“Recovering the Christ of Christmas:
4) The Resurrection and Life”

a sermon by

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Text: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes on me, though he die, yet shall he live” (John 11:25).

In his book *The Hungering Dark,* Frederick Buechner relates an experience he had some years ago visiting the city of Rome at Christmas time. On Christmas Eve he joined thousands of other pilgrims at St. Peter’s Square for the celebration of the Christmas Eve Mass by the Pope, who was then Pope Pius II. It was a long wait and the crowd would periodically break into song, singing “Adeste Fidelis” in Latin and “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht ” in German.

After a very long wait the Pope finally entered, carried on a throne with the Swiss Guard in their scarlet and gold and the Pope dressed in white. As the Pope and his entourage passed by, Buechner noted that he stared into the crowd almost as if he were looking for a single person, a face in the multitude of faces that enveloped that great church that night.

There is a sense in which all of us are looking for that face. The one we are looking for is the one who was once here and haunts us even now, though two thousand years have now passed, but the intensity of that search continues still.

I.

Over the past several weeks we have looked at some of the famous "I am" sayings that are found only in the Book of John. These are affirmations that define Jesus: the door, the way, the truth, the life, the good shepherd, and the light of the world.

In the story of the raising of Lazarus we find the saying of Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me though he die, yet shall he live and the one who lives and believes in me shall never die."

The narrative about the raising of Lazareth is one of the most dramatic in all of Scripture. Lazarus had been dead for four days. In fact, when Lazarus became ill, his sisters, Martha and Mary sent for Jesus, but Jesus did not seem to be in a hurry to come to Bethany. And when he got there, it was too late. Lazarus was dead. So Lazarus' sister said to Jesus, "If only you had been here, my brother would not have died." This lament becomes the occasion for one of the greatest miracles in the New Testament. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. As a result, the chief priests and the Pharisees plotted to kill him.

In the prologue of the Gospel of John the evangelist tells us that in the birth of Jesus "what was come into to being was the life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). Raymond Brown notes that there is a connection between this miracle and the miracle of the man born blind (John 9). In that miracle Jesus affirms that he is "the light of the world." In the raising of Lazareth Jesus affirms that he is "the resurrection and the life." Both fulfill the words in the opening of John that in the birth came life and the light of men.

II.

In this Christmas Season there is nothing more important than the affirmation that what Christ brings into the world is nothing less than life itself. The New Testament is not naïve. It understands our dilemma. It begins with this tragic fact: "Even when we were dead through our trespasses." That is where it starts. And then it goes beyond that. It sees a saving power that has come in Jesus Christ that not only has the power to redeem individuals, but to transform societies as well.

Certainly this is true in the social situation in which we find ourselves in Charlotte today. There is blinding poverty and hopelessness all around us. Our own school board cannot work together without additional security guards to protect the members from each other. Imagine the example that sets to the children of this community! So often we think of the problems that beset us in economic, political, and sociological terms, and they certainly have that dimension.

But they go deeper than that. There is a fundamental flaw in human nature that only a profound spiritual renewal can address. The Bible calls it sin and the only answer for it is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is true for all of us: rich or poor, black or white, young or old.

But, it is true in our personal lives as well. No one understands himself until he or she sees that there is darkness in our lives, a void in our lives that only Christ can fill.

There was a story in the ancient church about a religious hermit who was so holy that the evil spirits sent to tempt him were discouraged. They could not break him down. They tried the passions of the body and failed. They tried the doubts of soul and mind, but those too did not succeed. Then Satan himself came and said to the evil spirits, "Your methods are too crude. Let me have a go at him." So Satan went to this poor hermit living in the desert and said to him, "Have you heard the good news? Your brother has been made Bishop of Alexandria." That got the poor hermit. Here he was, isolated in the desert, and now his brother would be Bishop of Alexandria. Jealousy swept over him like a flood. He could stand almost anything except the success of his brother. What we are saying is that no person understands himself or herself until he or she comes face to face with the fact that there is something tragically wrong in our human nature that by ourselves we are unable to manage.

In this regard we often deceive ourselves because sin has an insidious way of disguising itself. Sometimes sin is gross and terrible. It blasphemes with oaths that offend all people. It wallows in vice. Then prosperity visits sin. It moves to a finer residence. It changes all its clothes. It is no longer indecent or obscene. Its speech is mild. Its civility is irreproachable. But at its heart it is the same old sin, self-indulgent, callous, envious, cruel, and unclean.

The tragedy of this is that my sin is not simply an individual matter but it destroys those around me. Personal sin quickly becomes social sin and social sins are destroying the society in which we live. All of the great seers have seen this. Start with the great Greek tragedies of Sophocles and Aeschylus and think your way down through Macbeth, Othello, Hamlet, Faust, Les Miserables, The Scarlet Letter and you will understand what the great literary giants of our culture have understood--the terrible way that individual sin poisons the water of our entire community.

This is what the New Testament is all about, trying to get us to take a serious view of ourselves and then to seek a cure for this malady. Go through this highly respected congregation and who of us does not need this? There are those among us who have sinned secretly and are afraid it will be found out publicly. Their lives are anxious, wondering if and when they will be exposed. Some have sinned in such a way that the shame is heavily upon them and they wonder if they will ever be able to forgive themselves. Some have sinned and have tried to keep the consequences to themselves, but they cannot; it overflows to family and loved ones.

Every person here knows what I am talking about. This is not Greek to anyone. No one understands himself until he understands this. "All have sinned," writes the Apostle Paul, "and fallen short of the glory of God. There is none righteous. Not one." No one can understand the coming of Christ until he or she understands this. That is what Christ has come to bring: life and light. He has come to free us from the power of death and sin.

Shortly before his death several years ago Dr. John Leith wrote that the most serious problems facing our society are not economic or social or political, but theological. The great question that each person must answer, if they are to grow to human maturity, is "Why am I here?" Does human life have meaning, or is it simply a senseless, meaningless episode in the history of the universe that will end in ruin without purpose or meaning? The second most important question is the question of guilt and salvation. Is there some power in the world that enables each of us as a human being to overcome the dominance of instinct and impulse and the corruption of instinct and impulse by our own self-interests?

Let us be perfectly clear about our answer. In the birth of Jesus Christ God has entered our world to save us from the power of sin and death.

One may say it is not true but one may not say it is trivial. And if it is true, it is the greatest news to ever reach our planet.