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Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

December 24, 2010  
Christmas Eve

Today's sermon is taken from the Gospel of Luke.

Twenty years ago my parish, St. Paul's in Southington, belonged to something that was created by Chuck Colson from the Watergate fame; something called "Prison Fellowship." It was something that a number of our parishioners were involved in, but at Christmastime it was particularly poignant. We were all assigned to deliver gifts to various prisoners' children, and I and another person were assigned a young fellow that was located in Walcott, Connecticut. Now if you have ever been to Southington you know that Southington has this big mountain called Southington Mountain. You have to climb it to get to Walcott -- well, you have to climb it in your car, that is. It seems like it's on the other side of the world. It's like someone living in Provincetown is told you have to go to Boston and cross the bridge -- you know, it's a long trip -- but you got up Southington Mountain and into Walcott.

We were driving, and it happened to be a rainy Christmas eve, and we were looking for this house. Finally we found a small sign that told us where the house was, and it was an old farm house that sat up on a hill. We climbed the high steps to the porch, and we took the box that we had wrapped and slid it across the floor of the porch. We straightened up just in time to glimpse the face of a small boy who was in the window. He had been watching us coming up the hill, and now he announced our arrival with shouts of excitement, "They're here, grandma, they're here!" The door opened and an older woman greeted us; her gray hair was pulled back in a bun at the back of her neck. She had on a dark plain dress with a white apron. She was drying her hands with a dishtowel and explained to us that she had been doing the supper dishes. "I told you they would come!" a child's voice said from behind her. A little boy with black hair and bright dark eyes rushed to the box and he began pulling the paper off, and he went for the goodies that were inside. The woman told us that she and her grandson were all that was left of her family. The father and mother had divorced and gone their separate ways; the father was serving a life sentence in prison. The little boy had been left behind for grandma to

raise. She said, “Oh, I’m so glad you are here. He was up early this morning looking for you. He sat by that window all day. I wasn’t sure you would come, and I tried to prepare him in case of a disappointment, but he just said, ‘Don’t worry, grandma, I know they will come.’”

That young boy didn’t know it, but in a sense he was speaking for all of Christianity. A thankful people warned them; one billion of us around the world pause for a few moments this night and we pray. We knew he could come.

The prophet Isaiah, just read to us by Don, speaking in behalf of God, had promised it hundreds of years ago, “For to us a child is born; to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He has come just as promised. Those are magnificent descriptions of the long awaited Messiah, are they not? Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Handel did a wonderful job on that.

I’m glad that modern writers are not trying to find a word descriptive of Jesus. We’ve become so lacking in imagination in this high-tech age that any effort we might make would be pitiful in comparison to Isaiah. Nowadays the language of business and computers dominates our daily speech. No frills, just information. New words are being created; words that we sometimes call “techno speak.” But the strangest instance of the business mentality spreading beyond reasonable boundaries is a hospital that classifies newborn babies as (are you ready for this?) “obstetric products.” Let me say that again -- babies are now “obstetric products.”

Can you imagine the angels announcing at Jesus’ birth: “This day there is born to you an obstetric product which is Christ the Lord.” Or Isaiah proclaiming, “To us an obstetric product is born.” No, we will settle for the traditional language: “To us a child is born; to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.”

Can there be a more perfect place to be on Christmas Eve than God’s house? Can there be a more perfect story than the story of the first Christmas? God entered the world as a tiny babe. That’s impossible for us to get our minds around, yet I can’t imagine any better news in all the world. The Creator of the universe loved us enough to come into our world, and he did it, not in power, but in the most helpless guise possible -- that of an infant. There’s something about a baby, isn’t there? Or even a young child.

Yesterday we had our Christmas Eve at our house. We now have five grandchildren, and it gets a little difficult with all the services on Christmas Eve to try to fit in all the activities, so we decided to have it on the night before. And, you know, it was absolutely wonderful -- you're probably wondering why Father McGinn has a thing on his wrist. This is what my grandson made for me yesterday. Henry was very upset when I had taken it off before he had left and put it on the bureau. He said, "Where's your bracelet?" But it was a sign of his love for me; he gave me this gift. And each one of those children yesterday, as they came up, they gave me a big hug, and my little grandson who is only seven months old, gave me a big sloppy kiss on the cheek. He was Jesus in the pageant for thirty seconds (hearty laughter). Yes, he lasted thirty seconds before he started screaming. But in the midst of the hugs and kisses, I thought of my father, my mother, my grandfather, my grandmother, my uncles and aunts - all those loved ones who have gone before, who have hugged me and kissed me and told me that God is alive and God loves me. I guess all of us need a hug on Christmas eve, particularly from a child. There's something about a baby or a young child. That's one reason Christmas Eve is so wonderful; the joy of anticipation that we see in our children's eyes. God entered the world as a babe in a manger.

And here's the second thing I think we need to see. That babe, that child, became our Savior. "And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." He didn't stay a baby; he became a man for others. There are no adjectives lofty enough to describe our feelings about the man from Nazareth. I like the way it's been put though. Just ask the angels what they think of Jesus -- they'll tell you. "A Savior has been born unto you; he is Christ the Lord." Ask John the Baptist and he'll tell you. "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Ask the demons what they think of Jesus, and they will tell you, "What do you want with us, son of the most high God?" Ask Judas what he thinks about Jesus, and he will tell you, "I have betrayed innocent blood." Ask the apostle Paul, what do you think about Jesus, and he will tell you that nothing compares to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Ask Pilot what he thinks, and he will tell you, "I find no fault in this just man." Ask the Roman centurion what he thinks of Jesus, and he will tell you, "Surely this is the Son of God." Ask Thomas what he thinks about Jesus, and he'll fall down prostrate before him and cry out, "My Lord and my God." And ask Peter what do you think about Jesus, and he will tell you, "God has made this same Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ." We celebrate the fact tonight that God

became a tiny babe, but we also celebrate that this tiny babe became our Savior -- your Savior and mine.

To me one of the charms of Christmas in the popular culture is that it is the season of misfits -- misfits like Rudolph the reindeer with the bright, shiny nose -- think about it. Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer is said to be the only twentieth century addition to the Santa Claus story. He was first introduced as an advertising gimmick; however, he has become more famous and loved among children than Dasher and Dancer and Prancer and Vixen and Comet and Cupid and Donner and Blitzen. Rudolph turned seventy-one this year. You know the story: There once was a reindeer who was teased by other reindeer because of his big, bright red nose, and he saved Christmas one foggy night when his nose became a beacon that guided Santa's sleigh.

Seventy-one years ago Montgomery Ward -- remember them? -- gave copies of a poem titled *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* to customers for their children. It was an enormous success. The store gave away more than six million copies over the years. In nineteen forty-six Montgomery Ward transferred the copyright of this poem back to Robert May who worked for the department store when he wrote it in 1939. May, who had a sick wife and six children to put through school, sold the rights to a children's book publisher within a month, and the book sold more than one hundred thousand copies. Then in 1949 a New York song writer Johnny Marks, a friend of Mays, wrote a one-hundred-thirteen word song based on the poem. It took months to convince anyone to record the song, and when he pitched at the cowboy actor, Gene Autry (anybody remember him?), he was turned down politely but firmly. It was Gene Autry's wife who talked him into recording the song. Gene Autry said that he would record Rudolph only as a B side on what he thought would be a hit Christmas tune title *If it Doesn't Snow on Christmas*. The song has long been forgotten.

*Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* was introduced by Gene Autry at a Madison Square Garden concert in September 1949, and by Christmas record sales were more than two million. It has now sold more than one hundred million copies, making it second only to *White Christmas* on the all-time seasonal hit parade.

Now why would I spend so much time in my sermon, you're probably saying, on this little song about a red-nosed reindeer? Christmas, I believe, is a time for celebrating misfits because Jesus became a misfit in our behalf. Jesus,

who lived in glory, gave it all up to become a tiny babe, and then Jesus became a grown man who suffered and died for the sins of the world. Got into the world as a babe in a manger, and the babe became our Savior. And there was only one reason that Jesus came; he came because he loved us so much. “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.”

In an old “Peanuts” comic strip, that other popular misfit Charlie Brown, cracks open his piggy bank. He says, “Look, I’ve got nine dollars and eleven cents to spend on Christmas.” Lucy isn’t very impressed. “You can’t buy something for everyone with nine dollars and eleven cents, Charlie Brown,” she responds. And Charlie Brown retorts, “Oh yeah? Well, I’m going to try.” Then Lucy continues, “They’re sure going to be cheap presents!” But Charlie Brown says with absolute conviction, “Nothing is cheap if it costs all that you have.”

That tiny babe gave his all when he became a man, and it was for us, and for only one reason: God loves everyone. So have a grand Christmas Eve and a wonderful Christmas Day, no matter what your situation is, and give God thanks. “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.” Jesus came, Jesus loved us so much, he came. We knew he would.

*Amen*

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs