



From the Community Pulpit

December 24, 2008

CHRIST:

Mysterious Stranger in the Straw

#5 in the "Meet Me at the Manger!" series

Christmas Eve Services - 12 noon, 4 pm, 7 pm, 11 pm

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Christmas Prayer by Rev. Melissa St. Clair

Offertory 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

Welcome! And Merry Christmas! We're so glad you're here tonight.

If this is your first time to be in Community's sanctuary, we're so glad you chose to be in this place. We hope we'll see you again.

If you're a newcomer to the city or to the state or tonight's state of being, please know that you are welcome, too; you are among fellows-seekers.

And to Community members and long-time friends, welcome and abundant blessings on you as well.

You've all braved the cold and gathered yourselves and your souls together with others in a community of wonder. I join you in believing that there's really no better place in the world to be than right here, ready to receive the blessings from the manger. "*Borta bra men hemma bäst*" - "Away is good, but home is best" - goes the Swedish proverb that you can behold at almost every turn down in Lindsborg, Kansas. But tonight "away" and "home" are synonyms, or, at the very least, nonsensical, for we stand closer together as siblings in the human family than ever before.

Tonight is that moment when all faces are beautiful and welcome and all of our souls are clarified. This is that time when we embrace the gifts God has for the world in all of its complicated, joyous, invigorating, inspiring messiness and watch in wonder at all of the beauty, particularly the crystalline beauty brought by the snow!

We are here for the carols and the lights and the feelings that abound in this service. But those facets of our experiences are tied to the core of our hearts' desires: we yearn to listen to the story once again, to hear the accounts of Jesus' birth, and to bring our awe and reverence in response.

And accounts of Jesus' birth and our responses to it have to do with a Mysterious Stranger in the Straw.

A MYSTERY -

Christmas defies any sort of final calculus. It can never be put into propositional form that demands a thumbs-up/ thumbs-down vote. God's mysteries are immense. Babies and music and the world's befuddling ways are like that.

Poet and children's author Madeleine L'Engle has it just right:

This is the irrational season

When love blooms bright and wild

Had Mary been filled with reason

*There'd have been no room for the child.*¹

The apostle Paul offered equal eloquence when he said to the church at Corinth, "*Lo, I tell you a mystery.... we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye....*"² He reminded his protegee Timothy, "*...the mystery of our religion is great....*"³

There's certainly a mystery about the dating for Christ's actual birthday. Up until the fourth century, The Nativity of the Lord was celebrated on January 6th, what we now call the feast of Epiphany. And while Eastern churches - Russian, Greek, Serbian and other Orthodox congregations - would still maintain this ancient observance, the rest of the Church, by the year 336, had somehow moved its celebration of the birth of Jesus off of a day which focused not only on the birth but other activities associated with Jesus' childhood and growth into his mission as The Messiah. And thus the majority of the Christian world has its Christmas observances to December.⁴

Mystery also surrounds us on this particular Christmas Eve in the form of the weather. As we gather for Christmas Eve services Kansas City is blanketed with snow. If you're not driving or at a bus stop, the fluffy gift from the sky is beautiful. If you're a child or a teenager skimming down a hillside, the

blanket of snow is a thrilling adventure. If you're simply inside watching and wondering, you receive yet another sign of God's grace, another angle on a wondrous mystery: rounding every corner, smoothing every rough edge, quieting the din of our busy-ness, softening every footfall, hushing (even if only for a moment) the crash of the world's brutality, covering every trash heap and dumpster (everywhere!), snow makes the shape and appearance of the world brand new.

The graceful mystery of snow reminds us of the graceful mystery of God in Christ that makes everything brand new. We are reminded, again, God will never give up on you and me. God loves us forever, and wants us to follow Christ's example of love and forgiveness.

Because the manger holds a great and magnificent mystery that cannot be defined by mere human talk, we must sing. Because it cannot be defined by loveless logic, we remember Einstein's keen insight that "*Imagination is more important than knowledge.*" And because it cannot be contained by any formulaic recipe or dismissive dogma, we open our hearts to the stunning revelations of prayer.

But also note with me that this mystery is strange. Christ is not only mysterious, he is ...

THE STRANGER-

This is why the opening words of John's gospel are so appropriate for tonight and why the Church has always seen fit to include in its lectionary a reading from John 1:1-14 for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. These words about the logos - the Word of God made flesh (and sinew and tendon and blood and tissue) - are more than mystical incantations. They are passingly strange and they resonate with the passingly strange portions of our souls that know there is something beyond ourselves that we must have or we will be spiritually dead. On Christmas Eve we give voice to a daring, undaunted declaration: there is something more than mundane struggling day after day as our fate; we are destined, as we always have been, to be God's children and *not* petty blobs of protoplasm randomly spotted on a small blue ball hovering in the midst of a ceaselessly expanding and all together indifferent universe. We are here *on purpose!* The Word made flesh offers this strange, abiding truth: "*God became like us so that we might become like God.*"⁵ Not to become God. No one can do that. But to become like unto the divine. To come into a true claim upon the status God gave us when we were born: divine dust.

This is what is at the heart of what we call "The

Incarnation." "*Because God took on human flesh, human flesh is made holy. Even lowly and dusty feet, if they carry God's message, are beautiful.*"⁶ "...things that we would prefer to keep separate - the holy and the profane - have come together in a ... smelly stable."⁷

Ephraem of Syria, early church poet and preacher, described by the folks within the Syrian Church as "The Harp of the Holy Spirit"⁸, says that Christmas is the day when "the creator of all things became the restorer. He gave them back their former beauty."⁹

And behold how the beauty is made real. There is a mystery. And it is passingly, wondrously, beautifully strange. And it happens in the middle of the straw!

THE STRAW -

Instead of a palatial domicile, a stable serves as Jesus' birthing room. Instead of a fire-and-safety-certified, hazard-free, officially-approved baby bed, a manger serves as his resting place. A Manger. Not ethereal, set upon a cloud - why does divinity always have to repose on clouds!? - but tethered to the earth. Not some indistinct idea of some uncertain principle, but crudely, impertinently placed in a rough manger full of tough straw. The one who would become the very bread of life for a world spiritually famished is placed in a feeding trough for animals.

And, if you will pardon a stinker of a pun, this just may be "the straw that breaks the camel's back" of our petty presumptuousness. For if God can do this - make the strange mystery of love become real in the middle of the most humbling and rude circumstance - then God really can do anything, even change us, even move us to some new plain of caring compassion for the world, inspire us to some new depth of tenderness with one another, lead us to some new heights of understanding about ourselves.

This past July one of the great preachers of America, Dr. Caesar Arthur Walter Clark, at the young age of 93, took his last breath. You probably will not find his picture or his obituary in the special end-of-the-year edition of *People* magazine. But rest assured, we shall not see the likes of Dr. Clark for a good long while. He was a preacher's preacher, a true prince of the pulpit. At the physical height of about 5'6" (at his tallest!) he still stood tall and regal as the pastor of the Good Street Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, for more than 50 years. During that time, he was released by his congregation for 25 weeks or more each year to preach elsewhere in revivals across the land. During his preaching career he became, next

to Billy Graham, in terms of sheer numbers, the greatest, most prolific revivalist this nation has ever known. And yet, and yet... and yet, Dr. Clark knew something of the astoundingly strange mystery of Christ in the straw and of preaching about Christ. Many would be shocked to hear a statement he made, including my dear friend Emanuel Cleaver, who grew up in Texas listening to Clark's powerful preaching whenever Dr. Clark, came through Waxahachie, Texas. (In Emanuel's slow cadence at the beginning of each of his sermonizings you can hear Caesar Clark.) Into the maturity of his preaching career, Dr. Clark made a startling statement. He wondered, he said, if all of his preaching and proclamations, what others would call his monumental ministry, would really only amount to "*an embarrassed stammering*."¹⁰

Yes, the Mysterious Stranger in the Straw causes us to stutter and stammer in the face of the stunning realities which God in Christ has come to establish in our hearts:

- *You really can be made whole.*
- *You really do have a high, beautiful, important purpose on this earth;*
- *There really is more forgiveness in God than there is sin in the world.*

Now, in response to the mysterious stranger in the manger, whatever we do, we surely must do the following:

- (1) Like we are doing now, *gather in the bonds of a caring community*. Ultimately, human life is a "we" proposition. The human condition is always moved forward in concert, together. We are strongest, healthiest, most mature, most empowered, most tender, most creative when we are together.
- (2) *Let wonder loose in your life*, risking the world's scoffing, if need be. Liberate your capacity to be full of awe and reverence. Laugh and love and do so through your mouth and your heart – wide open in gawking delight. And who among us wouldn't gawk at the audacity of God's grace when we know that "[i]n Jesus' birth the wonder [of a locale birth] is extrapolated across the screen of all creation and all history as God-birth"!¹¹ And when you let wonder loose in your life, don't be surprised if you liberate some wondering in someone else's as well.
- (3) *And rejoice! Rejoice! And rejoice again*. For we were made for rejoicing and the mysteriously strange and astonishing event of singing. Rejoice in your singing and rejoice in the candles and

rejoice in the closeness of those next to you. Rejoice even in this poem, which is another way for my soul to sing and rejoice with you on Christmas Eve:

Mysterious Stranger in The Straw

The mystery –
a holy conundrum,
a magnificent puzzle,
a sacred enigma,
beyond all finite reckonings –
is here.

Strange in its beauty,
reflecting the strange light
in our eyes,
the mystery now in our hands
to share amidst rough straw
and the rude blessings of love
and the crude caress of human flesh
upon the earth and
throughout all the mansions of
God's heart.

Forever and ever
and ever,
it is so;
and so let it be,
until grace is no longer a stranger
and love comes home for good.

Amen. Merry Christmas and may God bless each and everyone, here and everywhere!

NOTES

- ¹ Madeleine L'Engle, *Glimpses of Grace: Daily Thoughts and Reflections* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p.103.
- ² I Cor. 15:5.
- ³ I Tim. 3:16.
- ⁴ See Greg Pennoyer and Gregory Wolfe, eds., *God With Us: Rediscovering The Meaning of Christmas* (Brewster, Massachusetts; Paraclete Press, 2007), p. 124.
- ⁵ The original phrase is Athanasius'.
- ⁶ See Isaiah 52:7 and *God With Us* p. 127.
- ⁷ *God With Us*, p. 127.
- ⁸ Joseph F. Kelley, *Origins of Christmas* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2004), p. 115.
- ⁹ *God With Us*, p. 127.
- ¹⁰ Eddie S. O'Neal, "An Embarrassed Stammering," *The African American Pulpit*, Winter 1999-2000, pp. 83-87, quoted in *The Times Picayune* (New Orleans, La., 1972)
- ¹¹ *God With Us*, p. 3.

Offertory Invitation
by
Rev. Kevin Snow

A story has grown on me over the past couple of weeks. The story sounds like it could be scripture, but as William Barclay notes, it's only legend. As the story goes, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were on their way to Egypt, when they grew tired from traveling, and decided to rest in a nearby cave overnight. The night was very cold, and a layer of frost was already beginning to form across the ground. A small spider was in the cave, and recognizing Jesus' magnificence, wanted to do something to keep the child warm overnight. The spider decided to do the only thing it could by spinning a large web across the cave's entrance to act as a curtain against the cold. After the spider had finished, a detachment of Herod's soldiers approached the cave, seeking to fulfill Herod's horrific orders. However, just as the soldiers were about to tear through the frost covered web and search the cave, the captain said, "Look at the perfection of this undisturbed web, no one could have entered this cave without disturbing it." So the soldiers passed on, leaving the holy family undisturbed. This story parallels the decorating of modern Christmas trees with shimmering tinsel, which reminds us of the spider's web, covered with the night's frost. Today, the spider's gift reminds us that each gift, no matter how small, is remembered and treasured by Christ.

Christmas Prayer
by
Rev. Melissa St. Clair

God of hope, peace, joy, and love,

As we light the fifth and final candle on the Advent wreath,
we rekindle our love for your son, Jesus the Christ – the life that is the light of all people.

As we lift our voices in song,
we rejoice with the heavenly host, who praised you saying,
"Glory to God in the highest heaven!"

As we hear your word preached,
we are reconnected with you, the Word,
through whom all things came into being.

As we gather at table,
we remember the human vulnerability
and the divine strength of your Word made flesh.

And as we pray this day,
we remember the greatest gift ever
given or received – the gift of a Savior, who
is the Messiah, the Lord
who entered into the world as a crying
baby,
with the needs and afflictions we each face,
with the hope each new child brings,
and with a love for humankind so
great it touches our lives
with each beating of our hearts.

In the name of the Christ child we pray. Amen.