

Leaving Bethlehem

Christmastide I

Scripture: Philippians 3:12-16; Matthew 2:12-18

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

We have been to Bethlehem again and we desperately needed to go, didn't we? We needed to experience once more the Christmas mystery and miracle. And as I said last week, after having spent a couple of hours in a rehearsal for the Christmas pageant, it always seems to happen again and never disappoints us, because I think there is something deep within us that knows the truth. There is some deep intuition that the love that came down at Christmas is the ultimate truth, and that the only real power in the world is the power of love. All other power is penultimate and can only finally be overcome. The power games of the world issue in somebody on top for a while, to be toppled by another, in an ongoing desire to be number one. But there is something deep within us, when we celebrate Christmas, when we bow again at the manger, when we go to Bethlehem, there is something deep within us that knows that that is the final truth. And so, this year especially after 9-11, we had to go to Bethlehem to be reassured and to let it happen again, wash over us, to experience it once more, and indeed, we have done that and it has been good. We have found again that our hearts become more tender and the world becomes a softer place, and that is because it is true.

Sometimes I have celebrated Christmas with the angels' songs about peace on earth and wondered how could it be, when will it be? I remember one year preaching on the subject, "Peace on Earth: Promises, Promises," or "Peace on Earth: Wishful Thinking?" wondering if it maybe was just a delightful fairy tale that had no relationship to the hard reality of the world. But, this year, in our long Advent journey which has been more demanding than usual, we have discovered something else. We have discovered a tension within the New Testament itself, a tension between the God who is mirrored in the Christmas story and the God who is mirrored in the so-called Second Coming of Christ in power and glory to judge and to reign. We have discovered that the God who was mirrored in the Christmas story is a God who was mirrored as a child, a human face, that the insight of Christmas, the deepest insight of Christmas, is that God is a God of love without coercion, and that the kingdom of God will not come through any way but through the way of the child or the human. That is where the

tension is, of course, because the God we want, the omnipotent God, almighty God, that God is mirrored in that Second Coming which is the Advent theme. "When the Lord of glory comes with power to reign." But, that is in contrast to what we see in the manger of Bethlehem. That is in contradiction to the God mirrored in the Christmas story, and, as I have said to you numerous times in these past few weeks, I never felt the tension until this year. I am sure it was because we are all wrestling with what kind of a world is it going to be and what kind of response must we make, now that 9-11 has happened, and that everything has changed?

Well, really nothing has changed, but our illusion has been stripped away and we have come to see how vulnerable we are. Then we go to Bethlehem and we see the vulnerability of a child, and we find that the God mirrored in Christmas is the vulnerable God who moves by love or doesn't move at all. So, we have gone to Bethlehem. Our deepest intuition has been confirmed, our trust deepened, our hope renewed. Dear God, it was important to go to Bethlehem this year.

But we cannot linger there, can we? We have to leave Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary had to leave because the idyllic picture painted for us in the Christmas stories of the mother and the child and the animals and the manger and the star hovering overhead and shepherds adoring and angels singing - that idyllic tale was a light set in the darkness, and before long, Joseph had a dream once again and that was that he had to take mother and child and flee the area, to go to Egypt because Herod was going to seek and destroy the child. Those Wise Ones whose visit we will celebrate next Sunday, they too had another dream and had to depart, bypassing Herod's royal palace, going to their own country in another way. And we, too, leave Bethlehem, for that world which is always with us, that world filled with violence and hostility and especially now so vividly before us, a world at war, a world where terrorism is a terrifying threat for our every move, a world that is hunkered in for the long haul of a very intense struggle. And so, we have to leave Bethlehem.

And as we leave Bethlehem, the question that I would raise with you is, What difference will it make that we have been there? What difference will it make as we return to our world that we have adored at the manger of Bethlehem? What difference will it make in our response to the world that we have seen God mirrored in the Christmas story? Will it be simply business as usual? Or, will this journey have made some difference to us, impacted our thinking, changed us, transformed us, and become a catalyst to send us back as transforming agents in our world?

I suppose that I am a hopeless idealist when I hope that we have knelt at Bethlehem and really seen something life-changing. As I said a few moments ago, peace on earth? Who are you kidding? Peace on earth? Promises, promises. Peace on earth? Get real. And what I see this year as never before is that there is a connection between the manger and the angels' song. It is not a coincidence that

the angels sang about peace on earth and good will among humankind in connection with the birth of the child. That story, created as it is with all of the beautiful accoutrements of angels and shepherds and stars, that story was saying something and it was saying something intentionally and profoundly, and it is that there is a connection between God mirrored in a child and peace on earth. That's what has hit me so strongly in this Advent journey that has brought us again to Bethlehem, and now, as I leave, I wonder what difference will it make? Have I been changed and altered, has my world come into a different focus?

As I said last week, we are a good people, we American people, a good people at the pinnacle of power who have been impacted by the Christmas story. That is our dilemma. We have imbibed the Christmas story and intuitively we know it's true, and yet, what can we do with it? When we leave Bethlehem, what will we do with what we have seen and experienced once again?

Ah, the Wise Ones had to leave and go another way. And I read that paragraph from Paul just as an example of the exertion that there is in walking this Christian way, this way of Jesus. Paul, in a rather personal and individual way, spoke about his own experience of being scrupulously religious and then having been captivated by the vision, been set free from all religious performance, was free to go into the world and to press for that goal for which he had been captivated.

The Christian life, too, is a life that calls us to an exerted effort to do something, to become something. Not in order that we might gain salvation, but having seen something, to do something with it. Not attaining, but pressing on, forgetting those things that are behind and pressing forward, having seen something new, to do something with it. And here we are, American people, a Christian people in terms of this community, and we have been to Bethlehem. Now we depart. What difference will it make?

I think about the Middle East right now, and as I was thinking about this, I thought what is going on there is a microcosm of our world. What is going on in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a microcosm, because there is Israel that has all of the moral fiber of tradition over centuries and millennia, that moral law, all of that which comes down from Moses shaping that people, and they have power, and they are dealing with an alienated people, a people who have been made homeless in some respects, a people who are poor, people who seem to have a lot of sense of being victim. And what is going to happen? I see it as a microcosm because I see a powerful force with a moral sense over against an alienated, disaffected people.

You know what I am afraid is going to happen one of these days? I am afraid that the pressure that we put on Israel is going to be relaxed just enough or be disregarded, and Israel with its power, is going to move in and dominate and simply put its thumb on that region and hold it by power. Sick of all the conflict, sick of all the suicide bombings, sick of all the stone throwing, sick of all of that. Sick of all the constant violence and danger and peril - sick of it all. Get out the

tanks. Get out the guns. Get out the army. Reduce it to a state of enforced peace. That could happen. How long would it last? How secure would Israel be?

It reminds me, you see, that that is a little piece of the globe right there, but it is a picture of the whole globe. It reminds me of the Christmas story when Rome ruled the world. It was the great super power. Roman legions enforced the peace. We speak of the *Pax Romana*, which was a peace enforced. It was a peace enforced by legions and swords. It kept things in good order. But underneath the enforced peace was the seething underbelly of the human family, and imperial Rome was not the place that God chose to bring the child. Herod's court was not the place for the birth of the child. The power games and structures that are a part and parcel of the human scene in history are contradictory to that which is ultimately true and which we have spotted once again at Christmas. All of our strategic planning, all of our military might, all of that is in contradiction to that which is revealed at the heart of Christmas. And so, we leave Bethlehem, and what are we going to do?

I don't think there is any question abroad about whether or not we need to pursue the terrorists. But there are voices being raised about how much military might do you use to go after a network of people. But even that is not the issue. The real question for us, leaving Bethlehem, is how we will approach the global community and the global situation in the wake of 9-11. The U. S. A. has exactly the same power position that Rome had and, during the Cold War, it was a standoff between us and the USSR. It was a standoff, there was a balance of terror, and we all did our things fairly decently and fairly well. There was order! Might, power can ensure order. Let's acknowledge that. But once, through our own strategic planning and cleverness, we brought the USSR to its knees, what happened?

The world unraveled with all these civilizational groups rising up and all these conflicts around the globe, and now we're the lone super power. What are we going to do? Are we going to try to maintain that position by force and might? Are we going to create an anti-missile shield with billions and billions and billions of dollars in order to protect ourselves? Are we going to continue to go on and muscle our way through the world in order to maintain economic advantage? Are we going to go on into the world in all of its diplomatic relationships, throwing our weight around?

Or, are we going to see that, in a position of preeminent power, it is precisely our prerogative now to yield up some of that power and to begin to think globally? And if we would begin to think globally, giving billions and billions of dollars to international organizations, working through organizations like the United Nations and the World Court, working for global environmental control and working to rid out poverty, disease in Africa, homelessness and all of the anguish that is a part of the human scene, then we might begin to find a way for humankind to dwell securely. It is only when power yields up its prerogative that

there is the possibility for peace on earth. There is no accident between the angels' song and the birth of a child, and there is no accident between international policy on the part of a world super power and the condition of the human family. It is for us, it is in our court and, if we have seen God in the mirror of Christmas, I suppose it's too much to ask, isn't it? I suppose that I am a hopeless idealist, that masses of us who have knelt at the manger will say, "Oh, my God," and then rise up, changed.

In a couple of weeks in this place there is going to be a seminar on a Sunday afternoon led by a peace group advocating non-violence, and they presently are in Israel in the midst of the crossfire between the Palestinians and the Israelis. This peace team is going to be here on the 13th of January, talking about an alternative. There is room for good conversation about the use of force, about pacifism, about non-violent resistance, and this is a place where that conversation can take place, because what we create here is a forum. There's no party line. There is diversity of opinion, and we honor that. But, I want to go on record to say this, dear friends, acknowledging the complexity of the situation, acknowledging only a limited knowledge and understanding, this I want to say - if you have seen God in Bethlehem's child, then you know wherein lies the possibility of peace on earth and, when you leave Bethlehem, you have a hard choice to make.