

God in the Mirror of Christmas: A Child

Advent IV

Scripture: Hebrews 11-4; Luke 2:1-7

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Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The thing that I want to say to you this morning is really quite simple. I broached the subject last week; it is the realization on my part of that tension within the New Testament between the Christmas story and what it mirrors about God, and the post-Easter biblical material that speaks of the triumph and the reign and the coming again of Jesus with power to reign and to judge. As I indicated last week, I have lived with that tension for years and years and I never recognized the tension. It never struck me that to speak about the one who came in poverty and humility and then to speak about that one who came as coming again with the splendor of royal power was giving me two pictures of God, two mirrors.

It was reflecting God in two contrasting ways: the mirror of Christmas, that is the mirror of the God with the human face— the God who is in the manger as a child in all of the vulnerability and all of the beauty of that moment which we will celebrate again tomorrow evening – and the God of the rest of the New Testament is the same old God, the same almighty, omnipotent God who is in control, the God who at the right moment will send the Son and the Son will come in glory and splendor with power to reign and to judge, and there will be the vindication of the righteous and there will be vengeance on the wicked. That whole judgment scene of the God in control, the sovereign Lord of history, that picture of the New Testament is strung throughout the whole New Testament, and if you want to read it in all of its bare horror, read the book of Revelation. That picture is in contrast to what the Christmas story mirrors about the nature of God.

Last week we read in John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the divine intention, and the divine intention became flesh and dwelt among us. No one has ever seen God but the son has revealed God." Or Paul's statement "We have seen the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Or the statement from the Epistle to the Hebrews that I read a moment ago, where how could it be more explicit? Jesus is spoken of as the Son who is the exact image of God, the reflection of the exact nature of God. That's the Christmas story, and what God is mirrored as being in the Christmas story is a God of vulnerability and ultimately,

finally, a God of love. Christmas is about heaven touching earth with love. Christmas mirrors a God who moves by love to persuade, but never coerce, for the child that is the central focus of this Christmas season is a child with all of the wonder of a child, dependent, vulnerable, beautiful, innocent, harmless - there is a picture of God.

But that stands in such sharp contrast to the revelation of God in the rest of the story, almost as if Christmas happened and the life of Jesus happened, Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, counseling compassion over against the good and the evil, the righteous and the unrighteous as reflective of God's attitude and spirit. Jesus of the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus of the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus - all those stories of the God who draws near, the God who is full of grace, the God who is accessible, the God who is approachable. Jesus of Passion Week who goes right into Jerusalem and speaks his truth to power and is crucified for it, not resisting. Resisting only violent response, praying finally for his enemies, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" - that Jesus gets jettisoned on Easter, and from there on the Christian story and the Christian Church has become one triumphalistic procession down through the centuries, waiting for that one who came in humility and vulnerability, to come in smashing glory.

How could I preach for years and years and years and not feel that contradiction? And which God do we choose? Well, of course, we choose the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Of course we choose the God who will bring history to its culmination point. Of course we will choose the God who has time in his hand, who will call the shots, who will send the Son in clouds of glory to judge the quick and the dead, finally to reign. Of course, that's the God we will choose, the God we can worship. That's the God we can be secure with, that's the God who can set things right.

And what happens to the God of the child? What happens to the God mirrored at Christmas? What happens to the God with a human face? We talked about that last week, but I want to say this week one further insight on this whole week, and that is that, in spite of the fact that we have moved too quickly from Christmas, in spite of the fact that we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus," nonetheless, every year we come back to Christmas. We can't forget it. We can't get it out of our system. We can't get it out of our bones. Every year we come back to this moment. Every year we begin to experience the magic and the wonder of Christmas. Every year we come again to bow before the manger that holds the child, and every year it happens again. We all know it. There is no question about it. The world is a softer place this weekend. The world is a softer place at Christmastime. The tear flows, the lump in the throat, the old carols stir something deep within us. The simple and beautiful story told again moves us.

I've already celebrated Christmas because I have gone through a couple of rehearsals for the early service for tomorrow night. So, I know the baby gets born

again, a real-live baby cries, and as I stood as one of the narrators for the story, being beautifully portrayed by our lovely young dancers and our shepherds, and Mary and Joseph, as I saw it again yesterday, I was cognizant myself of the fact that it does move you again. It happens again. It's a lovely story. It's a story that reaches the deepest part of the human being, and we come back to it every year, and it's the same old story but it's new every year and it moves us every year, and we celebrate every year, and we rejoice in it every year, and I want to submit to you that we do that because it has gotten into the marrow of our bones and we know intuitively that that story is the ultimate truth. We know that the love that came down at Christmas reflects the grain of the universe, the truth deep down in things.

You see, most of the rest of the year, we don't live that way. Most of the rest of the year, we simply get caught up in all of the power games and all of the power structures, political life, economic life, social life. We move away from Christmas and we forget the radicality of the vision that we have seen. But, for just a little while, we remember and it touches us because it is true. It is the final truth. And there is that within us that knows it is the final truth. Jesus is our window to God. Jesus isn't the only window to God. Jesus isn't everybody's window to God, but Jesus is our window to God.

I appreciate the fact that a dozen or so of you sent me the last page of *Time* magazine, the essay by Rosenblatt entitled, "God Is Not On Your Side Nor On My Side." I like the fact that so many of you thought of me when you read it, because it tells me that you are listening and that you identify with me with that kind of idea. I appreciate that fact. But, Jesus is our window, and I want to tell you, Jesus is a radical window. Jesus is a magnificent window. Jesus is a window on God that is so profound and so magnificent, that we ought not to miss it. It is so easy to take it for granted because it is the old, old story and we know the story so well, and how could we ever find anything new in it, and then one sits back for a moment, and says, "My God! Do you realize what that story is telling me about God?" It is radical! It is revolutionary! It is so radical and revolutionary that the world hasn't been able to deal with it yet.

Our old world is rocking with war again and I am sure the reason that this Advent season I was not able to live with the contradiction without at least lifting it up was the fact of current events, what is going on in our world. That often happens. One has an old story, an old tradition, and suddenly something happens to you or something happens in the world, and one sees something that was always there and one didn't see it at all! Suddenly I see it everywhere now. I see what the future, if there is to be a future, I see what it has to be. It has to be a world that is posited on the nature of God reflected in Bethlehem, in Jesus.

That is hardly the way we have lived, even though in the West Jesus has been our window. That's hardly the way we have lived. It's dangerous to live that way. It can put your national security in jeopardy, of course. But, you see, in this old

world of ours, after 9-11, it has become apparent to us what has long been true, and that is that there is no ultimate security through power or might or force of arms.

It would be political suicide for our national leaders without talking about securing this nation, but this nation is not secure, and given the technology of our world today, given where we are in our world today, it will never be secure again. It will never be secure in a world where there are those who are dispirited and despairing and hopeless and helpless and alienated and angry and full of rage – never be secure again. And so, what we really have to do is find out another way to be in this world, because power isn't going to do it. It just might be that, while we're number one, it might be the smartest, most savvy thing in the world for us to begin to create a new one world reality. You see, right now, the way it has been, might, force, power has ruled, and the international game is a vast chess game, and those analysts of international affairs plot out those chess moves. We should do this, they'll do that, and if we do this, we can checkmate at this point, because it's a power game, it's a game about winning, or at least not losing. And it isn't going to work anymore.

Our world is rocking with war and there is no security and down deep in our hearts, we know, and we keep coming back to Christmas every year and we're moved by it. Our eyes moisten again, we get a lump in our throat again, our hearts are softened again. You can feel it on the street, because down deep we know that's true, and we try to get on with life according to the only way life can be survivable, right?

Well, one wonders. We come back and we're touched, because that is the deepest truth and, if that is the deepest truth, I wonder when we're going to try it. Let me tell you about a savvy move we made in that chess game. You know it, too; it's been in the news. You know that we funded Osama bin Laden. You know that we funded and gave arms to the Taliban, right? As long as they were fighting the Soviet Union. And why did we do that? Simply because we didn't like the Soviet Union? We are smart. We knew if we could get the Soviet Union to have our own Vietnam, it would suck the life blood and resources right out of them. We'd bring them to their knees. And, by God, we did it. There are those among our leaders right now who were responsible for that policy, who are defending it, and I'm sure there are some of you out there who would say that was a good move, because the Soviet Union was brought to its knees. Didn't President Reagan call it "the evil empire"? Ah, dear friends, as long as we're in that kind of a game, we will be trying to save our necks, we will be trying to defend our borders, we will be trying to perpetuate the preeminence of our position, and it's a no-win game, ultimately.

You know the problem with the American people? We're a good people at the pinnacle of power, and Christmas has seeped into the marrow of our bones. If we could just use our power in any brutal and violent fashion, we could shape this

world up. You wouldn't have to pray. You wouldn't have to ask for God's blessing. You wouldn't have to pray "God bless America." Just turn our resources loose with no moral qualms, with no ethical consideration, just bomb 'em, baby. Bomb them into submission. We have the stuff, folks. We could do it.

But, we *can't* do it, because we have Christmas in the marrow of our bones. We have been touched by Jesus. We've seen God in the face of a child, and once you've seen God in the face of a child, you just can't go on being a mean S.O.B. anymore. That's our dilemma. A good people at the pinnacle of power who know the ultimate truth, but haven't quite dared to live by it yet. Maybe this year.