

"A WONDERFUL CHRISTMAS OR A DREADED YULETIDE"

Text: Isaiah 9:6

Sermon by the Rev. Arthur W. Rich December 5, 1965
First Baptist Church Lakeland, Florida

As Christmas approaches, do you face it with delight or dread? Dr. David MacLennan calls attention to an editorial by John Fischer which begins with these words, "With the dread Yuletide already lapping around our ankles, even the sensible man is now groping for whatever comfort he can find to sustain him through the most grinding month of the year." Evidently, John Fischer felt that Christmas was something to be dreaded --both a dread yuletide and a part of "the most grinding month of the year."

There are so many for whom Christmas is a Yuletide with a dread which robs it of its joy. Christmas should be a time of great joy. Christmas should always be wonderful, literally wonder-ful. Let me suggest some ways to make this a wonder-ful Christmas.

1. TO HAVE A WONDERFUL CHRISTMAS, WE MUST PUT CHRIST BACK INTO CHRISTMAS

Dr. Merv Rossell was talking to a man who told him an interesting story. The man's mother had been standing in front of a plate glass window in a beautiful department store in Oregon. There was a manger scene depicting the birth of Christ. The man's mother overheard two women talking about the nativity scene. One of them said, in a loud voice, "I suppose those religious fanatics are going to cram Christianity into Christmas now and spoil all our fun!" Can you imagine a woman so stupid that she did not realize that Christmas is the celebration of the birth of the Son of God, and who failed to realize that the birth of Christ is the only excuse for giving gifts or having joy?

The tragedy is that there are two words, which should be miles apart, yet we have brought them so close together. One is the word 'Bethlehem', and the other is the word 'bedlam'. Bethlehem is the happy word for a famous little village. It is the village of courtesy in the Bible, a village that welcomed an alien woman, Ruth, who became the great-grandmother of David, the ancestor of the King of Kings. Bethlehem is the village of chivalry, where three mighty warriors risked their lives behind the Philistine lines to bring a drink of water to their beloved leader, David. Bethlehem is the village of consummation. The promises of God would be consummated there, according to Micah, the prophet, "But thou, Oh Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto me, that is to be ruler of Israel whose goings forth have been from old, from everlasting". (Micah 5: 2)

The other word is 'bedlam'. In 1247 the priory of St. Mary of Bethlehem was founded in London. By 1330, it had become a hospital. In 1401, it was specifically recognized as a hospital for the insane. The noise and confusion of the insane asylum came to be known throughout England. The name of St. Mary of Bethlehem was shortened to Bethlehem. In time, Bethlehem by contraction and by corruption became 'bedlam'. Today bedlam is a word in our dictionary. Webster defines it as "any place or scene of uproar and confusion".

We have made Christmas a bedlam. Christmas is what James Cleland calls "the merchant's bonanza and the shop clerk's despair". Christmas is the bedlam when liquor sales reach all... time high, and when some unscrupulous liquor dealers advertize their products as "true spirits of Christmas". Christmas is the bedlam when hundreds are killed on the highway. Christmas is the bedlam when thousands will receive a perfume called 'My Sin' on the birthday of the One who came to save us from our sin. Christmas is the bedlam when decorations and lights are gaudy, rather than godly. Christmas is the bedlam for world confusion and organized chaos. Christmas is the bedlam when exhaustion is coupled with bad temper. No wonder one exhausted observer of all this bedlam sent his Christmas greetings, "All the complaints of the season - and a preposterous New Year."

We need to put Christ back into Christmas as we realize that the true meaning of Christmas is not shopping - but a Savior, not decorations - but a Deliverer, not tinsel – but Truth. At this time we should be thinking of the society of the incarnation, not the society of the insane. Bethlehem is life organized around Christ instead of bedlam, a life organized apart from Christ.

How do we put Christ back into Christmas? Why not begin with Isaiah? At a time when Judah's wicked and idolatrous King Ahaz was on the throne, the Prophet Isaiah gave the most wonderful promise and prophecy about the Messiah, the Saviour, the King of Glory. "Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign: Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son and shall call His name Immanuel". (Isaiah 9:2)

Let me pause to say that I believe the entire fact of the virgin birth of Christ. If Christ were not virgin-born, He must have had a human father. It could not have been Joseph, since he knew he was not the father of her baby and would have put her away, when God stayed his hand with the revelation that Mary had known no man, and what had been conceived in her womb was the overshadowing work of the Holy Spirit of God.

If Christ were not born of a virgin, then He was born out of wedlock, and He was then an illegitimate child. If Christ had both a human father and a human mother, He could have been only the son of man. For One to satisfy the holiness of God for the sinfulness of man, there had to be the God-Man, and that God-Man was possible only as He had an earthly mother and a Heavenly Father. This was made possible in the miracle of the virgin birth. Why should we question God's power to work this miracle? Is your God so limited that He cannot perform a miracle in a woman's body? My God is so *mighty* that He made the first man without either a father or a mother, and later made the first woman with only a rib from the side of that man,

We can put Christ back into Christmas when we think of our wonderful Christ. Isaiah said that His name should be called Wonderful. Christ was wonderful in His eternity. Before the heavens and earth were created, He was eternal as the Son of God, wonderful in beauty and glory. Christ was wonderful *in* His birth, as the only-begotten Son of God was laid upon the bosom of a lovely virgin. An angelic chorus announced His birth, and a beautiful star led the wise men to His crib. Lowly shepherds and learned scholars worshipped at His manger. Christ was wonderful in His life, living a holy and sinless life. He was *in* all points tempted, as we are, yet without sin. Christ was wonderful in His mighty deeds. He healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, raised the dead, cast out demons, and forgave sins. He showed His power over nature, sickness, devils, death and sin. Christ was wonderful in His death. He died willingly and gladly for a lost world, and His death so impressed a calloused centurion that he said, "Truly, this was the Son of God." Christ was wonderful in His resurrection. He broke the bonds of death and forever gave us the assurance that because He lives, we too, shall live. Christ was wonderful in His ascension back to the Father, as all heaven gave Him a glad welcome home. Christ is wonderful now, as our High Priest, ever living to make intercession for us. And He will be wonderful when He comes to reign in glory. When He comes, there will be a wonderful restoration. The curse upon creation will disappear. The animal kingdom will be at peace. "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid, the calf and the young lion will feed together. The desert shall blossom as the rose."

Oh, put this wonderful Christ back into Christmas!

II. A SECOND WAY TO A WONDERFUL CHRISTMAS IS TO MAKE LOVE THE LAW OF YOUR LIFE

You are not ready for Christmas until you obey the word of Christ, "This I command you, that ye love one another." (John 15:17)

Love finds its hidden source in the heart of God. Love finds its first manifestation in the life of Christ. Love becomes the fruit of our relationship to Christ. Love is the badge of discipleship. "By this all men shall know that ye are my disciples if ye have love, one to another." Our Lord left no other law but the law of love.

Dr. Howard Thomas says, "The experience of love is either a necessity or a luxury. If it be a luxury, then it is expendable. If it is a necessity, then to deny it is to perish." Love is a necessity. The only safe place to dwell is in another's heart. When you love, you make of your heart a swinging door. Some of you could have a wonderful Christmas if you looked into the graveyard of your friendships. Have you buried good-will toward another. Ask Christ to give you the strength to go to the one who has hurt you, or to the one that you have hurt. Perhaps there is someone in the family of God that you have excluded from your love. Why not welcome back into your heart someone shut out.

One of the best ways to a wonderful Christmas is to express our love to others. An unknown poet has written one of the loveliest poems on this theme with a poem entitled: "If You're Ever Going To Love Me":

**IF YOU'RE EVER GOING TO LOVE ME, LOVE ME NOW, WHILE I CAN KNOW
ALL THE SWEET AND TENDER FEELINGS, WHICH FROM REAL AFFECTION FLOW.
Love me now, WHILE I AM LIVING - DO NOT WAIT TILL I AM GONE
AND THEN CHISEL IT IN MARBLE - WARM LOVE WORDS ON ICE - COLD STONE.
IF YOU'VE DEAR, SWEET THOUGHTS ABOUT ME, WHY NOT WHISPER THEM TO ME?
DON'T YOU KNOW 'TWOULD MAKE ME HAPPY AND AS GLAD AS GLAD CAN BE?
IF YOU WAIT TILL I AM SLEEPING, NE'ER TO WAKEN HERE AGAIN,
THERE WILL BE WALLS OF EARTH BETWEEN US AND I COULDN'T HEAR OF YOU THEN.
IF YOU KNEW SOMEONE WAS THIRSTING FOR A DROP OF WATER SWEET,
WOULD YOU BE SO SLOW TO BRING IT? WOULD YOU STEP WITH LAGGARD FEET?
THERE ARE TENDER HEARTS ALL ROUND US WHO ARE THIRSTING FOR OUR LOVE,
WHY WITHHOLD FROM THEM WHAT NATURE MAKES THEM CRAVE ALL ELSE ABOVE?
I WON'T NEED YOUR KIND CARESSES WHEN THE GRASS GROWS O'ER MY FACE;
I WON'T NEED YOUR LOVE OR KISSES IN MY LAST LOW RESTING PLACE.
SO THEN IF YOU LOVE ME ANY, IF IT'S BUT A LITTLE BIT,
LET ME KNOW IT NOW WHILE LIVING; I CAN OWN AND TREASURE IT.**

III. Last of all,

A WONDERFUL WAY TO A WONDERFUL CHRISTMAS IS TO TAKE THE WAY OF SELFLESS GIVING

There is so much selfishness in our giving. Dr. Curtis Jones tells of a sexton who served in one of his churches. Early in December, the sexton would begin to buy gifts for his wife, and he would ask the pastor to store them *in* a closet in his study. Furthermore, he would be so afraid he would lose the receipts for the purchases that he would ask Dr. Curtis to keep them for him. Frequently, he would ask the pastor to tabulate the amount he had spent on his wife. When Dr. Curtis asked him about this procedure, the sexton replied, "I spend so much on my wife, then I tell her how much she is going to get - and she goes out and spends the same amount on me."

No one is ready for Christmas if all he does is swap gifts. For many people, Christmas is not a powerful remembrance, but a personal reciprocity. Where is Christ on your shopping list for Christmas? I am grateful for the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for Foreign Missions, because if it were not for this stabbing reminder of our responsibility for missions, some would otherwise forget Christ at Christmas.

The story is told in the days of acute housing shortage on the West Coast, of a family from the East who had to stay in a hotel for some time before they could find a house. The young son became a familiar figure to other hotel guests. One day one of them said to the boy, "Sonny, don't you have any home?" He retorted quickly, "Of course we have a home. We just can't find a house to put it in!"

God faces a similar problem today. He has concern for hungry children and older folk. He has concern for those who have never heard about Christ. He is concerned for the millions who live in refugee camps around the world. God has plans to supply medicine and food to those who desperately need them. God's Spirit, the Living Christ, is God's home. But He needs a house to put it in.

Will you let your life be the house for God to dwell in? Will you help God meet the needs of the world? If you are willing to be partners with Almighty God, you will find that this will be a wonderful Christmas - rather than a dreaded Yuletide.