

Matthew 24:29-44
Luke 12:39
I Thessalonians 5:02
II Peter 23:10
Revelation 3:03; 6:15

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

Welcome to the Advent Season. Thirty-one days to the new year. Twenty-four shopping days until Christmas. Has either one got anything to do with Jesus? What, precisely, has either one got to do with Jesus?

We read six of the “Thief Passages” found in the New Testament. What do we learn from that? At the very least, it makes it clear that this was a favorite theme of the early church. Jesus will come as a thief in the night. He always has. He always will. Not our timetable. Not our doing. We do not go find Him. He comes to us. We never know when. We never know if. But it is very important to get ready, and stay ready.

I just lost most of America. Not that I ever had it, of course. But suppose someone were foolish enough to give me prime-time nationwide television coverage for thirty minutes this Advent Season. I would lose all but a tiny handful inside the first twenty seconds. Why? I have suggested that Jesus is in charge – not us. Our religious life, our spiritual awareness, our relationship to God, our awakening to the dimensions beyond, our faithful response, the level of our gratitude and our love – it depends upon Him, not on us. (“... *lest any one should boast.*” (Ephesians 2:8-9; I Corinthians 4:7))

In former times, there were various brands and flavors of blasphemy. One was idol worship – bowing down before images of man or beast as if they were gods. Many believe that Jesus was crucified primarily because He and His followers thought His connection with God was too close – that the identity between the two was becoming blurred.

Many things have changed over the years. It is a very different world. Yet some of the major themes have not changed as much as we like to think. We only make it *sound* a little different. What is the difference between *their* idolatry and *our* thinking we are in charge? The only reason humans make idols is so they can try to control the gods. We make images and try to find the right names so we can have more influence, and ultimately gain control. This or that pleases or displeases the god, and

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

pretty soon we have it figured out so we can wrap the god around our little finger. Idol worship costs us effort and sacrifice, but it is worth it if we can get some control and be in charge of the outcome. Or we can try to find a shortcut to the desired results – claim that we are in charge without all the falderal. It is called “atheism.”

Nevertheless, modern America has tried to move beyond the sovereignty of God, even though it pretends to believe in God. We *think* we are in charge: How religious I am depends upon me. How faithful I am depends upon my degree of commitment and obedience. I can decide to be converted whenever I want to. I can decide when to feel close to God, when to make the prayer connections, when God will speak to me; I can even steer the conversation around to just about whatever subject I want to. My, me, mine ... even “my God” and “God as I understand him.” Oh my! My goodness ...

He comes as a thief in the night. Always has. Always will. We never know when. We never know if. We are not in charge. We cannot control it coming or going. We can get willing. We can want it. We can try to be ready. But if we think we are in charge of Jesus, we have hold of an idol. Many people will miss Advent again this year because they think Christmas is something they can bring, choreograph, plan, make happen – in whatever way they choose, in any way they want to. They do not know that Advent is about waiting and watching and hoping. They do not know that God has to initiate all relationship between us. They do not know that prayer is waiting upon the Lord, instead of bossing God around. We live in a culture that thinks *we* can bring Christmas every year, in our own calendar time, in whatever way we want to, according to whatever sentimental themes and threads most please us.

Many will miss Advent again this year because they think they are in charge. They will “do” Christmas their way. They will get exactly what they put into it – no more and no less. And God will not be there because there is no room for God, and God does not think it appropriate to shove hard enough to get in.

Oh, God will still come – in his own way and time. He comes like a thief in the night. He always has. He always will. That is what all the stories say. Nobody could have guessed or imagined that Jesus would come as He did, when He did, in the way that He did. Actually, He came into our world even more quietly and subtly than the stories say. A few of

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

the lucky ones, and a few of the most aware, picked up on it pretty early. Most never did. He was born, lived, died, and was raised again – and most never even noticed. Most do not even still. But He still comes as a thief in the night – still picks us off one by one – now here ... now there. But you never know. Burning bush; coal of fire; catch of fish; minding your own business on the way to Damascus. A love you did not expect. A purpose or passion you did not even know you had. Some morning you are too slow getting off your knees as quickly as usual. Whammo! You never know. It is not our idea to become religious. The Spirit moves within. The Spirit reaches us. Everybody fights it at first – except for the pretenders. Modern-day Christmas is mostly for the pretenders.

Yes, I know. I need to correct. There are a few – a handful, a remnant – who use Advent as a time of spiritual preparation. They mean all their Christmas preparations as an invitation, a humble request, a sheer statement of willingness to receive, should the THIEF choose to come. And Christmas for them is a time of gratitude; a remembering of the mystery and power of His coming; an honoring of all that the Incarnation means to those who have responded to His coming, to His loving us, to His choosing us.

What about the fear? There is always so much fear around His coming. There always has been. When Messiah comes, what will He think of us? What changes will He make? In what ways will He be displeased? Will some things make Him angry? Can we imagine looking into the eyes of true justice and not feeling judged? Even if love is clearly surrounding us and forgiveness is clearly offered, can we imagine looking into the eyes of truth and justice and not feeling judged? I don't know about you, but with God, I do not fear punishment nearly as much as I fear his look of disappointment. I am not crass clear to the core, any more than you are. Underneath I really care. I do not wish to displease my God. Anything else is preferable to that. And it is not just theory, is it? We know from *experience*. And the old chant tolls: "God have mercy. Christ have mercy." Please, give me another chance. And He says, "Why else would I come?"

Lots of people will come to Christmas this year with no fear worse than the fear of buying an inappropriate Christmas present, or perhaps forgetting to get one and being embarrassed by that. Is that really all it's about? How tragic to expect so little.

Others, not wanting to miss all the thrill and excitement, will drum up a little fear. Oh the end of the age! Oh the fires of Hell! It's like a cheap-shot production of a horror movie. With a little effort and imagination, we can give ourselves the thrill of an adrenaline rush. But eventually we leave the theater and go home unchanged. Maybe we talk about it over coffee and have a nightmare or two as an aftershock, but nothing really happens. The day after Christmas, we are the same old people in the same old world. Fear can control us for a while, but it does not transform. At the first opportunity, we always revert back to who we really are.

There are people, of course, who become so immersed in fear that they cannot function in ways we call normal. Fear can become a mental illness. All of us know there are ways in which fear is shutting us down – keeping us from our true identity and destiny. Faith, we say – trust in God – is the only antidote. There is no intelligent person on the face of the earth who cannot entertain legitimate fears at any moment in time, no matter what their circumstances. Every one of you can picture disasters that really could happen to you, and to our world. They are not irrational or unreasonable. They are live possibilities. Every single one of you can go terrified any time you choose to focus on your fears. And there is absolutely no way to guarantee that what you fear will not actually happen. Fear is big and real in our alienated, broken world. Most of us spend a good deal of time and energy in this life trying to get ourselves into some position where fear cannot reach us. It is like trying to heal greed by giving it money. Sooner or later, we have to choose between fear and faith. Until then, fear governs our lives. Oh, we do not announce it out on the surface. We try not to act like it. Nevertheless, sooner or later, we have to choose between fear and faith. Until then, fear governs our lives.

Only, how do you choose faith if you have never met the THIEF in the night? Isn't it interesting that our world surrounds the coming of Messiah – the coming of this THIEF – with dread and anxiety? For many people, “repent” no longer means “change” or head in a new direction – or, most accurately, turn around and head for home. Today, most people think “repent” means “cower in shame and guilt.” How did Satan pull *that one* off?! There is nothing wrong with the word “repent” or with its true definition. How did it get turned around to serve the reverse of its rightful purpose?

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

For many people, the thought of “The Great Day,” “The End of the Age” and “The Second Coming” no longer means “Hallelujah! The Day of Light and Love has arrived at last – how wonderful to see Him face-to-face! How marvelous to move out of this veil of tears and lies and decay!” No, it means grovel and cower because the fires of Hell await. How did Satan pull that one off?

You know what? I actually know some people who read this parable in Matthew about the thief in the night and go away from it thinking they do not *want* their house to be broken into. Can you imagine such a thing? Incredible!

“But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” (verse 43)

Jesus is teasing you! Don’t you get it? He is talking to His friends. But He is still promising them that He will break in no matter how well-guarded they think they are: I’m going to reach you. I’m going to get to you. I know you really want me, no matter how you sometimes act – no matter how you sometimes protect yourselves against me. So, “On guard!” I’m coming for you. Let’s play hide-and-seek. You go hide – you always do anyway. I just want you to know I’m going to find you.

Christmas is spiritual hide-and-seek. He came into the world ... and now He is after you – seeking you out. *“You do not choose me, I choose you!”* (John 15:16, 19; II Thessalonians 2:13)

Who is this THIEF in the night? Do you really not want Him to get into your house? What is He going to break into? Your life – your very soul. And what will He steal? Your heart! Your very self. Your whole life ... and turn it into life eternal, which is as much about quality of life as it is about longevity.

Of course that is scary. *Of course* we are frightened by the unknown – by the possibilities and purposes that such a break-in is bound to cause in our lives. But you *do not* want that to happen? Really and truly?! That is not how the early Christians saw it. Their cry was, *“Maranatha!”* Come Lord Jesus! That is what the whole early church was saying to the THIEF. “Hey, don’t fool around on my account. Don’t delay because I need more

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

time or have some projects to finish up. *Maranatha!* Come Lord Jesus! Any time you like. The sooner the better.” Only, they knew they were not in charge. It was a plea, not a command. It depended upon Him.

May your Advent be beautifully frightening. May your soul await His coming with eager joy and willing invitation. May you know that it is not your doing – that HE must choose you. And that when He does, it means God’s total love and grace and mercy – nothing you made up, or contrived, or pretended. And most especially, may you remember that He does not come only once, or at the end of time, or in ways that shake all the outer foundations. He comes over and over – in ways large and small – until we ourselves are so made over that there is no break in the comings because He stays with us. I believe He said: *“I will be with you always, to the close of the age, and to the end of time.”* (Matthew 28:20)

But He comes like a thief in the night. He always has. He always will.

Isaiah 53:1-3
John 1:9-11

UNEXPECTED

Last week we mentioned that the true Christmas is God's doing, not our doing. It's not that I think many of you disagree with that. It's not that I think you didn't "get it." It's just that I love to muse about it because to me, it seems so incredibly wonderful and special. So today, instead of getting special mention, perhaps it can become the major theme.

It is familiar, yet still startling, to stand back from the story of Jesus and realize that no other man who has ever lived on earth has had so deep an impact on so many people, over so many years. It may be fun to debate such a statement. It is interesting to muse about how the world might be different if Jesus had not come. I have been in many conversations with people who like to propose that Jesus has caused incredible strife and turmoil in our world. I often surprise them by giving them far more evidence to support this view than they themselves have thought of. Only, they conclude that it would have been better had He never come. For me, such a conclusion is unfathomable. He was willing to pay any price for us. He is worth any price we have to pay. Of course, such a statement comes from a different place than the one they know.

Nevertheless, after all the games have been played and the dust clears, the statement still stands, though I do not think that Jesus' reputation on earth is anywhere near what it ought to be. We have neglected the records; we have refused to learn from our errors; we have added layer after layer of our own agendas, preconceived notions, and wishful thinking. We have even superimposed onto Jesus some of our darkest angers and desires. On a good day – even in this new century – if you listen closely to some of the preachers, it is difficult to tell whether Jesus is Son of a loving God, or Satan about to throw us into Hell.

Despite all this, it is an overwhelming reality: Jesus has had a greater impact on our world than any other person who has ever lived on our planet. This becomes ten times more startling when we stop to ponder how He managed to have so much influence. That is, Jesus did not do any of the things that we think would make a person influential, successful, or famous. And He *did* do a lot of things that we think would *prevent* a person from becoming influential, successful, or famous. This means that Jesus is not only incredibly influential, but He reaches us in

ways we do not expect to be reached. He appeals to us on levels we do not think can work. He touches us in places we did not even know we had within us.

Down through the centuries, in country after country and culture after culture, Jesus has drawn to His cause, and to His own personal leadership, thousands upon thousands of individuals. Nearly all of them have concluded that their lives are better because of Him, even in this world. Most of the people who get to know Jesus very well would rather die than lose Him – that is, they are no longer willing to live without Him. Yet the vast majority of them do not think that Jesus has promised them any of the rewards this world most values: health, money, popularity, success, power. The only thing Jesus promises them is a personal relationship with the Living God. Everything else comes as it will, and falls where it may.

Some of Jesus' followers have been incredibly successful in this world – incredibly wealthy and powerful on the world's terms. Some of His followers have been persecuted, tortured, mocked, destroyed. Either way, it doesn't seem to make much difference to the bond between Jesus and His followers. That is, what happens between Jesus and His followers does not seem to have any direct connection to what is going on in the outer world. Somehow the reality of it – what it is really about – is based in a different dimension, and it calls forth effort and loyalty that operate here but are not and cannot be controlled by what happens here.

I wonder if any of us think *we* could design such a movement. Could we put it together, make it work? People who discount Jesus, or think He is explainable in human terms, simply have not thought about it very much. Jesus is a never-ending surprise. There are the little miracles of His own ministry: People being healed – people being changed. One of the greatest miracles on earth is a human being changing an attitude, and people who come in contact with Jesus nearly always change their attitudes. Once or twice it would be merely interesting. But hundreds of thousands of people over two thousand years? Their attitudes do not get perfect, and they themselves know it. Yet the fact is that suddenly they *know*, and some of the attitudes do change – and keep changing. If even one attitude changes, life simply cannot stay the same. It is a universal impossibility. One attitude change, and your old life is gone forever: from fear to faith ... from resentment to gratitude ...

from being alone to belonging to God's Kingdom. Earthquakes make headlines, but they are minuscule in comparison.

There are other kinds of miracles in the wake of Jesus' ministry as well. Despite incredible pressure from Zealot and other patriotic influences, Jesus refused to become part of any insurrectionist movement against the Roman Empire. Over and over, people tried to get Jesus to make statements of anger or disapproval against Rome. Even though it cost Him the support and respect of many people in His time, Jesus refused to play in this arena. Only, it was not because He did not care – had no interest or purpose or plan. The truth, almost beyond belief, is that Jesus *did* conquer the Roman Empire. He did it in His own way and time – a WAY nobody else could have imagined or taken seriously. Such a thing was unimaginable to anybody in His time. It took three hundred years – and Jesus' followers did not use the sword – but Rome finally turned away from emperor worship, and all the vast temples and ceremonies of its former gods, to claim Jesus as Savior and Son of God. If Pilate or Tiberius Caesar had heard anyone breathe such a notion, they would have thought them to be stark raving mad.

You know I am only touching the fringes of the real drama. The coming of Jesus into our world has *not* been successful in the light of any of the values, purposes, goals, or truths that Jesus proclaims. I maintain that such purposes never *will* come to completion in this world, and that Jesus makes it very clear that it will not. It is equally clear to us, I hope, that despite this, Jesus calls us and expects us to live for these very purposes and toward this end – in all our days – right here and now.

But how is it that Jesus has had such a startling influence in our world? If our world thought, believed, acted, and cared like Jesus did, it would not startle us at all ... would it? You cannot make such an enormous impact on the world by doing things the way everybody expects them to be done; by holding views everyone already agrees with; by carrying on business as usual. If Jesus were just summing up our own familiar wisdom – telling us to act according to our best instincts – then how do you explain that this Galilean peasant has had more influence in our world than any other person who has ever lived?

You understand the dilemma? I keep running into people who talk as if they think their own wisdom and actions just naturally fall in line with Jesus' wisdom and actions. They see themselves as naturally spiritual and highly evolved. They say that if anybody taps into their own best

inner self, they are already pretty much in synch with Jesus. And they say that lots of other folk have taught and displayed pretty much the same spiritual awareness and stature of Jesus, so let's not get overexcited. Let's not get all carried away or out of balance. Decorate the tree; buy some gifts; you're pretty okay the way you are; God loves you; keep politically correct; everybody be nice – and it will all come out fine in the end.

You think that's really what it is all about? We have Jesus pretty tamed down and figured out? Nothing to get overly excited about? A little "Golden Rule" here, a little "love your neighbor" there – never mind Savior; never mind conversion; never mind turning your entire life and will over to the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. Just a little tweaking here, a little adjustment there, and we can go on with life pretty much the same as always. With us in charge, of course – doing things pretty much however we think is best. Not how we think God really wants it, but how *we* think it will work out best (for us and ours).

Sometimes people tell me that statements like this are harsh. How can that sound harsh in our world? On what basis could our world possibly object to anybody doing the best they can: being responsible, taking charge, deciding things according to what they think will work out best for themselves and those they love? "Let's be reasonable." How we love that word "reasonable." Funny how often it really means staying the way we already are. And there is not always a lot of "reason" for that! Anyway, it is clear to most of us: The problem is that some people are not responsible; do not take charge; try to live off of others; do not keep the rules; keep damaging and destroying everything around them, sometimes even themselves; do not hold up their end of anything. They just live for their own momentary gratification, and half the time they cannot even remember what they want, at least not for long enough to work or move toward it.

It is true – those folk really wreck society. But they do not wreck the Kingdom of God any more than we do – sometimes not as much. (Remember: *"Then Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you: tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.'"* (Matthew 21:31)) The one thing we humans can never get clear, and keep clear, about the Kingdom of God is that in the Kingdom of God, God is the King. We cannot do things "our way" in the Kingdom of God. It will not work and cannot work. Total allegiance to the King is the only way the Kingdom works right. And while there may be other ways to enter the Kingdom, that is not really

my affair. What I suspect for you, and know for me, is that the only way we can get into the Kingdom is if we give our hearts and lives to the King's Son, who came to this earth for the very purpose of reaching us, inviting us, choosing us – and in the end, carrying us – personally into where we, by our own efforts and merit, *cannot go*.

We do not see the end of anything here – how much power Jesus' efforts really take, how much caring they represent, how much it costs Him to do all that for us. But some of us do see and feel the front end of it – the love, The Presence with us, the guidance. And we only get into that part of it when we trust Him enough to turn will and life over to Him. Will and life. Baptism is a drowning. We die to our former life, and He raises us up for a new one. That is not the end of the story – that's for openers! That is what gets it started.

Christmas is about One who is SENT. Christmas is not about what rises up from among us – *our* hero being sent forth. Christmas is not about how we evolve – how we turn out if we get a good education, work hard, provide good families for our children, pay off the mortgage. Yes, Jesus grew up like a normal human being in this world. Incarnation is about God putting it on *our* level. The message is so startling and new, the WAY of Life so different, the Message of God's caring and love so unbelievable ... that it has to come from our own level – from somebody who is one of us – or we would scatter like frightened birds. Half the time we do anyway.

Jesus was gifted, to be sure, but He lived like a normal human being until His baptism – until the descent of the Holy Spirit. After that, something was very different. He was still very human, but also far more than human. And Jesus Himself knew it was different – He knew He was sent – He saw everything in a different light. He knew that each one of us is of far more worth to God than anybody on earth has ever dreamed or thought before. I mean, it is easy to say that lots of others have been as advanced as Jesus – that others have said or taught the same thing – but show me who they are. Name them. Tell me what they wrote or said. I'm sorry, but they do not exist! Nobody said it or believed it or lived for it until Jesus came. Afterward – after crucifixion and resurrection – it is easy to say, “Oh yeah – I knew that!”

Only, nobody knew it or claimed it – never mind living and dying for it – not before Jesus. Certainly we thought God had plans, cared about the nation or the community, raised up heroes and leaders to further the

nation's destiny – maybe even protected and guided us so we could get our work done. But nobody knew, dreamed, or said that God loved every individual like his own child, or that he had built a personal identity and purpose within them, or that he wanted them to spend all eternity in his Kingdom. We thought maybe a few of the very best, for services rendered, would be rewarded. That is a very far cry from the Gospel our Savior taught and bought for us.

Yes, it came out of Judaism, but it was also a whole new dimension. Jesus was SENT. It was not just an accident; He was not just the 100th monkey; it was not just the next logical step – that is, if Jesus had not done it, somebody else would have. God chose *to reveal* himself in Jesus Christ. And His coming into our world was so striking, so unusual, so different and startling ... that nobody else who has ever lived here has had such an enormous impact.

Do not be fooled by the way our culture pretends to be all happy and comfortable with it – families gathering, pretty decorations, lots of us showing kindness and generosity. That is always wonderful, any time of the year. But if your Christmas has anything to do with Jesus, then that is a whole different story. He comes because He knows you are far more – and far more important – than you have had any notion about. And if we allow the connection, it takes life out of our hands and puts it on a whole different level, and we have no way to know what will come of that. New lives for old – that is the Message. And that is the offer.

Isaiah 53:4-6
John 3:13-21

DISOBEYED

We come now to the part of Advent that many people in our culture want to shy away from, at first. It is, however, an integral part of preparing for Christmas. Without it, many of the blessings cannot break through to us. It comes dramatically in Isaiah (40:3), and was the main theme of John the Baptist: *“Prepare ye the way of the Lord.”*

Getting “the roads ready” is what Advent is mostly about. Advent before Event. All worship has this dimension to it. Only, the Incarnation – the coming of the Great King – heightens the necessity. If Christmas is real – if our Messiah is really coming – then we need to make preparations.

It is not a complex, mysterious point. At least we wouldn’t expect it to be. It is the Boy Scout motto. Normally when guests are coming, we like to clean the house up a bit and have some special food planned and ready. Even the most casual kind of worship requires preparation: bulletins; candles, and who is going to light them; flowers; ushers; cleaning up the sanctuary ahead of time; getting the patio set up and the coffee perking. How embarrassing it would be if some Communion Sunday, nobody remembered to prepare it. It is a constant hassle, but most of us hardly notice, until somebody goofs.

On a slightly different level, humans have always known that before coming into God’s presence, we must purify ourselves. We do not keep all the purification rites required in the Torah, but is that because we have lost all respect for God, or because we think some of them are no longer required?

Do any of you still wash your hands before sitting down to eat? You tell your children it is because of germs. But we have been washing our hands before eating for thousands of years, and most of us have only known about germs in the last hundred. During most of recorded history, humans gathered at temples to eat sacred meals with God. Even when not at the temple, humans felt grateful to be able to eat, and so they thanked God for their food. It used to be called “grace.” Jesus asked His followers to remember Him every time they ate or drank. Hands were washed as a purification before encounter with God, even in a common meal.

Saturday night baths and dressing up to come to church were a way of life for most Americans through the first half of this century. It was only a symbol – an acknowledgment – that we needed to keep “cleaning things up” before coming into God’s presence. More important was the inner purification – the purification of the heart.

It used to be that boys and girls were taught to connect what they expected, or at least hoped, to receive at Christmas with their behavior during the year prior to Christmas. Had they been obedient to their parents, helpful and cooperative around the house, reasonably good to brothers and sisters? Were they studying diligently, doing okay in school, not getting into trouble? I can clearly remember, as a boy, analyzing my behavior as Christmas approached, hoping maybe exceptional behavior in the last six or eight weeks would offset earlier offenses and carelessness. There was no doubt in my mind that the presents under the tree were connected with my behavior. Of course, there was no doubt in my father’s mind either. It was no figment of my imagination.

Did that make Christmas less exciting? I think the reverse. Did that make me feel less loved when I got good presents? I think the reverse. Did that make Christmas seem more connected or less connected with real life in my young mind? You have three guesses.

Is there any parent alive today who would withhold Christmas presents from an undeserving child? No, we want Christmas to represent the free gift of God’s outpouring grace and unconditional love. Do you really think young children understand ethereal theories that have no connection with anything they do or care about? Once each year we dump all this stuff on them, whether they have been incredibly wonderful or whether we can barely stand the little monsters. And from that they are supposed to deduce the love of God and the meaning of life?

Every year at Christmas time, I hear endless remarks pretending offense or even scorn at the commercialism of Christmas. I do not take it too seriously, since it seems to have little or no effect on the cash registers or credit cards. But I keep wondering: As Americans, even as American Christians, do we have something against commerce? I love buying presents. I wish I could buy a lot more of them. I do not have anything against commerce. Like most of you, if you gave me unlimited resources, I would love to buy some really wonderful presents for every single person on earth who tried to make life better for others this past year. I think we should stop complaining about commercialism, and complain instead

about meaningless commercialism and immoral commerce. And everybody who makes toys that do not do what they are supposed to do ought to have to spend January in jail. And everybody who gives presents to people they do not like or children who do not behave ought to have to spend February in jail.

Suppose we all grow up knowing we have to help in the preparations for Christmas: we have to obey our parents; get along with each other; help with the cleaning and cooking and decorating; start thinking of things we can do for or give to others. That's pretty good on a child's level. If anything is mentioned about the birth of Jesus, that is even better. But for adults, it gets deeper. It does not jump track – unless you start thinking about Easter – but it gets a lot deeper and heads for mystery beyond our knowing. There are deeper preparations. How do we get the inner roads ready? There are preparations we need to make that we are not quite sure how to make. There are things that need cleaning up, and we are not sure if that is even possible.

They came to John the Baptist to be washed in the Jordan River. You can feel the hunger ... the longing ... the desire for a better, truer life. How do you get clean after you have lived in this world for a few years? How do you prepare for the coming of the Holy One?

There are two great realities to Christmas that we hate. They are connected. One is that we can never get sufficiently ready to receive such a visitor. We are not and never can be worthy for God's Messiah to come visit us. It dawns on us eventually that He comes precisely because this is true – precisely because we cannot get worthy – precisely because we need Him so desperately if we are to go on with LIFE. But that awareness comes later. Initially, we always try to get ready, try to be worthy – even pretend we are just fine whether He comes or not.

This sets us up for the second reality that we hate. His character and being are a light that reveals our flaws. He does not do it to be mean. We learn that later too. It just happens. Light casts shadows. We cannot stand what we look like when He is around. All our mirrors are in rooms with ten-watt bulbs ... until He comes. We thought we looked okay. We thought we were getting away with it. It turns out that He sees beneath the surface, to identity and destiny and value we never dreamed lurk within us. But we do not know that at first. We think He judges us like we judge ourselves and each other. And when His light illumines our lives, we cannot stand the reflection. We end up rejecting Him. We will do almost

anything to get away from Him, at first – or to get Him away from us. He understands why even better than we do – even when it takes Him to the Cross.

One of the things His light reveals is our disobedience. We have never loved or obeyed God. Oh, we have done a few things – we have tried in our way to be good and religious and responsible and moral and all. At least at times. It suddenly looks pretty pathetic, anemic, and half-hearted ... in the LIGHT that comes from His life. All my life I have been playing Chopsticks. I even thought it sounded pretty good. Then He comes along playing the Hungarian Rhapsody, Mozart, and Beethoven with full orchestra. How was I to know that such things were even possible? But at first I do not notice the smile, or His beckoning. I only know that I have worked really hard at my Chopsticks and now He has made it sound silly. It is a really hard decision for us humans: Shall we follow Him until we can play Beethoven, or kill Him so we can go back to pretending that Chopsticks is really beautiful, or at least as good as it gets?

The disobedience is not His fault, even though we blame Him for it. The disobedience was here long before the Incarnation. It has been ruining life here, and we have been choking on it, since Adam and Eve first discovered free will and turned it in the wrong direction. But disobedience never looked so clear and ugly until He came. So He gets blamed for it. That is always the other side of Christmas. It is reflected in the stories – in the gift of myrrh; in the actions of Herod; in the flight to Egypt; in the manger itself, and no room in the inn. And we all have our own stories to add to them.

Many have tried to take this dimension out of Christmas, not only for the children, but for everyone. Insofar as they succeed, Santa looks and behaves more and more like Satan: red suit, hearty laugh, instant gratification ... all reeking with temptations that promise everything and deliver a “high” that lasts almost a week, but leave us “another day older and deeper in debt.”

The reality is that there is judgment on the earth for as long as we are disobedient to God. It operates everywhere. It is not some special kind of punishment. Creation runs according to the Creator’s design and purpose. Nothing can or does go right here for very long if it operates against the Creator’s design and purpose. That is the meaning of The Fall; that is the meaning of The Flood; that is the meaning of The Plagues of Egypt. Christmas does not bring these problems. Jesus does not bring

trouble to a world all loving and peaceful until He came. Nothing can or does go right here for very long until the judgment is lifted – until obedience is restored. We usually prefer to call it reconciliation – restoration of trust – conversion – reestablishment of relationship between us and God.

Meanwhile, the loving God goes on loving – offering salvation and redemption, as always – but the judgment still stands. Meanwhile, the world has killed the Son, and for the most part it has not acknowledged the deed, or repented, or even bothered to say “I’m sorry.” The judgment is not just God being a poor sport or a sore loser or seeking vengeance. If that were the case, we would not even be here. There would not *be* any “here”! Clearly God has not given up on us, but the judgment still stands. Where could it go? Take it away and there would be no rhyme, reason, or hope anywhere.

So the Son was rejected, and that judgment stands over the world. We can each change that, but only in our own hearts and lives. Is that not how Christmas still comes? The real one? YOU can get ready. YOU can wait and watch. YOU can receive Him and turn back to obedience and reconciliation with God. But you can only do it in your own life. You cannot do it for your children. You cannot do it for your friends, or your spouse, or your enemies. And please know for an absolute fact: Most of the world around you is not doing this – it is not turning toward obedience to God. If you are obedient in a disobedient world, you are at terrible risk. This does not turn us away – He is worth every second of it. But we do need to know and remember. That, also, is part of the Christmas story.

What follows is pure myth of my making. It has no basis in historical fact, but is only my way of trying to tell the truth.

I sometimes try to imagine what would have happened if the world had recognized Jesus’ true identity and welcomed Him as the rightful King. You know, King Herod saying, when they finally met: “Oh Jesus, I can’t tell you how ashamed and sorry I am. I have been a bad Jew and a rotten King, and nothing is going like it should. Please, I’ll do anything you say. Show me how to be the King I am supposed to be ...” and so forth.

Why was it so impossible for Herod, and all the others, to receive Jesus in this manner? I have only to think of my own response to Jesus to understand. The judgment of the rejection still stands. The world cannot have the peace and love of the Kingdom – until it is willing to obey the King. The blood, sweat, and tears keep mounting up – to more injustice,

sorrow, pain, and death. No one here escapes, because the world itself turns away. No punishment is appropriate or required. To reject this King is its own inherent punishment. The Kingdom does not come. There is no way to embellish such a loss.

We are living today in the time of “the third chance.” The second chance was lost on a Good Friday long ago. We suspect God knew all along that it would come to this. Jesus seemed to have known too, by the time He was halfway through His ministry. But my myth picks up at the zero hour, when Jesus realized that it was hopeless – that human institutions were unable to reverse their response or cope with truth from beyond their own domain. Jesus had to make some emergency decisions. (In my mythic imagination.)

First, Jesus gave the thief next to Him a one-way ticket to Paradise. Secondly, He sent an urgent message to His Father: “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*” Decoded, that meant: “Hold your fire! Cancel wrath. There is more to this than meets the eye.”

A little later, somewhat recovered from His ordeal, Jesus entered God’s presence for a summit conference. “To get right to the point,” He began, “despite your perfect knowledge and wisdom, you have no idea what it *feels* like to be down there! The dimensions are unbearably cramped. People are wonderful, just like you created them. Only *they* don’t know that. They don’t see much of it in each other either. Abba, you cannot imagine the blindness of being caged up in one of those bodies. They cannot see the angels. They cannot even hear the music! They don’t know hardly anything about glory. Their language has no words for even the most commonplace blessings of this realm. They look at the sky, and all that comes is a bittersweet loneliness – an overwhelming sense of incompleteness. And *you* cannot fathom how uptight they feel about survival. Such a monstrous fear is hardly conceivable here. It is painful to be a soul locked up in flesh, with no memory of HOME. My last message was literally true. Despite all our preparation, they had no understanding of what they were doing. They actually thought life would be better without me! Like I was causing their problems. Even the most secure among them cannot really trust love – there is so little experience of it there.” Jesus paused with a shudder, waited to regain control.

“I brought a friend with me, a man they were killing beside me. They had quit on him. Can you believe that? I want you to meet him and see how much soul he has – how much goodness and beauty and potential

he has. They didn't have an inkling of it, or any idea how to bring it forth. It is the same everywhere. There is nothing wrong with the design. Only, the blindness and the fear and the loneliness are so great. It needs more time. It cannot be completed there. We have to find a way to give their souls more space and more chances to grow. They don't need more threats or pain – they need mercy, grace, forgiveness.”

God was smiling. “Yes, my Son. You have learned all I had hoped – maybe even more. Now you will never make the mistake your brother Lucifer made. He thinks everything can be solved if you just apply more pressure and force and punishment and pain. How is he, by the way?”

“About the same, Sir. I don't think he is catching on yet at all. He actually thought I would come over to his side when I saw how things really were down there.”

When the summit conference had ended, it had been decided that earth would never be able to receive her King *en masse*, or by political, cultural, economic, or even religious establishments. It had to be the slowest, hardest way: *one at a time*. It must be by individual recognition and choice. It made it doubly difficult, since many of the benefits were impossible until the vast majority could see it and claim it together. The blessings and the power were cut way back. But it was better than nothing – and still a great deal more than most were willing to receive.

So the judgment remained *and* the New Kingdom became possible – both, at the same time. Which brings us back to today. That is where we are, regardless of how it has been presented. The truth is that the world rejected its rightful King and, for its lack of obedience, does not enjoy the peace or joy or prosperity of the New Kingdom. And yet, by the mercies of Christ, the WAY is still open ... to each one of us – *one at a time*. We can enter the Kingdom at any moment – any time we are willing to give our own personal allegiance to the King. There is nothing this world can do to prevent it. It is the only thing Lucifer cannot stop. Never try to get Christ into Christmas. That is not the issue. Trying to get *ourselves* into Christmas – *that* is the issue.

Isaiah 9:2-7
John 1:6-17

UNLOVED

Have any of you ever walked in darkness? They say that people who have never walked in darkness have very little use for Christmas – at least the real one. I wonder if that is creating a problem for any of you? Most of us, I suspect, have walked in darkness until we can hardly bear it. We tried to put the best face on it we could, and sometimes we still do. Nevertheless, we can barely stand it. A few of us even suspect that some of the personality quirks, mannerisms, addictions, and bad habits that cling to us so closely, that we have struggled for years to eradicate – like anger, greed, lust, jealousy, gluttony, sloth – are connected to the darkness. Is that why we can never quite manage to shake them once and for all?

Some of you noticed that I did not name the seventh and greatest of the Seven Deadly Sins – the personification of which is Satan himself. But, well, I did not want to spoil your day.

There is darkness all over the world: people hungry (for one kind of food or another); people hurting; people estranged; people being abused; people killing each other, or wishing they could. Can you think of anybody you believe the world would be better off without? You can lie to me, but don't lie to yourself or God. Can you think of *anybody* you are pretty sure the world would be better off without? I always have a little list handy in my hip pocket, just in case God should ask ... Do you think God understands such things? How about *that* for a Christmas present? Instead of giving us more junk we don't need, how about taking away some of the junk or some of the people that keep wrecking things for the rest of us? The only trouble with that line of reasoning is, eventually I start wondering if I would make the cut.

Have you ever walked in darkness? Do you ever talk to your best friends about it? We build every kind of shell and shield we can think of to keep the darkness from overwhelming us – to keep from being any more conscious of it than we can help. Perhaps our sanity depends on it. Did you know that during the Christmas season, more people consume more alcohol than at any other time of the year? I'm not talking about the drunks. We never need special seasons or reasons. I'm talking about the general populace. All of them are so happy – so genuinely comforted by Christmas and its assurance of life and hope and love – that at Christmas

time they would rather be a little less conscious, a little less aware ... so they can enjoy it a little more. Interesting. Not trying to make a big issue of it; just commenting. Interesting ...

I have some friends who, though not directly involved, resent the Christmas boat parade. Though I have a hard time finding a chance to go see it, I think the parade is wonderful. But these folk go watch it over and over just so they can resent it. They do this by recalculating the lights, the decorations, even the boats into money that should have been used to feed the poor, or at least used in some fashion to help people. Now *there* is a grand idea: Let's take all the beauty and joy and celebration out of the world. That will drive away the darkness. Maybe if we take away all the lights, the darkness won't feel so bad.

The truth is, we still walk in darkness. The signs of it are everywhere. We try to put the best face on it we can, and sometimes we even try to pretend it is not so. Yet darkness is not the only truth. In this world, we live in a strange and terrible and wonderful dualism. There is also light here. There always has been. But it came most brightly – and still shines most brilliantly – from the Incarnation. Many things in our time try to reflect it, borrow it, claim it, take credit for it, even steal from it. But *“the true light that enlightens everyone”* still shines most brightly from the coming of that Special One into our world. How eerie and tantalizing and incredible that Isaiah was “seeing it,” speaking of it, and writing about it ... seven hundred years before He came.

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.” The words still thrill our hearts. The words still ring as strange and true today as they ever did. And so we still get the roads ready. We still prepare our hearts. We have already seen and known this light – it is already mixed with our darkness. It has been illumining our lives for years. We seek it, wait for it, long for it, and welcome it with greater eagerness the longer we know of it – the more we let it into our lives.

The coming of Christ – true Christmas – is always unexpected. We have talked about that, and how we try to get eager and expectant and ready for anything – watching all the out-of-the-way places – knowing, even so, that we will be surprised each time He comes to us afresh. This part of Christmas goes on in the secret places, apart from the outer trappings and celebrations which try to symbolize it. If the Christ comes close within, then the lights and trees and gifts and music seem genuine

and bless us deeply. Because He has come close and been with us so many times already, the trappings speak to us and no longer seem as empty and foolish as they once did.

Only, it is never over. It is not a story onto which we can write “The End.” It is a Living Story that takes on more life the longer we live with it. UNEXPECTED remains true. And DISOBEYED is still part of the story, so we again try to come to terms with our disobedience. How else can we get the roads ready? How else can we prepare Him room? I suspect that none of us are ready to boast a perfect humility or obedience (they come to the same thing). But we have ahold of some new dimensions of it. Seeing our disobedience afresh does not automatically make us obedient. The Savior still has work to do with us. But awareness of our true condition does make it possible for us to welcome and receive Him. The alternative, as our world has made so very clear generation after generation, is terrible – and terribly clear: Crucifixion.

We come today to the third reality that opens us to Advent preparations. Jesus was not only UNEXPECTED and DISOBEYED. He was also UNLOVED. He got loved a little, by a few, while still in His earthly ministry – *but they all deserted Him*. Do you know anything more appalling? Doesn’t this part of the story also keep repeating itself? Talk about the heart breaking! How do we explain that, at moments during Advent, when everybody else is acting so happy and eager, we are weeping? We don’t mean to take anything away from the celebrations or the anticipation. Yet He is unloved. It is part of the story. And the story is not over. Why is there so much red wherever there are Christmas decorations? Some people don’t even know. But *we* know. The stories and the carols and the music and the decorations still remember and cry it out – if we have not turned off all our hearing aids: “Why Jesus our Savior has come for to die.” Is He unloved still? It is not even a question. It is certain, and dramatic, and obvious. And is He unloved, sometimes, even by me? When the question gets to there, I can barely breathe. Of course, most folk say we shouldn’t take such things so personally ... Right!

But if I do not run too fast and too far – if I keep watching the story – after a while I can breathe again. He got loved a lot, by the same few, after it was what we call “too late.” Slow to respond and understand – just like me – the disciples *did* awaken more and more, especially when He started appearing to them – coming to them – after the Resurrection. Jesus gave His life for them. But He was not mature and magnanimous and

above it all, like some people try to picture Him – like some people try to tell the story. No, He expected and wanted their lives in return. He was after them. He has been ever since. Jesus had never heard of our high-minded theories about unconditional love, selflessness, giving with no thought of return, living with no desire to achieve anything or receive anything back. Not Jesus! We dare not confuse Him with some modern-day guru of serenity and supreme abstractness. Jesus likes two-way streets. He likes getting involved with us – giving *and* receiving – like true love always does. That is what Incarnation means: coming here to be with us – the whole way, and all the way – where it really counts.

Jesus never blesses us without also calling us. He expects response. He expected the lives of His disciples in return. His whole mission counted on it – and it still does. How else can the Kingdom come – in any way, for anyone? Insofar as we know about their lives, the disciples ended up giving love for love – life for life. One way or another, they each turned life over to Christ – and in the end, lost it for love of Him. Is that not the very thing which blessed them the most – which closed the connection – which truly redeemed and transformed them? I am not just talking about the twelve. I am talking about *all* disciples, generation after generation. They turned life over, laid it down for Him, lost it for love of Him. Life for life, and love for love. It was no parlor game. He was after them. He still is. He loved them and wanted them. He still does.

Never do we want to go through Advent without asking about the One who is loving but unloved. Never do we want to go through Advent without asking about the condition of our own love for Him. If Christmas does not seem real or feel right or seem to be coming for us this season, that is where we go looking. Incarnation is God taking drastic measures – Christ playing for keeps. To accept love is to get caught. It requires us to respond in some way. Ask any bachelor; look anywhere in the world; watch any person; read any story. To accept love is to be caught. If love is offered, no person can receive it and stay neutral or unchanged. We return love, or we turn love away.

I am not making this up. These are not my rules. I am only mentioning what IS. It is a principle of the universe. Boy meets girl. Then one day, boy kisses girl. She may mistrust him – turn away – reject. She may believe his affection is genuine and still turn away; maybe she has other plans or other commitments. It is still rejection. Or she responds and receives his affection. If so, what does she do? She kisses him back!

Do you imagine that the same principle does not operate between us and God? Reject or kiss back. Track it through the warp and woof, the length and breadth of all Creation. Love leaves us no choice. Love leaves no neutral ground. Do we not know this about love? Love leaves no neutral ground. Receive or reject. And God is love. That is why He came.

The personal love of the personal God has come into the world. That is what Christmas is about. Now the question is whether we will receive or reject it. There is no neutral ground. If somebody kisses you, you know whether you respond or reject it. If somebody dies for you, you know whether you respond or reject it. In both cases, it is the beginning, not the end, of the relationship. If we want a Merry Christmas, we kiss Him back. Love for love. Life for life.

Some of you also want to begin telling the Christmas story to your children. There are many ways. Maybe this year, for a change of pace, you could go back to one of the older Sunday School curriculums and dig out the story of Sleeping Beauty. Your children will understand it, even if some of us do not.

Sleeping Beauty is the story of how the world was cast under a spell by an evil Magician (whose real name, of course, was Satan). All the beauty of life went to sleep and could not be awakened. People lived in a Twilight Zone, unaware of each other, and God; unable to rise to the call of the Spirit; unable to walk or work or sing or play in the light and fullness of LIFE. Being spiritually asleep, they walked in darkness.

Until one day the Great Prince of Love came. He defied the evil spell and the power of the terrible Magician. He broke into the castle (our world), where no light had been alive for ever so many years. He found Sleeping Beauty and, with the kiss of love, awakened her to all the life and hope and struggle and learning and challenge of LIFE – to all the joy and travail and promise of Real Life that the evil spell had taken from her. (Well, that may not be exactly how you heard the story, but you can tell it to your children any way you like.)

Only, one thing was left out of the story, I suppose, back when this story was first told, because it was assumed that everybody knew such things: When Sleeping Beauty was awakened by the kiss of the Great Prince, she had a choice to make. She could kiss Him back, or she could go back to sleep. It didn't matter whether she felt worthy or unworthy. It didn't matter what she had dreamed about during the long sleep. It

didn't make any difference whether she could explain or understand how the Great Prince had come to love her. It didn't matter whether she knew how He had broken into the castle, or how He was able to break the evil spell, or where He had found power enough to defy the terrible Magician. Only one thing mattered: She had to decide whether to kiss Him back, or go back to sleep.

Isaiah 53:10-12
John 3:12-17

HE CAME ANYWAY

What are you doing here? Christmas Eve and Christmas Day were not enough? *More* than enough. But unlike most of our nation, you figure that after the celebration, it is time to live the LIFE. And we do that by being part of the faith family – part of the people who worship together, and support each other, and carry and share it in all of our days. I am very grateful you feel that way too. And I am very grateful that Jesus is not a once-a-year man.

Watching the outsiders trying to deal with Christmas reminds me of a customs officer I once heard about. Over the years he had developed a remarkable sixth sense. He had one of those noses that could just smell it when people were trying to smuggle something over the border. Early one summer, a boy came riding up to the gate on a bicycle. There was a big box of sand on the back of the bicycle. The customs officer got that funny feeling, and he just knew something was “going on.” He carefully searched the box of sand but found nothing. All through the summer, about every four days, the boy would come on his bicycle with the same box of sand. The customs officer had been at his job a long time. He thought maybe he was being set up. Maybe the boy would come through with nothing until the officer got careless or lazy, and then he would begin to smuggle whatever it was he intended to smuggle. So all through the summer, the customs officer sifted the sand each time the boy came through. He checked the box, he checked the boy, he inspected the bicycle for secret containers. He even examined the bike to see if there was a way something might be hidden in the metal frame. But he could never find anything.

At the end of that summer, the customs officer retired and settled down to a leisurely life in the border town. One day he saw the boy on his bicycle. He stopped him and said, “I’m retired now. You have nothing to fear from me. But I’m so curious. I know you’re up to something. Please tell me: What is it that you’re smuggling?” The boy smiled and said, “Bicycles.”

What was God smuggling into the world at Christmas? HIMSELF! Most of the world keeps trying to find a magic potion or a secret ingredient that causes generosity or makes people be extra nice. We look for a warrior to fight our battles, a genie to grant our wishes, or a special leader who will

make our political causes be successful. But it's the bicycle: God wanting to be with us as we really are, so we can become who he really made us to be. That's the kind of magic that never blows away.

We keep looking at the presents, the wise men, the shepherds, the angels – wondering what it is about. We keep sifting through the sand of our hurts, disappointments, fears, successes – wondering if that is all there is. We keep checking the parties, the gifts, the gatherings, the food, the decorations. All the time, there He is, right out in the open: Christmas is the coming of Jesus. Jesus is what we are looking for. “*God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.*” That is what we really need and want: back in tune with God – back to the reality and awareness of what God is really like.

In all of the writings of the prophets, no passage is considered a clearer or more specific prediction of the coming Messiah than the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah. Truly it is not a straight prediction. Most people leave out the ending and the context. But Isaiah is onto great themes – greater than he knows, and he is a mighty visionary. So the passage does portend the coming Messiah, in all the strange reversals that still leave our heads swimming.

We have been reading various sections of the chapter all through Advent. Its message has cued the sermons: Jesus was UNEXPECTED, DISOBEYED, UNLOVED. In the early verses, Isaiah's words are severe, serious, and grim. Today the victory note comes breaking through. Let it be so for you, too. We have held it off – felt the shock and contrast of holiness entering a fallen world. That is only the preparation and the ensuing adjustment. True, that is where we spend most of our lives – in the preparation and the ensuing adjustment. But today, let God's victory come breaking through.

God's victory is certain and total – at least that is our faith. But Christmas is more like the beginning. Even Easter is more of a beginning than an end. Still, they both point to the end, even as they hand us hope and joy and the mandates for what to do with ourselves in the meantime. So we celebrate Christmas with some hindsight and knowledge about the great victory cry. And God's victory, at least cut down to our level of perception, is at least threefold: First, the Son stayed faithful. Second, a new Kingdom was set up – an alternate choice and WAY of Life became available to humankind. Third, all who received the Son were endowed with power to become children of God. By the way, all of us – even the

earliest apostles – received the Son via the Holy Spirit. Who was being true, dynamic, or faithful before Pentecost? You can name them on no hands.

I.) THE SON STAYED FAITHFUL

We seldom think of the possibility that Jesus might have failed – that He might have been corrupted, or confused, or misled, or tempted to the point of ruining His mission and purpose. On the other hand, there is little indication in the Scriptures that Jesus Himself felt nonchalant or smug, or that He took His own faithfulness for granted. If anything, the reverse was true. Jesus seemed to have been far more intentional and disciplined about spiritual matters than we are. While He was more conscious of the power and presence of God, He was also more aware of His own human frailty and limitations. So Jesus spent *more* time in prayer than we do, *more* time pondering the Scriptures, *more* time matching His daily decisions and choices against both prayer and the Scriptures – shaping His life in the context of God’s personal presence with Him, *and* in the context of what God had been doing with faithful people in the generations before He came. Did the prophets predict Jesus, or did Jesus love and honor the vision and heritage of the prophets? Do you breathe “in,” or “out”?

It is always a tense and nervous time when you watch your children going into situations where you cannot intervene or control the outcome. I am aware of the foolishness of reading human feelings into God. I am also aware of the foolishness of not trying to read human feelings into God. That means not trying to comprehend anything about God or Christmas or Easter at all. Jesus called God “Father,” and sometimes “Daddy,” and I suspect that God as Daddy was frequently nervous and more than a little anxious about how the Son would fare in the strange and difficult circumstances of this earth.

Part of the job of a parent is to *believe* in a child from the beginning, and not just after all the trials are over. So I don’t mean that God was not counting on Jesus. God knew the quality and mettle of the Son he had sent. We feel it in the angel anthems, and even more at the baptism. It was unmistakable on the Mount of Transfiguration. But that does not mean the drama was staged or predictable. There was a lot at stake, and there was always that other possibility. God had plenty of experience with all the other children of the earth turning away from him, once they

became enmeshed in matter and focused on the affairs of this world. And then there was the thing with Lucifer.

So part of the victory cry we sense in Christmas is the choked-up heart of a Father so proud of his Son that he can hardly contain it. (Fortunately, in the tenth dimension you don't have to contain yourself as much as here, but we don't understand that, so we just call it "glory" and let it go at that.)

Anyway, Jesus had stayed loyal. When no one else was looking to God, He had looked to God. Beyond the place where humans formerly could stay faithful, He had stayed faithful. Jesus kept tuned to all the highest impulses that God kept feeding into His mind and soul. Many people want to do that, and I suppose all of us try at times, and for a while. Then the world gets harsher, or more raucous, or more alluring – like it always does for everybody. Finally Jesus was backed into a corner from which there was no escape except compromise or capitulation.

Yet neither came. The scene was set: Satan, as always, had managed to arrange and prepare everything. All was in readiness for earth to steal another child away from God. Only this time, it did not happen. No hasty retreat, no suing for terms, no plea for mercy or another chance. Nothing happened. Jesus stayed there in the Garden ... waiting. Do you ever meditate on the meaning of the two Gardens, Eden and Gethsemane? One is the quintessence of disobedience. The other is the quintessence of obedience. One separates us from God. The other reconciles us to God.

Anyway, in this second Garden – in Gethsemane – there was fear, but no panic; anguish, but no rebellion. He just kept absorbing it – kept centering on the Father and his will. Nothing happened – and in that "nothing," the most that has ever happened came to light. Jesus stayed true to God all the way. A child was born, only this one was different. The world has never quite recovered – never managed to laugh it off, rationalize it, or forget it. This One was different – the quintessence of obedience. And whether we comprehend it all or not, it smells so much like "home" that we are drawn to Him – we cannot help but love Him. What is the difference between choosing a willing obedience to God, and finding LOVE?

On the earthly side of it, Jesus gave no quarter and asked for none. He said, "Live for God." The world said, "Of course, but do it our way – and *for* us – because that is what God really wants, after all." The world

brought all of its threats and pressures to bear: failure, poverty, dishonor, persecution, suffering, death. That's about the list, isn't it? And in just this context – with loyalty to God at stake – no one ever told the world to “Go to Hell” more exquisitely, with clearer mandate, or with less compromising ardor than Jesus did. “You can kill me,” He said, “but you cannot change what I live for.” And no one ever did it with less malice, with as much compassion, with such a sincere affection and love – with such a total concern for the world's true benefit and need – than He did.

So, part of the victory was a personal victory for God. The Son had stayed faithful. Everything had depended upon that. But aside from everything that depended on it, it was still glorious in itself. The Son had stayed faithful! Looking back, that is part of the high note of the celebration – part of the joy of Christmas.

I would like to be one of the children who stays faithful. I cannot make that yet. Try as I might, it eludes me. So until I get it right, I figure to follow the One who knows how. That is the *only* reason I like Christmas: hope and love and life and purpose. Of course, that seems like quite a lot to me.

II.) A NEW KINGDOM WAS SET UP

The dead King is alive again, present and at work in the world. *He lives!* That is what we cry and sing on Easter. And if we could not sing and say that on Easter, Christmas would instantly pale to insignificance, don't you think? There can be Easter whether we know anything about Christmas or not. But there can be no Christmas unless we know Easter. “A child is born.” “Oh? What did he do? What makes him so special?” “Uh, nothing in particular. He never did anything special or unusual that we know about. He was just a really cute baby.” Great, so let's all buy presents for each other because nothing in particular really happened? That's the American Christmas. WE are talking about Christianity.

From time to time, I try to get you to do this little counting game with me. I was always taught to count “one, two, three, four ...” Like that. Okay, the First Coming of Jesus Christ is at Christmas – the birth, the Incarnation, God with us in human form. That is what the celebration is supposed to be about. And after this First Coming, we got rid of Him – killed Him on a Good Friday. He came once and we got rid of Him. I count that as “one.”

If we know He lives – if we have any conviction about who He is or how important He is – it must be because He came again. How else could we know? What do we call the coming after the First Coming? The “Second Coming,” right? So the Second Coming of Christ is the Resurrection – Easter. And if we like, we can include Pentecost and the other appearances of Jesus after the Crucifixion. In the New Testament, there is no distinction between the Resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. The two run together and become interchangeable. (The earliest written witness to the Resurrection comes from the Apostle Paul: “*Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*” (I Corinthians 15:8))

According to the Book of Revelation, the Second Coming of Christ is supposed to be a time when the faithful followers claim Christ’s leadership, spread the Gospel to all the world, and fight against the powers of evil in an effort to bring in the new reign of righteousness. It is also pictured as a time of severe testing and trial and suffering. (Flood, famine, earthquake, wars, rumors of wars, etc.) Do you have trouble recognizing it?

Some people are still waiting for the Second Coming. I think you ought to know that you are living right in the middle of it. An alternate Kingdom was set up, beginning with Easter and Pentecost. Some people are living in this New Kingdom even as we speak – even right here, with so-called “normal life” going on all around them. And that is part of the victory! We are no longer in bondage to this world if we do not want to be. Linking up with Jesus, no longer afraid of failure or death, the world can control us no longer. So we do not have to wait for a second Second Coming – we are living in it right now. Jesus, in the higher role of Holy Spirit, has already come again – He is already with us. The only thing we need to “wait” for is the Holy Spirit’s guidance – the daily sustenance and daily orders that keep us living in the New Kingdom each day.

So we are not caught in some backwash of history, waiting for God’s next phase to begin. We are already in the middle of it and part of it. NOW is the time Christ is building the new age. So there is a Third Coming, when we die – only, that is when WE come into a new realm. And maybe there is a fourth and a tenth and a hundredth coming that we do not need to know about yet. But there is a New Kingdom for us to live in RIGHT NOW! And that is part of the high note, the victory cry – part of the joy of Christmas. I do not like the old order; I’ve tried it. I want to be part of the NEW Kingdom. That is the *only* reason I like Christmas: hope and love and life and purpose. Of course, that seems like quite a lot to me.

III.) POWER TO BECOME CHILDREN OF GOD

This third victory, at least for me, is even better than the other two. It is not about what we do, but about what Christ does for us. Beyond the turmoil and the struggling that we do – bigger than whatever there is of our faithfulness and hope – Christ changes us. If we receive Him, through no fault or merit of our own we receive the power to become children of God. That is both an internal and an eternal change. That connects us with a drama greater than the earth, and more vast than time or space. Our souls are greater than our bodies. Any spiritual kindergarten knows that. All you have to do is notice what the body is like when the soul has departed. Anyway, we do not control or manage things on that level. We only discover that we are loved – and if we want to, we respond by loving back.

The New Kingdom we can be part of here is a wonderful thing, and it is the only thing worth living for here. But it is not going to succeed by our efforts or come to completion here, no matter how hard we try – not here on earth. We are not going to feed all the hungry, free all the oppressed, or love all the lonely. We are only supposed to die trying. We do learn that from the Cross, don't we? (Among other things.) But we are not going to make it here. Without losing one ounce of zeal or determination – without ever using it as a cop-out against doing what we *can* accomplish – we need to come to terms with the fact that we are not going to make it here. This place is too small, too limited by time and space, too estranged from the Father.

The third victory means that none of this really matters. We are not going to make it here, but we have it made – because Christ loves us. The power of “trust in love” changes us into children of God. It does not happen suddenly, like conversion sometimes seems to. Conversion only gets it started. Slowly we are transformed into God's children – into people of peace and wisdom, into people of grace and love. That brings us back to why the baby was born. Some imaginary quota of righteous deeds is not really the purpose. The quality of *being* and the WAY of relating are what finally matter – who we are and how we express that ... with ourselves, with each other, and with God.

The whole drama of creation has been like a vast and complex game of hide-and-go-seek. People keep hiding from God, and no matter how often God finds them, they keep running and hiding again. It started in that first Garden so long ago, when Adam and Eve hid themselves from

God. It has been that way ever since, generation after generation, until hiding seems to be the only thing any of us know how to do. Some people say it is still so. At least all of us still know the game and play it every time we are afraid, confused, or go semiconscious. The world is full of diversions, and hiding from God is its primary preoccupation.

But Christmas has changed that, and keeps on changing it. A “man” came who ate not only the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil, but also the fruit of the Tree of Trust and Love. They call it the Tree of Life. And He stopped running and hiding from God. It was the craziest thing the world had ever seen. He simply refused to go hide. He kept on waiting for God, and waiting *with* God. He did everything in the open with God. And He did the unspeakable and the unheard of: He asked what God wanted first, and what He and other people wanted second. “*Seek ye first the Kingdom of God*”

The repercussions of Adam’s disobedience were enormous. The repercussions of Jesus’ obedience are also enormous. Since His coming, nobody who has known Him has had to run or hide from God. Instead, they receive the power to become children of God.

And that is why we celebrate. It is not just that the Messiah is unexpected, disobeyed, and unloved. That is all true, and we need to know it. But what makes the celebration so wondrous is that He comes anyway! And He comes bringing victory in His wake: Victory in His faithfulness. Victory in a New Kingdom that He makes available to us. Victory in a love that transforms us into God’s children.

He comes anyway! Knowing the reception will be poor. Knowing we are not prepared. Knowing we are not yet obedient. Knowing we will not always love Him back. But He comes anyway! There is nothing on earth so strange and wondrous. He comes anyway! I never know whether to weep or rejoice. But in either and both, unspeakable gratitude wells up in my soul.