

From the Community Pulpit  
**“A Strange Name for a Baby”**

#6 in the *“Christmas Eyewitnesses”* series

Texts: Matthew 1:21, 25; Luke 1:31, 2:21; John 1:1-14

**Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill**

Christmas Eve – 12 noon, 4 p.m., 7 p.m., 11 p.m.

Friday, December 24, 2010

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Merry Christmas! It's good to see you, and it's so good to be with you. More than you'll ever really know, tonight, this Christmas Eve, it's so very good to be with you here, and to share the Christmas message with you.

Each year, for the past several years, on Christmas Eve morning, I remember Reinhold Niebuhr's challenge that people mostly need poetry - and not prose - at Christmastime.<sup>1</sup> And so, I've offered poems during our Christmas Eve services here at Community. In a departure from my normal practice of concluding my Christmas Message with a freshly composed poem, I want to start off with one. Please receive this poetic effort as it is intended, as a declaration of hope, a pronouncement of love, a commentary on the grace that is possible for us all.

***What Eyes Have Seen***

*What eyes have seen  
tongues now proclaim.  
What ears have heard  
songs now refrain.*

*The mother's calm,  
the angels' peace,  
the shepherds' knees,  
the magi's grace.*

*No heart conceives  
this holy night;  
we now receive  
by greater light.*

*The grand bequest  
resounds with care,  
and hope careens  
both near and far.*

*What gift to bring,  
how high or low?  
We rise to sing  
and love bestow!*

*God does prepare  
for souls who trust  
this grand affair  
of mercy just.*

*The gentle proof  
of life anew  
is found in truth  
in flesh imbued.*

*See now what is  
a gift divine:  
God comes to raise  
the world to life.*

*What eyes have seen  
tongues now proclaim.  
What ears have heard  
songs now refrain.*

Our trek along the Nativity landscape now wends its way to the Christmas manger. At the end of our four week journey through the sacred Advent season, only one character among the Christmas Eyewitnesses remains to be celebrated. You and I, we all of us know who it is. The central character in the great Christmas drama is the little baby, the infant Jesus, in the manger.

Over the course of our explorations of the Christmas Eyewitnesses we've been challenged by the prophets' foretelling of the coming of the Messiah. We've also been inspired by the intriguing parallels between the Innkeeper and ourselves. Mary's attraction is clearer to us now, and we're certainly more mindful of what the Magi saw. Joseph's important role in the Christmas story, too, has been discovered all over again by many, and brought into bright relief for the first time for some.

But now it's time for "the reason for the season." That, of course, would be a truly maudlin and hackneyed phrase if it weren't also so magnificently true. In the character of the baby Jesus, we come to the gist of the Christmas story.

This character may disappoint some of us, since there's an obvious lack of dialogue on Jesus' part. His mute report as an eyewitness could serve to baffle us. Obviously, we comprehend the Christmas story more by what others saw and said about him than by what he said or did in his infancy.

But from of the manger there *is* a proclamation, and it has to do with the name of the Holy Infant.

The theological tenet of the entire Christmas story, as we observed at the outset of our journey to this manger, is called "Incarnation." But the gospel writers have a strange way of talking about "Incarnation." Instead of an abstraction, they simply point to the name of the baby. And it's strange name, indeed.

There is no impressive technological wonderment that can reveal to us what this Incarnation means. There is no show of force or dynamic of the usual persuasion. Just the name of the child. This is how the gospels understand Jesus giving voice to his life and worth and mission.

In Luke, the gospel with the most familiar part of the Christmas story, the angel Gabriel directs Mary to name the new Messiah baby "Jesus."<sup>2</sup> And she does.<sup>3</sup>

In Matthew's gospel, the direction is given by another angel to Joseph in a dream.<sup>4</sup> Plus there's a citing of the prophet Isaiah and the inclusion of the name "Emmanuel."<sup>5</sup>

And in John's gospel, even though we don't have one smidgeon of the familiar Christmas story to guide us, another name is, indirectly, given to the Christ Child.<sup>6</sup> The Messiah is to be grasped as the Logos, the Word made flesh. The very Logos, the very Word of God. In other words, if you've seen this baby, you've seen and heard God.

But let's be honest this evening and admit that these are strange names for a baby. Such very strange names.

### *Strange Names*

In Hebrew, "Jesus", "Yeshua," means "the Lord saves." And Emmanuel means "God with us." And the Logos ("Word") in John's gospel means simply the very spoken word of the Divine Creator of the Universe.

Any one of these can qualify as a strange name for a baby. Can't you hear the catcalls on the playground at recess. "There he is, little 'the Lord saves us.'" "Hey, there he goes, a pint size 'God-with-us.'" "What do you know, here comes little 'Logos'"

I once thought there were no stranger names for children than what William Faulkner included for the names of the Snopes family. In Faulkner's mythical "Yoknapawpha County" in his *Snopes* Trilogy of novels, he outlines the Snopes family tree. One of the children is named "St. Elmo Snopes." Another is christened "Montgomery Ward Snopes." And still another is called "Wall Street Panic Snopes." Strange, weird names, for sure.

A name can also be strange but in an unusually warm and inviting way. On an airplane flight several years ago, I listened to the flight attendant as she instructed all of us passengers about the appropriate procedures for exiting the plane in the event of a premature downing and subsequent safe landing. In contrast to most flight instructions, the guidance this time was powerfully, uncharacteristically different. The attendant instructing us had a lapel pin with some wings on it and the word "*Treasure*" clearly, visibly imprinted on top of it. "*Treasure*"? What kind of treasure? I wondered. When I asked the attendant the meaning of the word on her lapel pin, she said it was her given name. "*Treasure*." Strange, but warm and inviting.

The Bible is full of strange sounding names with even stranger meanings. Remember Hosea, who named two of his children, *Loruhamah* (no more mercy), *Loammi* (not my people)? Or consider the beginning of Matthew's gospel, where Matthew lists Jesus' genealogy or the end of Paul's epistle to the church Rome where the great Apostle gives a shout out to 27 people with names that are, for many, tongue-twisters for sure.

It could easily be argued that the name for the Christ Child is the strangest name of all in the Bible and in the world. "The Lord Saves." "God-with-us." "Logos."

May I offer you tonight the contemporary rendering of all these names, a new equivalency for "Emmanuel," "Jesus," "Logos"? Are you ready? Here it is: Love.

Love is the name we can give to the gift of the Christ Child. Love is the rubric and the name and the core of the Christmas message. This is central issue of all of our lives: love. The message of and by and through the strangely named baby in the manger is this: love conquers all – all delays, all despair, all deflations, all dejections, all debasing, all debilitations, all devaluing. Love conquers all. There is nothing made by human hands nor conjurable by the craftiest aspects of human imagination that can

stop love's power. Love is God's ultimate trump card in the game of earthly existence. We were made for love, and, the Christmas drama tells us, we were made *by* love.

Carl Jung discovered a Latin phrase by Erasmus and had it inscribed above the doorway of his home and eventually on his tombstone: "*VOCATUS ATQUE NON VOCATUS DEUS ADERIT.*" "*Bidden or unbidden, God is here.*" This season, on Christmas Eve night, in the year of the Common Era, Anno Domini to Christians, 2010, we could just as easily and appropriately say "Bidden or unbidden, Love is here!" There is no greater declaration, no finer preachment, no more direly needed truth: Love is here!

### ***Conclusion: God Is Here!***

I close with this story which I was glad to share with you a while back, and I'm glad to share again tonight.

Back in the spring, I was privileged to officiate at the wedding of Deidre Kalman and Wade Walker on a sunny Saturday afternoon at Somerset Vineyard.

An unanticipated gift graced the day which celebrated Deidre's and Wade's union. In the beauty of that bucolic Kansas setting, the wedding party proceeded down the hillside to the place of the ceremony by a small lake.

Everyone was beautiful – attendants, mothers, flower girl, friends, and, of course, the bride and groom. And then I spoke the words I came to say: "Dearly Beloved we are gathered together in the presence of God and in the face of this company to witness and to bless the joining of this woman and this man in holy matrimony."

Then I came to the conclusion of the opening welcome, "So Deidre and Wade are here. And we are here, for we would be no place else on the face of the earth. And Another is here, God is here...."

And before I could get out the rest of the phrase (“... to witness and to bless and to make yet holier still this marriage...”), little Christina Johnson, the petite 5-year-old flower girl, blurted out “God is here, Mama! God is here!”

Talking with Christina’s mother after the ceremony - while also telling Christina my thanks for the best 7-word sermon I had heard in a long time - I found out information that made the moment even more poignant. Christina’s father died before she was born, killed in action in Iraq. Yet, despite that gaping hole in her life, despite that existential deficit, she and her mother spoke to God every night in their prayers, and she practiced, daily, the presence of God. “God is here, Mama! God is here!”

God is here! Christina was also saying “Love is here!”

Such a strange name for a baby. But such a right and necessary and redeeming name.

In the strange name of the baby born in Bethlehem – Emmanuel, Jesus, Logos – and within our hearts tonight, in the name of the Love given to the world at Christmas, God bless us all, I love you, and Merry Christmas everyone! Amen.

#### NOTES

- 1 See Reinhold Niebuhr, "A Christmas Service in Retrospect," in *Essays in Applied Theology* (New York: Meridian, 1959,
- 2 Luke 1:31.
- 3 Luke 2:21.
- 4 Matthew 2:20.
- 5 Matthew 2:23.
- 6 John 1:1-14