across the empire and in particular, Israel. Moreover, many Christians have struggled to understand the miraculous birth of Christ and the witness to the Virgin Birth that has been an essential part of Christian theology.

And yet, when all is said and done, there is the Christ of history. “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King.” That is the Christ of history, and the Christ of history is real. From Bethlehem to Nazareth, from Caesarea Philippi to Golgotha, one can trace the life and ministry of Jesus. As one who has visited the land in which Jesus lived, I

can tell you that there is a “ring of truth” about the story of Jesus. No scholar of any substance has doubted the historicity of Jesus.

So the Christ of history is real. His coming was the most significant event in the spiritual history of humankind and we do well to celebrate it at this season of Christ, when we say, “Let us now go unto Bethlehem, and see this that has come to pass.”

But I believe that there is another Christ, not just the Christ of history, but also the Christ of faith. That is what Paul speaks of when he writes to the church in Galatia. Paul did not know Jesus personally--not in the way that his disciples and the others who walked with Jesus did. On one occasion he wrote, “Even though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know him no more,” which is another way of saying that the Christ Paul served was more than simply a figure in history. On one occasion he wrote to a group of fledgling Christians to say, “My little children, of whom I am in travail until Christ be formed in you.” Paul meant by that that it wasn’t enough just to believe that Christ had lived. He was concerned that Christ live in us. He summed up this essential movement from the Christ of history to the Christ of experience by saying, “I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me.” That is the Christ of faith. So as we come to this Christmas Season, it is important that we affirm the Christ of history, but it is also critical that we affirm the Christ of faith.

In the birth of Jesus Christ we affirm that the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.” That is what we mean by the incarnation. The Christ of History has become the Christ of faith and that affirmation has enormous implications for us.

I.

First of all, if Christmas is to become real to us, it will be because we recognize that in Jesus Christ we encounter God himself. One of the great crises in the early church occurred around the Council of Niceae in 325 B.C. The Roman Emperor, Constantine, was concerned that the Roman Empire was being threatened by a theological controversy; namely, the person of Christ. For that reason Constantine summoned the Bishops of the Church to the city of Niceae in Asian Minor (Turkey) and commanded them to resolve the issue of the relationship between God and Christ. Two major voices were present at Niceae. The first was a man named Arius, a citizen of Alexandria. He argued that Jesus Christ was not God but something that God created. Arius was challenged by another great theologian by the name of Athanasius, who argued that Jesus Christ was not “like” God, but that Jesus “was” God. The Council of Niceae produced today what we call the Nicene Creed. In many ways its language is difficult and archaic. It speaks of Christ using the language of Greek Philosophy. Jesus Christ is “very God of very God,” “begotten not made,” “being of one substance with the father.” The Nicene Creed makes the most definitive statement about Christ that the church has made. It affirms that insofar as we can know God, we know God in Jesus Christ. Christ is not one revelation of God. Christ is the defining revelation of God by which every other revelation must be tested.

That is what the church affirms in the Christmas season. Christ himself is Christianity. That is the consistent witness of the New Testament. Take, for example, the writer of the book of Hebrews. Ask him what is the persistent, eternal fact in Christianity. He does not reply with an abstract theological expression. He knows that theology can and does change. He says, "Jesus Christ...the same yesterday, today, and forever." Ask him what it means to live the Christian life and he does not deliver a moral code. He knows that moral customs often alter. Rather he says, "Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, even Jesus, who was faithful to him that appointed him." Ask him how he finds the power to carry on amidst persecution and great adversity, and he replies by saying, "Consider the one who has endured such pain saying of sinners against himself, that you not be weary, fainting in your souls."

Tell him that the world is going to the dogs, that humankind is brutal, violent, and uncivilized, and he replies by saying, "We do not see all things controlled by man, what we do see is Jesus."

II.

Then, too, if Christmas is to become real to us, it will be because we realize that the birth of Christ means that the universe, as well as our own particular lives, has its origin in the will, intention, and purpose of God. Sometimes theologians have spoken of the "decrees" of God. Today, we do not use that language. But one thing must be clear. As a distinguished historian by the name of Herbert Butterfield observed, "For let us make sure of one thing--in the long run, there are only two alternative views about life or about history. Here is a fact that was realized thousands of years ago and is still as true as ever. Either you trace everything back in the long run to sheer blind chance, or you trace everything back to God." The Christian affirmation about the birth of Christ is that God's incarnation in Christ brings meaning and purpose to our lives. The world and our lives are not ruled by impersonal powers and forces. The world in which we live is ruled by God's grace.

As we come to this Christmas Season, I have noted on several occasions that there is a sense of weariness in our nation. We are being driven more by fear than by the confidence and hope that are essential not only to our faith but to a democratic society. So often we react as if our destiny was somehow out of our control. I thought of that this week, when I watched the news report of the young soldier in Kuwait who questioned the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, as to why our soldiers in Iraq were not being given adequate armor and protection to fight. For a number of months we have know this was true. Soldiers and their families have had to buy bulletproof vests for the men and women fighting in Iraq. Many of the fighting men and women have had to improvise what they call "hillbilly armor" to secure their vehicles. The question that has haunted me since is the question of why we would allow our government to let this happen. How is it that the richest nation in the world cannot provide it own soldiers adequate protection? And why have we let this happen? What would happen, for example, if we were to insist that no luxury automobiles be produced or bought in this country until every soldier had adequate protection and equipment?

III.

Then, thirdly, Christmas becomes real to us when we realize that it is Christ and Christ alone who shows us the real meaning of life. “I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly.” That is what Jesus said and that is what Jesus does. He shows us life as it is meant to be. He did not simply say, “The Son of Man came to serve and not to be served.” He lived it. He reached out to the “outcasts” of his society: a woman taken in adultery, a tax collector name Zaccheus, a Samaritan woman at the well.

Several years ago, when I was in Edinburgh, I remember walking down Princes Street and encountering one of the famous landmarks of that “Royal Mile”-- Deacon Brodie’s Pub. It was named for one of Edinburgh’s most infamous citizens. Deacon Brodie was a well-known deacon in the St. Giles Presbyterian Church in Edinburgh. He was regarded as one of the pillars of the city. Yet, unknown to his family and friends, at night Deacon Brodie changed his identity. He plundered and robbed many of Edinburgh’s citizens until finally apprehended by the law. The whole city was aghast. No one could understand how this respected citizen could demonstrate two such disparate dispositions. One young writer in the city, Robert Louis Stevenson, was so moved by this event that he placed it at the heart of one of his most famous novels, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Most of us are aware that there are different facets in our own personalities. Certainly the Apostle Paul was aware of that. In the seventh chapter of his letter to the church at Rome he acknowledges this struggle within himself. “The good that I want to do,” he said, “I do not do. And the evil that I do not want to do, I do. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

That is what the text means: “For me to live is Christ.” This is not so much a theological statement as it is a statement of a transforming experience by which a person is changed.

We cannot keep Christ back in history. He is not just a figure of the past. To be sure we celebrate his birth. We recall the beautiful Christmas story of angels, shepherds, and wise men because they tell the story of his birth with such great power.

But we are celebrating something far more important than the Christ of History. We are celebrating the one who can change our lives and the one who has the power to change the world.
Amen!