

From the Community Pulpit
“The First Christmases”

#6 in the CHRISTMASTIMES series

Texts: Isaiah 9:2-7, Luke 2:1-14, John 1:1-14

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Saturday, December 24, 2011

12 noon (Narthex/Atrium), 4:00 p.m., 7:00 p.m., 11:00 p.m.(Sanctuary)

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Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas, and a special greeting to you and you and you, to all of us, on this occasion, the very “first” Christmas of our lives. Yes, you heard right. This is a “first Christmas” experience for all of us.

II. The historical “first Christmas”

By “first Christmas” I don’t mean only the first historical Christmas that surrounded Jesus’ birth, according to the scriptures.... in a humble stable, which was actually very likely a rough and rude cave-like structure, where domesticated animals were kept and secured.... in the midst of a tax season, or at least at the census-taking time leading up to the tax season.... in Bethlehem, a forgotten town in a backwater province of a legioned empire.... with “Bethlehem” meaning the “house of Bread,” thus making it so fitting and right – the “house of Bread” welcoming the very “Bread of Life” into the world.

Now, never mind that our picturesque combination of shepherds (from Luke only) and magi (from Matthew only) is a logistic and theological conundrum of a conflation, spanning over two years time. This still this historical “first Christmas” – hovered over by angels, guarded by peasants,

covered with astrologers' gifts, suffused by the devotion of Mary and the loyalty of Joseph – is precious. Despite all disputes, *something* happened there in Bethlehem and in all the contiguous area that surrounded Bethlehem and Nazareth and Jerusalem and the wide, waiting world. No ordinary baby was born but rather One who would be called “Messiah,” “Savior.”

There is that “first Christmas,” the historical “first Christmas.” And there is generative power in that foundational event beyond anything we can imagine.

But there is more.

II. The personal “first Christmases”

There are the personal “first Christmases” that we recollect from childhood and family get-togethers and our own personal journeys. Much of these “first Christmases” are lost to memory. But the feelings associated with them – profound and deep, resonating over the years, as we entertain them unawares – remain. Like a cascading waterfall they come back every year in our hearts and minds and souls:

- The first Christmas we recall opening presents.
- The first Christmas we knew the difference between Santa Claus and a baby named Jesus.
- The first Christmas we can recall being away from home.
- The first Christmas we heard “*Silent Night*” sung by a choir.
- Or the first Christmas we ever heard “*O Holy Night*” sung in the original French.

- Or the first Christmas we saw snow.
- Or the first Christmas we tasted egg nog.
- Or the first Christmas we heard "*Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer.*"
- Or the first Christmas we remembered to have enough tools (and the right tools!) to assemble all the toys.
- Or the first Christmas we went to a midnight service.
- Or the first Christmas we realized the whole operation hasn't ever been about the magi giving precious gifts but about them being humble enough to kneel and receive a gift – the gift of a new life, a new direction home, forever.

These are among those "first Christmases," to be sure, the personal "first Christmases" recollected from the treasured halls of memory. In this gathering tonight, there are as many of those "first Christmases" being reprised in our minds as there are Christmas lights on the Plaza.

But there is still more.

III. The existential "first Christmases"

There are tonight's existential "first Christmases."

For some this is the first Christmas in a long time when all the family has been all together in one place.

Or it's the first Christmas for you as newlyweds.

Or it's your first Christmas at Community.

Or it's your first Christmas with a new baby in your home.

Or it's the first Christmas you can recall the word "Occupy" being associated with a protest movement.

Or it's the first Christmas when your loved one is home at last, no longer in uniform.

Or it's your first Christmas without your beloved.

Or it's your first Christmas sober.

Or it's the first Christmas you've ever heard "*Sweet Little Jesus Boy.*"

Or it's the first Christmas you've ever seen a drum set as a part of a Christmas Eve celebration.

And *still* there is more!

IV. For all of us, this can be a "first Christmas" spiritually, in our essence

For all of us this can be a first Christmas to know and receive the warming truth, the brute fact that we really can be human after all.

This is the message from the manger back then which is the same message to our hearts now.

Tonight, Christmas Eve, December 24, 2011, we really can be real, we really can be human, after all. No need for sham or pretentious supposing. We can be open and receptive and honest with God and with one another. And being open and receptive to what God desires to give us, to all of us, we can be made whole.

And for all of us this can also be the first Christmas to be brave enough to share Christmas with others, those who wonder if it's true, if they, too, like Joseph and Mary, can be registered in a holy census, enrolled in the sacred story of God's healing gift for a wounded world.

My prayer tonight is that this Christmas will be exactly like that for you and yours.

I urgently hope and trust you will let this be a "first Christmas" moment

for your own life and that you'll share it with others so that this Christmastime will be for them, for us all, the first of many to come, a continuous "first Christmas" of hope and love and peace and joy.

As has been my practice on Christmas Eve for many years here at Community – ever mindful of Reinhold Niebuhr's caution that what folks want most of all at Christmas is not a lengthy sermon but the compelling comfort and succinct mystery of poetry, and thankful for your kind reception – I'd like to offer a poem.

Remember the First Christmas

*Remember the first Christmas,
amidst phantasms of empire,
at the crossing of time and treasure,
redefining what power is.*

*Recall the prophetic anticipations,
the solace of grizzled men
annealing every bruising;
think of stumps greening with new shoots.*

*Retrace the shepherds' vigil,
the magi's trek, the angels' hovering
at the stabled creche;
and honor Mary's assurance: "Fear not."*

*Recollect the Herod-haunted world
and its colossal mistaking,
confusing promise with threat,
blood with dominion.*

*And yet, remember, still,
that the boots of the tramping warrior
did not snuff out the light,
could not stifle love's perduring.*

*Reprise the first Christmas then
with your own first Christmas now,
among sheltering love and guiding lights
and surprising gifts.*

*Remember, now, this first Christmas,
beyond palaces and palisades,
when prose cannot suppose,
and only poetry will do.*

*Remember this first Christmas
of your own journey –
when you, a holy child, too,
find your own song and set it loose in the world.*

*Relive the first Christmas, of hope's' arriving,
with new life rising in you and then
rejoice that this Christmas
is the first of many to come, tonight and forever.*

Merry Christmas, everyone! I love you. God bless us all. AMEN.