

Christmas Preaching: An Incarnational Event

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"Welcome," announced the minister to his Easter congregation, gratifyingly overflowing into Narthex, anti-room and hallway. "It's a glorious Easter morning. But since I probably will not see some of you again for a while, let me be the first to wish you a Merry Christmas!"

It got a polite chuckle. For the culturally religious, being "found out" and scolded seems part of the game. Some have come to expect it. They feign self-disappointment and wag their heads in satisfying agreement over their shortcomings. There may be a payoff in this little game for both parishioner and pastor. But the "game" has nothing to do with the Gospel.

To begin with, then, let's agree to a permanent moratorium on all pulpit jokes about Easter and Christmas churchgoers.

There is something better to be done with holiday worshippers than to get an embarrassed laugh at their expense. That "something better" is the subject of this article. We may get a hint of our subject if we shift our attention from our puerile jokes to God's profound sense of humor.

God has a way of plucking the right strings. He has nurtured a society in which "going to church" on Easter and Christmas seems vital. At Easter we preach the Resurrection; at Christmas the Incarnation. The divine humor is simply this: any person staying in touch with those two primal centers of Christian truth will hear the Gospel and probably end up coming to church all the time! And "he who sits in the heavens laughs." The ways of our Lord are past finding out.

Christmas is our theme — Christmas preaching. This is no disparagement of other liturgical elements: prayers, affirmations, music, sacraments. The theme simply invites us to concentrate our exploration on the crucial task of *preaching* the Christmas message.

We have come to treasure this holy day in the church, this holiday in the world. C. S. Lewis describes for children of all ages what a sorry world it would be if it were "always winter but never Christmas." Both the church and the world agree, though not for the same reason. We cannot imagine doing without Christmas.

Yet the church did. For the first few centuries of the Christian era no established celebration of the birth of Christ was held. Likely the earliest mention of a date for the Nativity comes from Hippolytus, Bishop of Rome, in the third century. His commentary on Daniel mentions the 25th of December as the date of Christ's birth. Things seemed to have moved quickly. By the fourth century Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople, described the nativity celebration as of considerable antiquity even in his day.

Although its specific origin is shrouded in mystery, Christmas seems to

have found its niche as an annual church festival at least by the end of the third century. Clearly, the church believed there to be a value in celebrating the birth of our Lord. How then should the truth of Christmas be preached?

I

The theological focus of Christmas is the Incarnation. It is not a time to inveigh against Santa Claus, to bemoan commercialism, to deplore materialism. Nor is it a time to overstress festivities, overindulge in parties, or overplay generosity. These may be commendable concerns, but the world does a pretty fair job encouraging them. Yet no-one else in all the world (be quite clear on this!) will lay any emphasis whatever on the Incarnation. That message is uniquely the faith of the church. The world does not even understand it.

It is a baleful truth that Christians themselves are not always clear about the Incarnation. That does not mean they are ignorant of the theological formula: Jesus Christ was perfectly God and perfectly Man. Christians acknowledge that. But the meaning of it, the significance, the implications of the Incarnation may yet remain unclear.

Don't leap to conclusions, however. It is possible for preachers to believe their congregations fully conversant with the basic theology of the Incarnation. That frees them, they feel, to land with all fours on the implication side of the subject. Probably that conclusion is out of touch with reality. Every preacher would do well to develop the congregation's understanding of the Incarnation *itself*. It will come as "new truth" to many.

Care must be taken, however, not to dump all that heavy *homoousios* theology on your people. The subject can be made more appetizing than that! It should harmonize with the season. It is, after all, what the season is about.

Think, for example, of the people who went all the way to Bethlehem that first Christmas. "David's City" was a bit out of the way for travelers. A person had to want to go there, and for a purpose.

- The Parents went to Bethlehem
because they were required.
- The Angels went to Bethlehem
because they were sent.
- The Shepherds went to Bethlehem
because they were curious.
- The Wise Men went to Bethlehem
because they were drawn.

All of these are pregnant symbols which give birth to contemporary reasons for our annual Christmas pilgrimage.

If you leave it at that, however, you may produce an interesting "talk," but no sermon. The startling fact which Christians tenaciously hold is that God — the Eternal, Almighty Creator — *God* went all the way to Bethlehem. Who is that little One lying there in His straw bed? Who is He really? "Who do you say that I am?" That is the Christmas question.

While the Incarnation is the specific focus of Christmastide, it may be de-

veloped effectively these days in an entire Advent Series. Notice the oft repeated phrase — a veritable litany in the nativity passages — “His name shall be called . . .” There is:

The prophet’s announcement about the “Wonderful Counsellor . . .;” Gabriel’s declaration that the Child would be “Son of the Most High;” Matthew’s assertion that the Bethlehem Babe was the fulfillment of Isaiah’s sign, “Emmanuel;” and the angel’s instruction to call the Child “Jesus.”

The Incarnation can be uncovered in Old Testament prophecy, explored through Christ’s “pre-existence,” examined in our Lord’s imminence, and celebrated as God’s great redemptive purpose through Jesus, “the Savior.”

Where will inspiration for your Christmas preaching come from? It is a question faced by the busy preacher not only at the Nativity Season, but all year long. Early in my ministry a fellow-pastor and I used to help each other by sharing sermon ideas gleaned from the great pulpiteers. One summer he reported — as if by revelation! — “I’ve started reading my Bible again and, you know, there is a lot of good sermon material in there!”

Christmas texts? Let them emerge from your brooding over the Biblical material. God’s Word has an amazing way of speaking freshly out of familiar passages. One year during Advent I found it rewarding to go searching for the Christmas message in each of the four Gospels. Matthew and Luke were clear sailing, of course. But what Christmas use can be made of Mark who begins his story “too late.” Or of John who begins his account “too early.” There is adventure awaiting if you are willing to mine those riches.

If the theme of Christmas preaching is the Incarnation, the preacher need not be restricted to Gospel passages alone. The Incarnation runs through every New Testament book. A Christmas message in II Corinthians? Why not? “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (5:19). Galatians? The text might be, “When the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman . . .” (4:4). Philippians? Christ “emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (2:7). Hebrews? Just read the first chapter and take your choice! The list of Christmas texts is endless because the Incarnation is fathomless.

It can also be challenging to commit yourself to preach your Christmas sermon from the Lectionary. There are a variety of denominational formats available for use. The Presbyterian Lectionary provides an Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel passage for each day. You will want to pick from the Scripture selections prescribed for the fourth Sunday in Advent as well as the two services for Christmas Day.

The fourth Sunday in Advent, first year, for example, puts together Jeremiah’s Messianic prophecy (23:3-8) and the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38). Obviously, these sections resonate with each other. But what will you make of the Epistle prescribed for the day — Philippians 4:4-7? Unquestionably, it is a beautiful passage in and of itself. But a Christmas message? How is the Apostle’s word linked to Gabriel’s announcement and the prophet’s vision?

You may find the connection in the idea of “rejoicing” because Christ is

born. Or, the meaning may be discovered in eschewing "anxiety" because the One who said, "Do not be anxious," has Himself arrived on the scene. Perhaps the tie-in comes at the point of "peace" which is finally experienced through the birth of the "Prince of Peace." Then again it may be all of the above . . . and more.

Perhaps Philippians 4 connects with Jeremiah and Luke as a way of saying that the Incarnation cannot stay confined to a past event. What began in Jesus can never be limited to the first century or to any century. The Incarnation surges afresh into every new generation.

II

What after all is the Incarnation about if not God's radical commitment to this world? The fleshing-out of God's purpose is process as well as event. It is both historical and existential. The one without the other is like a tree that is either rootless or fruitless.

Thus far we have been centering our attention on the Incarnational event rooted in Christmas. Now we turn to the Incarnational process which bears fruit in our world today. It will be convenient to deal with this by looking at the tenses of our Christmas preaching.

Most preachers experience their greatest comfort zone when preaching about Christmas past. We love to rehearse the Christmas story, pageant and all. Preachers enjoy expounding the truths that "God was in Christ" and "the Word was made flesh." It's heady wine! And, if the Lord's Supper is celebrated during the Christmas Season, it provides an opportunity to explore the sacramental, to emphasize God's intention dramatized in the Incarnation, to materialize the spiritual, and to spiritualize the material.

A great deal of Christmas preaching centers on the past. Check the record of your Christmas messages in former years and critically examine the tense. You'll probably discover that the vast majority of your Christmas sermons are oriented to the past.

But Advent (and Christmas preaching for most of us these days falls within that season) concerns Christ's "coming." We celebrate not only His coming as past event, but His coming as future hope. Each time we repeat the Apostles' Creed, "from thence He shall come to judge . . ." we affirm our belief in Christ's return.

This future tense of Christmas preaching causes the comfort level of many preachers to flag. Yet throughout the New Testament the witness to His return is given. This thing is going to happen again. Not "again" in humility, weakness and poverty. The Parousia will be no encore. He will come finally in authority, power and glory. The Christian hope is also part of the Christmas message. How much of your Christmas preaching has treated His second Advent?

Very well, in our preaching we re-present the past and rely on the future; but we reside in the present. Strange, then, how at Christmas we too often ignore the present or trivialize it! Either we reenact the much vaunted "true meaning of Christmas" with a wooden manger and a plastic doll, or we fritter away our homiletical opportunity with sentimentality. Let this be clear: Christ

comes with power *today*, not just yesterday and tomorrow.

The present tense of Christmas requires us to live in the creative tension between memory and hope. If our present is to be authentic, we must recall and treasure every aspect of His humble origin. And we must envision and treasure every promise of His glorious return. But that past history and that future hope must effect this present moment.

How does the Incarnation enable us to deal with the real world of our present moment? Let's take just one example. Jesus was born poor. We know that not because of His humble place of birth, but because of Mary's offering (Luke 2:24 cf. Leviticus 12:8). He was born in poor flesh, as one who was poor, for the sake of the poor. Once grown and ordained for ministry by the Spirit's power, He claimed as His mandate Isaiah's prophecy "to preach good news to the poor"

Divine compassion for the poor was no new thing, of course. The Old Testament prophets had thundered away in their righteously indignant fashion about God's attitude toward unjust treatment of the poor. The radically new thing was God's own coming in the flesh of poverty. "For your sakes He became poor." He took "the form of a servant." That sets some fundamental symbols in an agonizing tension: God-poor.

That's the past. Now feel the tug from the other end of the rope — the future, the final reckoning. Sheep here! Goats there! And all on the basis of response to the poor and needy. "As you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me." These are words which ring out across the misty past, rebound from the mysterious future and reverberate in our messy present.

Christmas preaching becomes authentic when it provides the handles by which the Incarnation becomes a present-day passionate reality. Today the Body of Christ continues to live out God's concern for the poor, all the poor — the poor in goods, the poor in hope, the poor in spirit. Yet the minister's preaching and the church's actions at Christmas must not become merely an annual ritual to relieve our guilt for the neglect of the poor throughout the year.

Christmas preaching about a ministry to the poor? Absolutely! But do not stop there. That's just one case in point. Go on. Take seriously a text like the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-56). Feel the power its symbols begin to suggest for your preaching:

Political impropriety, "He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts" (v. 51).

Economic justice, "He has put down the mighty from their throne, and exalted those of low degree" (v. 52).

Life style, "He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent empty away" (v. 53).

Incarnational theology even at Christmas (especially at Christmas!) must not become domesticated. It reaches out to grasp quite firmly God's wildly extravagant redemptive compassion for His wounded world.

Catch the same present-day rapid pulse beat in other familiar nativity

passages. As you do, be sensitive to the homiletical juices that begin to flow:

Consider the call to peacemaking, "Guide our feet in the way of peace" (Luke 1:79).

Experience the special yearning for meditation, "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

Feel the vital challenge to evangelize, "A light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32).

Sense the universal need of redemption, "This Child is set for the fall and rising of many" (Luke 2:34).

Yield to the promise of comfort in His presence, "Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace" (Luke 2:29).

You see the point. Incarnational theology while paradigmmed in the single, supreme, unrepeatable event of Christ's birth nonetheless remains a continuing practical challenge for each new generation in the Body of Christ. It is the means by which the significance of the Christmas event becomes contemporary.

There may be complaints from the pew because your Christmas message was not enjoyable: "I did not feel comfortable as you preached;" or "Tell us more about sweet Baby Jesus."

As a preacher, my only response to such parishioner objections would be, "You are talking to the wrong person. Take it up with the Lord." After all, preaching is not our work, it is His. We merely footnote *The Sermon* — the total life and work of Christ Himself, the Word made flesh. That sermon — which is Christ — got "worded" in a language we could grasp. It took radical human form. It assumed the shape of poverty, pain, and even sin. That living Sermon marched out to heal the running sore of our wounded humanity. It plunged unhesitatingly to the lowest depth of our personal hell.

Christmas is "lovely" in precisely the sense that the cross is "beautiful." The only thing attractive about either is that Christ was born and Christ died *for you* . . . and for every bleeding, sinful soul the world over. Our little homiletical footnotes on God's great Sermon simply *must* vibrate with the same theme of salvation accomplished through suffering and service. That, or our preaching will be awarded the most terrifying of all judgments — irrelevant!

Settle it then to preach the Incarnation at Christmas. Declare imaginatively the startling news that comes from the past; the Word *became* flesh in that Babe of Bethlehem. Develop responsibly the challenging message that must be addressed to our present; the Word *becomes* flesh through the continued ministry of His Body.

Dedicate yourself to Incarnational Christmas preaching. Faithfully follow that practice and you may discover that the remaining Sundays of the year will become as exciting, and be as crowded with worshippers, as are the high holy days.