

“Recovering the Christ of Christmas: 2) The Revelation of God”

a sermon by

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Text: “I am the door” (John 10:9).

One of the things I have noticed this year is the ambivalence that our society has about the celebration of Christmas as a religious holiday. This was brought home to me this week on a nightly news television report concerning the lighting of the Christmas tree at the White House this past week. The debate centered on whether it should be called a “holiday tree” or a “Christmas tree.” Even the speaker of the House of Representatives weighed in on this issue. The reporter went on to note that this tension about the celebration of Christmas has become much more pronounced in recent years. In fact, the reporter noted that the federal courts of our country have what is called the “two reindeer rule,” which allows cities and other public entities to display crèches and other depictions of the birth of Christ, except that there has to be at least two reindeer present as well. (I visited Bethlehem several years ago and don’t remember seeing any reindeer.)

Now, given the fact that we live today in an increasingly secular and pluralistic society, I am sensitive to the fact that we cannot impose the religious meaning of Christmas on everyone. In Charlotte today there is a significant and important Jewish community. There are three

mosques in Charlotte and a host of other religions represented. Certainly, there are occasions that call us to respect people who do not celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday.

More surprising to me, however, is the fact that many people in the church are somewhat uneasy about Christmas. Theologians have often spoken about “the scandal of particularity,” the Christian conviction that God was revealed in that one man, Jesus Christ, in that one place, Bethlehem, and in that one time. In fact, we date our calendar from the birth of Christ. And yet, time and time again, we seem reluctant to talk about our faith. We revere the character of Jesus, we esteem his teaching, but we are reluctant to speak of Jesus as the revelation of God.

I.

That is why during these weeks of Advent the focus of the sermons will be on the Gospel of John, and particularly on the famous “I am” sayings of Jesus, which are a distinctive feature of the Gospel of John.

To the best of our knowledge the Gospel of John was written in the city of Ephesus toward the close of the first century. The city of Ephesus in John’s day was very much like New York City today. Ephesus was a melting pot into which streams of new people, new thoughts, new philosophies, and religions easily poured.

It was an unsettling time in Ephesus. The old “gods” were crumbling. Once Zeus had seemed true and the temple of Diana in Ephesus was the center of sincere worship, but that was no longer the case. New religions were pouring into Ephesus, from Persia, and Arabia, and Egypt, and Greece.

This, in large measure, explains the contrast between the so-called Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and the Gospel of John. The Synoptic are earlier, more straightforward narratives that pay close attention to everything that Jesus said and did.

But as one moves into the Gospel of John, one is aware that this is a very different world. John’s gospel does not start with the birth of Jesus (as do Matthew and Luke) or even the ministry of John the Baptist (as does Mark). John starts with the preexistent Christ. “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1:1).

That is what makes the Gospel of John so unique. Matthew, Mark, and Luke present Jesus primarily to the world of first century Palestine. The Gospel of John presents Jesus to the Greco-Roman world of the Roman Empire. Ephesus was a key city in the axis of that Empire. It was the gateway to Asia.

Throughout the Gospel of John there is one theme that is presented forty times in the Gospel of John, and that theme is that Jesus Christ is the revelation of God.

II.

That is certainly the emphasis in the passage that I have read from this morning. In John 10 Jesus presents himself as “the great shepherd.” This passage follows closely after a healing story in which Jesus heals a man who is born blind. In that story Jesus claims that he is the “light of the world.” He brings sight to those who are blind. In this passage Jesus speaks of himself as the “door” and as the “good shepherd.”

The image of the shepherd and sheep is a familiar one to us. The shepherds are an indelible part of the Christmas story. To them the tidings of the birth of Jesus were announced. Moreover, the Old Testament speaks of God as a shepherd. Psalm 23 reminds us that, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” The Psalm uses the imagery of the shepherd to speak of “still waters, right paths, of the shepherds rod and staff.” In the same fashion the prophet Isaiah speaks of God as one who “will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep”(Isaiah 40: 11).

These images give us a keen insight into Jesus as the revelation of God.

III.

In the first place Jesus reveals the personal nature of the love of God. There is nothing more important than the affirmation that God not only is the creator, but that he preserves and orders our life.

That is the power of the image of the shepherd. He knows his sheep and his sheep know him. The shepherd enters the door or the gate. The thief and the bandit enter another way, but not the shepherd. They know his voice. He knows each sheep by name.

There is something very intimate in this imagery of the shepherd and the sheep. Many of us have pets. We know how they become a part of our family. I am in the stage of life where my children sometimes leave their pets with me, when they are on a trip. Over the Thanksgiving holidays my son Will and his wife Whitley left two dogs with me, a small daschund named Rusty and a huge Great Dane named “Diesel.” Diesel, though still a puppy, weighs 160 pounds. When he jumps, he is higher than I. He is a gentle dog who has no concept of how big he really is. When I woke up last Friday morning Diesel was standing at my head. He loomed over me like Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Jesus used the image of the shepherd to show us his own nature as well as the nature of God. The “Good shepherd” lays down his life for his sheep. The “Good Shepherd” does not flee when trouble comes, as does the hireling.

That is the God whom Jesus reveals. God is one who nurtures us like a parent, who knows our name, and whose voice is familiar. “As a mother comforts her child,” writes the prophet Isaiah, “so I will comfort you and you will be comforted”(Isaiah 66:13). “As a father

has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear God” (Psalm 103: 13).

IV.

In the second place, Jesus reveals what it means to have a relationship with the living God. In 1906 Albert Schweitzer published his famous book, *The Quest For the Historical Jesus*, which was an attempt by using modern historical methods to separate the so-called “historical Jesus” from the “Christ of faith.” The problem with trying to discover the historical Jesus is that in every case the Jesus that is discovered is little more than a convenient mirror for reflecting one’s own theological, social, and political views. In recent times the so-called “Jesus Seminar” has revived the search for the real Jesus. Using color-coded pens the scholars of the Jesus Seminar separate the real words of Jesus (red) from the added on words (black) and those that may be doubtful (gray). The Jesus that emerges in the “Jesus Seminar” is a wandering “sage” or wisdom figure. For the Jesus seminar there are no miracles, no crucifixion, no resurrection. As one critic put it, “the Jesus that emerges from the “Jesus Seminar” looks a great deal like a middle age religion professor from a midwestern university who drives a Mitsubishi.”

One of the remarkable things about the letters of the Apostle Paul is that he shows little concern about this earthly Jesus. “Even though we have known Christ after the flesh,” he observes, “yet now we know him so no more.”

What you do find in Paul’s letters is a relationship with Christ that glows through every page he wrote and makes the might and mastery of the man. “It is no longer I who live,” Paul writes, “but Christ who lives in me.” “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.”

Such was the significance of Jesus. There are two kinds of greatness in this world. One is exhibited in a great general like Napoleon. In a certain sense he was great, but in another sense he did not represent anything of lasting worth. But when you think about people like Copernicus and Galileo, you come across a different kind of greatness. Their significance lies in something that they revealed, something eternal, into which we can enter now, and by which our lives are enlarged. Such was the significance of Jesus. He was the means by which the Spirit of God was revealed and incarnated into a fellowship that all could enter.

V.

In the third place, Jesus reveals for us God’s intention for our lives. In recent years there has been a great deal of attention to the ethical teachings of Jesus. For a long time the church focused on the theological Christ with all his great divine attributes that have been exalted in the church--great creeds written about him, great anthems sung to him, great rituals performed for him--but now there is a great hungering for the Jesus who calls us to transform the world--the Christ who called men and women to follow him, who healed the sick, fed the hungry, and associated with the outcast. We long for the Jesus who calls us not just to believe in him but to follow him.

But even this Jesus is not sufficient. For if you try to keep Jesus as only an ethical teacher, you lose him as an ethical teacher. The only Christ that can stay with a person is the Christ who says, "He that believes on me, believes not on me, but on the one who sent me."

Several weeks ago I came across an article in *Time Magazine* written about C. S. Lewis. Time called Lewis the "hottest theologian of 2005." His great children's Narnia stories have been picked up by the Disney Studios and "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe" is soon to be a movie.

C. S. Lewis was an active member of the Anglican Church. As such he addressed himself primarily to the mainline protestant churches. But by the 1960s the mainline churches had all but ignored Lewis. In recent years he has been discovered by the more evangelical churches.

There is something very powerful about C. S. Lewis's little book *Mere Christianity*. He was not a great aphorist, but he had a genius for the deceptively homey metaphor (the book abounds with pennies, trains, mousetraps, pianos, etc.) But there are classic C. S. Lewis lines that demonstrate profound insight and polemic interests.

One of these is Lewis's assessment of Jesus as primarily a moral teacher. Lewis wrote: "You can shut him up as a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher."

That is a profound statement. It reminds us that while we acknowledge Jesus as a great teacher, he is something far more than that.

The real significance of Jesus is what he revealed. He was just what he said he was, a door. "I am the door," he said. They went up to the door admiring it, when lo and behold, the door swung open and left them standing face to face with God.

That is what Jesus always does. He leads us to himself and then beyond himself to the one eternal God.

Amen!