

“WHY CHRISTMAS BEARS REPEATING”

John 1:1-15

A Christmas Eve Sermon by John Thomason

Woodbury UMC

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I, for one, am grateful that Christmas is an annual affair. Unlike Halley’s Comet, which appears on the scene only once in a lifetime, the star of Bethlehem graces the horizon every December. The birthday of Christ occupies a permanent place on our calendar of celebration days. Christmas never gets cancelled or postponed or rescheduled. It is always there. And I dare say most of us are glad for this repetition.

There is a certain practical value in the repetition of Christmas. As a consumer and contributor to my family, I appreciate one season being set apart each year for meeting material needs. I would presume to call myself a cheerful giver, but I’m not an eager shopper. I enjoy the convenience of doing most of my shopping all at once and getting it over with!

Besides this practical value, there is surely a great deal of personal value in the repetition of Christmas. For all its commercial vulgarity, I see plenty of evidence that the birthday of Christ brings out the best in people who may otherwise be at their worst. Yes, once a year we’re tempted to go on buying binges which must be an affront to God; but many of us are also led to new heights of generosity and kindness. If we don’t grow as givers at Christmastime, we are not likely to grow at all. Thank God that this opportunity to grow is offered every year.

But beyond the practical and personal value of an annual Christmas, there is above all a spiritual value. Pollsters tell us that most people profess to believe in God, and yet many exhibit what theologians call a “practical atheism.” That is, they eat and sleep and work and play as if there is no God. For a lot of folks, God remains an absence, an abstraction, an impersonal Prime Mover who put in six days of honest toil and then took a long vacation. But once a year, the world is transported back in time and space to the days of Caesar Augustus and the village of Bethlehem, where the great God Almighty met us and spoke to us in such an intimate way that we still blush and tremble to think about it. And once again we can be grateful for the repetition of Christmas. Who claims to take it all in – the first time we celebrate this event, or in my case, the seventieth time?

My 92-year old mother has had a singular addiction in life – an absolute craving to travel. Her first trip to Europe in 1968 whetted her appetite for more, and she returned to that continent on numerous occasions. Every time the opportunity presented itself, she retraced her steps to places like London, Paris, Rome, and especially the Swiss Alps. But at one point in her life she journeyed in the opposite direction, spending three weeks on mainland China just after that country opened its doors to Westerners. Back then, conditions in China were still primitive, even for privileged tourists. I’ll never forget that when she returned home, my father remarked in utter amazement, “Your mother has finally gone someplace she doesn’t want to go back to!” It seems she was so overwhelmed by the sights and sounds and smells of China that one exposure was quite enough.

Most of us have probably been to places like that. We’ve satisfied our curiosity in one visit, and we have no desire to repeat that itinerary. But I dare say Bethlehem is not such a place

and Christmas is not such an experience. Who claims to absorb it all in one visit? You and I never fully comprehend what happened in the city of David two thousand years ago. We never fully receive the One who was born there. We have told his story time and time again. We have beamed his image to every generation. But still he eludes us. The scene at Bethlehem is too big to capture in one glance. The babe of Bethlehem is too mysterious to capture in one sentence. So we keep coming back to his coming. We keep telling the story, hoping this time we get it all and get it right. So again, thank God for the merciful repetition of Christmas.

Of all the New Testament writers, John is the one who best comprehends that we are dealing here with the incomprehensible. When John writes about the Incarnation, he is not a journalist, like someone reporting the Mueller investigation in Washington, D.C. No, John is more like a poet or a songwriter, someone who would write the words to a Christmas carol. He reports the coming of Christ, not with a narrative, but in words resembling a hymn. It is John who best mirrors the mystery and wonder of this visitation from God.

He starts out by reminding us that God has always had a desire to relate to us, to communicate with us: “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1a). Because this is so, God doesn’t make himself a total stranger to anyone. All people have some exposure to God. None of us is so ignorant or apathetic or self-centered that we are completely in the dark about the divine. There is, John says, a “true light which enlightens everyone” (v. 9).

But John insists that there is more to the story. In the fullness of time, this universal light has actually come into our world. The light that was once faint and far off is now so close that we can feel the heat it generates. To change the figure, God reveals himself not in a proposition, but in a person. “The Word became flesh and lived among us” (v. 14a). Those who used to know God only as the subject of a sacred book, as a lofty idea or concept, have now encountered him as a human being, “up close and personal.” “We have seen his glory,” says John, “the glory as of a Father’s only Son” (v. 14b).

But notice: John goes on to report that this long-anticipated revelation was easily overlooked and ruthlessly rejected. “He was in the world . . . yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (vv. 10-11).

Now, at one level, this negative reception does seem surprising. The entire Old Testament has a forward look about it. Prophets and common people alike seem to wait in breathless expectation for the coming of the Messiah. During Israel’s exile, Isaiah cries out to God in a vivid image: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down” (Isaiah 64:1a). The New Testament claim, of course, is that this cry has been answered. God has come to the people since the people could not get to God. He has come in the only way they could possibly understand, as a person like themselves. And yet, they do not understand! Throughout the life and ministry of Jesus, the reception is always the same: God’s own people have eyes, but they do not see; and have ears, but do not hear. Those of us who view this event from afar wonder how in the world they could have missed its significance.

A little girl once wrote a letter to Santa Claus which simply said: “I am twelve years old. I want a talking bird, a kitten and a goldfish. But most of all, I would like to see God.” It’s easy to smile at such a childish request, but I think if most of us were honest, we would like to see

God, too. It boggles the mind that our spiritual ancestors had this opportunity, and promptly blew it!

And yet, their blindness is more understandable when we remind ourselves how God chose to come and show himself. The birth of Jesus was greeted with a royal welcome by a few, yet there were no trappings of royalty about him. His birth gave rise to political intrigue in the courts of Herod, but we have little evidence that it caused a ripple in the average household. The reason is simple: when God chose to disclose himself fully, he did so in the most ordinary of circumstances, in the most commonplace of ways. The glorious revelation did not occur in the secret grandeur of the Jewish temple or the remote halls of the Roman government; it occurred right where people lived. The chance to see the Christ-child was offered to shepherds, not while they were making a religious pilgrimage or even while they were in church, but while they were doing their proper job, which was tending sheep. The same news came to wise men right where they were, engaged in their day's business, which was scanning the heavens.

Friends, the birth of Christ reminds us that grace often comes disguised, incognito. We look for signs and wonders, but God gives himself in everyday flesh and blood, in quiet service and simple sacrifice. The late Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, once remarked that a lot of people tend to think of God as a clergyperson. But in the life of Jesus there is nothing more obvious than his meager interest in special "sacred" doings, and his profound interest in the most ordinary things of daily life. In his parables, the only clergy represented are the Pharisee praying with himself in the temple and the priest and Levite who bypass the stricken traveler on the road to Jerusalem. Each of these men comes across as a self-righteous snob who has missed the real point of religion. When Jesus speaks in parables to describe life in the kingdom, the primary characters are what you and I would call "laypeople" – kings and slaves, bailiffs and debtors, farmers and fishermen, housewives and children, and all at their secular occupations, with more feasting than fasting, and more weddings than funerals. When God reveals himself in human history, these are the places where he shows his face, and these are the people for whom he comes.

Is it any wonder that "he was in the world . . . yet the world did not know him," that "he came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him"? The light that came into the world was a commonplace candle, not a gaudy lamp. People were expecting something from Saks Fifth Avenue, and instead they got something from Walmart. I wonder, are you disappointed, too? Is a baby in a manger not what you were expecting from God?

I love the piece of free verse that sets the record straight:

"Out of the Gospel record comes the mystery of Christmas indeed. Expected was a prophet, a priest, and a king. Received was a child, a helpless one, a commoner. Expectation always seems to outrun fulfilment. Hope is for things far better than that which is received. Or so it seems. The mystery of Christmas was that the fulfilment was far more than the expectation. Who could have believed that a manger would outrank a throne, a stable overshadow a palace, or a Kingdom outlast an empire? Who can believe? Only those who discover the mystery of Christmas which sees fulfilment in simplicity to be far beyond expectation in extravagance. Who can believe? You can believe that the mystery of this Christmas will far exceed all of your hopes and all of your expectations."

Exactly thirty years ago I began the Advent season in the usual manner, pastoring a large, affluent church in Jackson, Mississippi. I lived with my two daughters and their mother in a comfortable four-bedroom home, and I could boast having a multitude of friends. All I wanted for Christmas that year was more of the same. My hope was to continue the life I knew undisturbed. My expectation was that I would live for many years in that house, in that family, in that community, in that particular church.

But I didn't get what I wanted that Christmas and for several Christmases thereafter. What I received was far less than what I expected, or so I felt. By Christmas Day of 1988, I had lost most of my world as I then knew it. I was separated from the people I loved the most, unable to do things that gave my life meaning. And, to be honest, very little that has happened to me since that time was part of my Christmas wish list thirty years ago, part of my original plan, my first set of hopes. Almost nothing in my life has gone as expected. Today, I've living in a different state and a different community; I'm pastoring a different church in a different denomination; I have a different marital status and a different set of friends.

But at long last, I'm here to tell you that the fulfilment is better than the expectation. What I've received is far better than what I had hoped for, and certainly far more than I deserved. God knew that for this season of my life, simple would be better than complex, small would be better than large, and that real love, real friendship, is always better than a host of superficial acquaintances.

And that's the way it is with Christmas. When God comes to earth we expect God to sit on a throne, lead mighty armies, or do something stupendous. But what we get is the cry of a tiny baby lying in a manger; what we get is a carpenter's son teaching and healing ordinary people; what we get is a despised and rejected man dying on a cross. Friends, it is no surprise that "he was in the world . . . yet the world did not know him"; that "he came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." Some people just don't recognize what they receive or don't receive what they recognize. But, says John, ""to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (v. 12). And he still does.