



From the Community Pulpit

December 17, 2008

A Christmas of Firsts

Travelers Christmas Eve Service

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Christmas Prayer by Rev. Melissa St. Clair

Communion Invitation by Rev. Kevin Snow

◇ COMMUNITY CHRISTIAN CHURCH ◇ 4601 MAIN STREET ◇ KANSAS CITY ◇ MISSOURI ◇ 64112 ◇ 816.561.6531 ◇
WWW.COMMUNITY-CHRISTIAN.ORG

SERMON by Robert Lee Hill

For many folks this will be an unusual Christmas. This year's holiday season will mark a "first Christmas" sort of Christmas experience for them.

For some folks we know this will be the first Christmas they've spent away from that place they've normally and traditionally called "home." For Melissa and Kevin, this will be true, and it will be interesting to hear about how they will experience Christmas here in their new home in Kansas City.

For some folks we know this will be the first Christmas they've spent in a new place, even if they've lived in their new place for several years. This will be true for Trent and Jan Jones, who, for the first time ever in their married life and in connection with this their family of faith here at Community, are absent from this service this evening. As Jan said to me a couple of weeks ago, "This will be the first Christmas I will not wake up in the home I grew up in Anthony, Kansas. This will be the first Christmas we've ever attended Community's Christmas Eve services on Christmas Eve. This year, for the first time, I will wake up with Trent and Ella on Christmas morning in our home in Lee's Summit."

For others we know this will be the

first Christmas after the death of their beloved or a lost friendship or a divorce.

For some, among the families within Community's family of faith, this will be the first Christmas they will not to have worry about the fate of their sons and daughters because they've come home from Iraq and Afghanistan. For others, here and in countless other places across the country, this will be the first Christmas that such worry has set into their souls, because their sons and daughters are, for the first time, not here, not home, and not nearly safe enough to satisfy their families.

For some in our congregation, like the Cychols, the Greenwoods, and the Kays, this will be the first Christmas they wake up, in an intentionally leisurely fashion, I might add, with a baby in the home.

For some folks we know this will be the first Christmas they can ever remember when they didn't have a job, having recently been laid off, or let go, or whatever euphemism companies use to describe what they do in their downsizing actions in this tough economy.

On the more pedestrian side of things this will be the very first Christmas without Carl Peterson at the helm as President of the Kansas City Chiefs. Whether you are experiencing ultimate glee because of this fact or this fact escapes you all together as important or

significant, for many Kansas Citians this will be the first time in 20 years when the future of their hometown football team is even more uncertain than usual.

For Republicans this will be the first Christmas season in a while when they are not anticipating one of their own re-ascending the heights of power in Washington D.C. For Republicans and Democrats and Libertarians and Green Party folks and the ever popular “None of the Above,” this will be the first Christmas in the history of our nation that will witness the rising anticipation that will culminate in the swearing in of President-Elect Barack Obama, the first African-American ever to be elected to the most powerful seat in our nation and indeed, at this time in global politics, in the world.

As I said, this year’s holiday season will indeed mark a “first Christmas” experience for many.

You’d think that such was the case with the actual “first Christmas” in Bethlehem. To our modern ears, without knowledge of similar stories from that time and before, we encounter the shepherds as if they were the first ones ever to wake up to the surprising gifts of God’s grace. But other shepherds, like David, had known of God’s merciful character and saving power.

We assume that the magi were the first to ponder curiously after the meaning of a bright star and that the bright light as described in Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels was the first to ever guide searchers and seekers after the divine. But ancient history, not to mention legend and lore, speaks of untold legions of sooth-sayers, necromancers, and wizards

who have sought after something holy by lights from above and beyond.

You’d think it would be a safe bet that the weary world of Palestine was the first and premier place awaiting the long-expected Messiah. But other places and times and peoples have also cried out plaintively “Is this the one? Is this one going to be the saving presence? Could it be that this one will bring us deliverance?”

So where is the sense of “firstness” in the first Christmas? What’s so distinctive and special about Bethlehem’s babe for religious-leaning residents in the 21st century?

The “firstness” about God’s gift of Christ to the waiting world must come from our understanding a salient, eternal truth, that in Christ Jesus – born of Mary in Bethlehem, watched over and cared for by Joseph, illuminated by the light of a shining star, attended by shepherds, adored by Magi, lullabied by angels – we see for the first time a strange admixture of elements coming together. It is in his life that we will see how so many “firsts” accrue to Jesus’ identity and mission.

In Christ we will see for the first time how a Messiah subjects himself to be baptized, to bear in his own life the humbling ritual of submission to a set-apart way of life.

In Christ we will see for the first time a Messiah and his cousin conjoin to do ministry together.

And it will be in Christ that we will behold for the first time how all demographic groups and all age groups and all ethnicities of all sorts of folks are

roundly criticized and unconditionally loved.

It is in Christ that we hear how the “firstness” of life is not all it’s cracked up to be: “...[the] first shall be last and the last shall be first.”¹

It is in Christ’s challenging teaching to James and John that we see that “firstness” has to do with being supreme in service, highest in helping others, the pinnacle of proffering one’s life for another in need.²

And it is in Christ, year after year, season after season, here and elsewhere, whether in a new “first” home or a tired old one, that we see that the real Christmas “firstness” has to do more with the gifts of God’s love in Christ and what it will first do with and to us.

Could it be that this is why we come eagerly, clamoring back to the manger each year, to see if God can do a miracle in us, in the manger of our hearts, and make us brand new, and that we will know it for maybe the very first time in our lives?

Could it be that we’d like to see God touch us with mystery and help us to know life at its savory best, in all of its splendor and wonder, like we once did? Like we did when we took our first steps or were first baptized or tasted barbecue for the first time or had our first kiss or tasted the sacrament of communion for the first time?

Could it be that we hover over a manger, here or anywhere else, not only to reaffirm Christ born in the world once more, but to welcome the birth of God’s love in our lives, with such a love making us brand new, awaking us to the “real reality” and a non-hackneyed

understanding of “the first day of the rest of our lives”?

So, let us consider, however we are experiencing this year’s Christmas, how perhaps it truly can be a “first-time” encounter. Or at least we’d like it to be. Because we all want to be, we all need to be, made brand new. And we all are seeking some new first-hand manner and method by which to head out into some fresh new existential territory, not to secure first-place status, alluring as that might be, but to know the truth of T.S. Eliot’s words in “*Little Gidding*” at the end of his monumental *Four Quartets*:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

May we each know Christ’s loving presence in a first-time way this Christmas, and in the midst of a Christmas of firsts may the first thing that leaps from our lips be that which God pronounced in the form of a little baby in Bethlehem: “I love you.”

I love you, and may God bless us all this Christmas. AMEN

NOTES

¹ Matthew 19:30.

² See Mark 10:35-45.

Communion Invitation

by
Rev. Kevin Snow

It is amazing to think how far we've come in regard to the cell phone. Think about how many things a cell phone can do these days. First and foremost, they allow us to talk to one another, anytime, anywhere. If we don't have the time or need for a full conversation, we can send text messages or E-mail. Can't find where you're going? Use your web browser to search for the address, and then you can use your built-in GPS navigation to get turn-by-turn directions. Forget your camera at home? Not to worry, today's cell phones come with cameras and video recorders. Depending on your need, your cell phone is ready to provide. The beautiful thing about the Lord's Supper is its ability to provide for a multitude of needs at all times. Perhaps tonight, you are able to identify with the sacrifice Christ made, as his death reconciles us with God and with one another. For another person, the table represents the joy that is expressed in the sharing of the bread and the cup, and in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Others resonate with the openness and welcome that is extended from the table to friends and family, strangers and sojourners, those who are alike and those who are different. As we look forward to "the firsts" that will occur this Christmas, Melissa and I will participate in a first Christmas away from home. We will likely communicate with our families via cell phone, but while we will miss the family meal, we will each participate in this communion meal. As we travel this Christmas, many of us will be separated by distance and time, but we are reconnected in a most intimate way around the Communion table.

Travelers Christmas Eve Prayer

by
Rev. Melissa St. Clair

God of grace and truth—
Glory to you in the highest heaven!

Like Isaiah, we give you thanks for delivering us from darkness to light;
for increasing our joy;
for the promise of a Prince of Peace.

Like Luke, we recount what it is to travel from one's residence to another land—
even a place that can be called home.

Like John, you have called us into the world to testify to the light, so that others might believe through your work in us.

On this night, our hearts are full of so many emotions— hope anticipation joy sorrow
love fear fulfillment peace
and those that no words can adequately describe...

Each one is known to you and felt by you.

We ask your blessing upon those who will be traveling in the week to come;
may each mile be safe.

We ask your blessing upon those whom we named this evening aloud and in our hearts;
may they know your calming & healing embrace.

We ask your blessing upon those who will be experiencing "firsts" this Christmas;
may they find meaning in the midst of change
and comfort in the constancy of your presence.

As we continue to prepare our hearts and minds this Advent season—

May we recapture the hope you offer through the work of the Holy Spirit.

May we refine our efforts for peace with justice.
May we reclaim the joy you have embedded in our very fiber.

May we remember the depth and breadth and width of your love for each of us.

We pray all these things in the name of the true light, Jesus the Christ. Amen.