

## EASY TO MISS

When I was younger, I was often appalled at how quickly the world moved from Thanksgiving Day to Christmas mood and decoration. And the first time I saw Christmas decorations before Thanksgiving Day itself, I was irate. Since that time, I have come to realize that there is no official book of rules on the subject. *Where* I acquired my notions of the proper break between Thanksgiving and Christmas, I don't even remember. Perhaps it is a holdover from Puritan tradition, which established Thanksgiving and outlawed any celebration of Christmas, period. In any case, the first Sunday of Advent always comes three days after Thanksgiving Day. And for Christians, it is a natural flow from a general thanksgiving to that for which we are most grateful of all. If that is not what the secular world always means to be proclaiming, nevertheless I am more and more content to let it be about its business, as long as it lets us be about ours.

And what is our business? "To live good moral and ethical lives," some have said. Well, that is a pretty good idea for anybody, but hardly enough to get us converted. "To help, insofar as we are able, those less fortunate than ourselves," others have said. No time today to discuss who is less fortunate, or on what basis, or how we try to help them. In any case, that is far from the central meaning of the Christian Faith. Deeds of mercy and caring spill over as a response to our encounter with Christ, but they are not the main event.

No, Jesus came proclaiming new lives for old – even for us. The offer is for New Life here: light where there was darkness; faith where there was fear; hope where there was despair; meaning and purpose where, before, things seemed to be run by random choice or, worse, by some evil force. Have you forgotten what it was like to see life laced everywhere with greed and malice; the lust for power; the compulsive race for pleasure or recognition that turns even beautiful things into something sick and wrong? Do you remember Stalin? Hitler? For every saint or hero you truly honor, can you not name a person so crass and cruel that it is difficult to imagine that they were really human? What did they think they were trying to accomplish? And have you never been heartsick to recognize in yourself, at least in some ways, the very seeds of what you see in them?

I am amazed at the *casualness* with which so many of us approach our New Life in Christ Jesus. It's almost as if we have little concern about which side we are really on. Or maybe worse, as if we have not fully realized that there really are issues here: a life-and-death struggle going on that really is about more than who we marry, what we eat, how much money we make, or how we spend Friday night.

But it is only the beginning of Advent, and I am much too quickly into what it is really about. Let us pretend a little longer that it is all very casual and ordinary, and that we have all the time in the world – at least until we get our bearings. You know, “advent” is an interesting word. In one sense, it refers to a period of time. Even more, it refers to a process that takes place between the “departure” and the “arrival.” Advent means *the coming*.

I can remember as a little boy having a lot of trouble with this concept. It was hard for me to understand that we could leave our house with every intention of being somewhere else, and still take a long, long time to get there. It was especially hard not to keep asking, “Are we almost there, Daddy?” “No. Not for a long time yet. Be patient. Stop asking me every three minutes.”

It was even harder to realize that the same thing was true of those coming to visit us. Such visits were always preceded by certain preparations in which all of us took part – mowing the lawn, sweeping the walks, vacuuming, cooking, and so on. I can remember the feeling of panic when someone would mention, “Well, they are on the way now” – and my jobs were only half finished! A half-finished job was no joke, in my childhood. Then Mother would say, “It's okay, they won't be here for another three hours.” How was that possible?! They were on the way, but they would not arrive for three hours? Something must be really wrong with them. (Nobody had helped me to understand yet that there really is something very wrong with us: we are finite creatures and terribly limited by time and space.)

I still know a number of full-grown adults who have never been able to comprehend this principle. They are perennially late because they cannot comprehend that it takes *time* to get from one place to another. Perhaps this is a lingering shadow-memory, or perhaps a precursor, of another realm where departure and arrival are instantaneous. And supposedly the angels in that other realm are never late. But some of the

angels in *this* realm are always late because they cannot get used to the idea that they have not yet come into their full powers.

In any case, things do not just happen in this world willy-nilly, instantaneously, or without preparation. For every EVENT, there is an ADVENT. Plans must be made. Preparations must be carried out. We must get ready for the event, or the arrival spells chaos, and sometimes disaster. Most often, if we do not get ready to perceive and receive, the event itself passes us by. We may hear the noise and see the activity, and maybe even be right in the middle of where it is all happening, but the event itself will pass us by.

I never knew any of my grandparents. One grandmother came for a visit once. I did not know at the time that it would only be once. I also did not understand what “grandmother” meant. She stayed for several days, I am told, but I never knew her. I cannot remember her voice, or her face, or a single thing she ever said. I missed it – the event passed me by.

Do we miss most things? Or do we perceive and receive most of what is really happening? Which is the exception, and which is the rule? So much goes on all around us, and much of the time we seem only partially awake. Even the great events are easy to miss. All through history, the great events have been missed by all but a handful of people. We have to read history books to find out which events were really important. Only a few perceive or receive what is going on at the time. Only a few know the secret of Advent: there must be preparation, awareness, a readiness to receive – or it passes us by.

Officially, Advent is four weeks to get ready to perceive and receive Christmas – the coming of the Messiah. On reflection, we realize that God’s preparations took longer – millions of years. We do not identify very easily until it gets to things we understand. But we see now that God was making Christmas preparations when he started talking with Abraham four thousand years ago. God was already hanging lights with Jacob and Joseph. God was playing special Christmas music with Moses and David. God was wrapping presents with Isaiah and Jeremiah and whoever in the world wrote Jonah. For two thousand years, God was sending Christmas cards about this coming, and for at least seven hundred years, people talked about getting ready, about how eager they were, and about the Great Day – the Day of the Messiah’s coming. And they kept praying, “Are we almost there, Daddy?”

You know what happened. When it came, most folk missed it. They thought it would be automatic. They thought it would be easy for them to turn and catch it whenever it came. They had not made the necessary preparations. And the truth is – as with all things high and holy – it is easy to miss. (Something about, “*Straight is the way, and narrow the gate that leads to life, and few there be who find it.*” (Matthew 7:13))

There are so many other things going on. Pictures to take, presents to buy, money to make, people to see, things to do. Time goes by and the lamps burn low, and we get to thinking that it will not happen in such a humdrum time, or anywhere close to us. Then a strange light from the sky, and a flurry of a different kind of excitement. But we are in the middle of tasks and plans of our own. We scurry and hurry to finish up what we are doing, for after all, it must be done. Then we turn to see what the strange new light was. But all is quiet again, except for the normal noise of the way of the world. The Messiah comes to tell us that the Holy Spirit is always coming – coming to people in all ages and places. Christmas comes to tell us that Christmas is always coming. But it is easy to miss.

The trouble with God is that God does not understand our attention span. Or maybe God simply chooses not to recreate the world to match our lack of discipline and training. We can hardly fathom staying alert for four weeks, never mind two thousand years. Sometimes on the tennis court, I cannot stay focused for two minutes, even when that is the very thing I think I am trying to do. This business of faithful waiting: year after year; in season and out of season; trying to stay spiritually aware; learning to pray day after day; seeking the will of the Holy Spirit in all that we do – how unreasonable! We simply are not built that way. But God just laughs and says, “*Tell me* all about how you were built! You may not like to admit that you are Spirit-beings, but you are. If I tried to come to you like you think you want me to, it would destroy you. Besides, I am not calling you to a one-day party. I am calling you into an Eternal Kingdom! The Advent must match the Event.”

The Gospel of John does not understand any of it in terms of four weeks, or four thousand years either. It just nods its head quietly and says, “*In the beginning was the Word ...*” From the beginning it was intended. In the end, God will bring it to completion. But coming or going, Jesus is at the center of it. Jesus is the event that breaks us into LIFE. Even so, it is easy to miss.

Humankind will reenact the drama of Christmas again this year. That is, it will come and go, and most folk will miss it. But God does not call it off. God enters the world with the same purpose that was from the beginning. God does not alter the purpose or change the plan according to how many people comprehend it. We are invited to notice if we will, to understand if we want to, to participate if we are willing. God comes into the world, and most folk go on about their business. Yet God goes on about God's business too: the redemption of Life – a Savior, for those who will perceive and receive.

Perhaps some people are sitting here today wondering about their career. They would like it if God would help them with that. They are not very interested in Advent unless they can see some connection between Advent and their career.

Others are concerned with their health, or perhaps with the health of a loved one. They feel the same way: if Advent could promise some sure and immediate answers to health issues, they would be most interested.

Still others are concerned with education, or the family; about friends they have, or want to have; about worries large and small – personal, or involving the whole society. What do we care whether or not some Word became flesh? What do we care about what happened to that flesh so many long years ago? We are alive *today*, with little time and less patience for whatever theories may have seemed important to shepherds and fishermen of a bygone age. Have you ever felt that way?

I have been in conversations about “relevance” for a lot of years now. “Why waste time on the church, when it's clear that we live in a post-Christian era? The church won't even be around by the next generation.” That was back in the '60s. Time and time again, I have watched the Christian Faith outlast what people were telling me was relevant. This has been going on for many generations now. Humans do not always have great perspective. God coming into the world and inviting us into a different WAY of Life – that is going to lose its luster, go out of date, become old hat? I don't think so. But some humans will always be thinking so. It merely reveals how much we need God to come into our world.

John believed in CHRISTMAS. Not the kind *we* celebrate – *that* had not been invented yet. John believed that GOD HAD COME INTO THE WORLD – God had revealed himself, his purpose, and his true nature in Jesus Christ. By that faith, John proclaimed his belief in Life's potential.

In Jesus of Nazareth, “*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*” And “*Those who believe in Him are given the power to become children of God.*” For John, Life’s potential had gone off the map. Suddenly it was unlimited – there was no ceiling. The love and power of God were so great that no matter how much you believed, you could not overreach God’s greatness. In one sense, you could believe as much as you were able to grasp and it would be true for you, because your mind could not exceed God’s greatness.

It is as if God gave us a blank check and said, “Write in the highest amount you can honestly dare to believe is possible.” Then God made good on whatever we wrote in. Only, people kept writing-in such paltry amounts. They kept settling for such meager lives that it wasn’t any fun for God. God, after all, is a Great Giver! It was irritating and insulting how little most people wanted from God. So down through the ages, God kept needling people: “Come on, add a few zeros on the end of it!” A few folk added one or two, and God made payment: You want the fleece wet, or dry? Okay. You want a code to live by? Okay. You want the Promised Land? Okay. You want out of the belly of the great fish and back on dry land? Okay. Even so, most folk were so afraid, they couldn’t even hang on to what had already been given. And always God waits for the smile of understanding to light our faces, but it rarely comes.

Finally, God turned to his Son, and said, “We are never going to get anywhere at this rate. Somebody is going to have to go down there and show those people how to make the mark for infinity.” There was a nod ... and Advent began.

How much life do we have to carry in order to survive? How much soul can we leave lying dormant and still get by? It is easy to miss, but that misses the point. How much are you *worthy* to receive? How much do you *deserve* to put down on that blank check? It is easy to miss, but that *really* misses the whole point! How much are you *worth* to the people around you? How much can you *accomplish* for their benefit? Should that not govern the amount you can write in? That is what most folk – even most of you – still believe. But it misses the point of Christmas.

What a paltry, cheap, and stingy little festival we have turned Christmas into – at least in comparison to what really happened. It is no good just hearing words about Infinite Life or Infinite Love or Infinite Joy. We have to put it back up to God: make some sign that we are

responding – that we are daring to believe what God has done. Get out your pen and start adding zeros. If you are not playing games, God will make payment on whatever you write on that blank check of LIFE – because that is the kind of God that God is.

Somebody told you Christmas was for children? Fine. Then start acting like children – God’s children. What kind of stingy, inept, uncaring Heavenly Father do you think you’ve got?

I cannot say it as well as John, but maybe I can get you to think about what John said. Let us try.

Even before our world was made, life had meaning. The secret of the goal and completion of life was with God, because the secret was God: the awareness of God; being with God; the experience of God – life with God.

Everything that was ever created was made with this purpose in mind. And nothing exists which is by nature opposed to this purpose. Everything in life, if rightly understood and rightly used, will contribute to the revealing and the bringing of the meaning God has for us.

Yet the goal itself is still unfulfilled in us, and therefore its proclamation is like a great beacon – a light shining in the darkness.

A ray of this very light – a person in whom the meaning was fulfilled – was coming into the world. Even though He was what the people of the world were created to be like, yet most people thought Him weird and hard to get along with. They did not recognize in Him their true destiny. Even though He knew and illustrated the secret they were all looking for, yet they could not believe it was really possible, and so they rejected Him.

But a few there were who looked more closely, and saw the longing of their own souls answered in this man and the life He lived. To those few – and to all those who will ever look more closely and believe what they see – He gives power to become what they are created and intended to be – children of God.

For this very reason, the meaning and life God intended from the beginning took shape and form and became a man, and lived among us.

No one has ever seen God, and all the rules and laws we make do not help us to approach the true design that God has for us. But Jesus Christ, the man of love, has revealed it to us – He has opened the WAY and made it available to us.

I repeat, John says it better. But it is now so familiar that many do not stop to think much about what it means.

“Are we almost there, Daddy?” That was old Simeon’s question, and Anna’s. That was the question of the wise men, and of John the Baptist. Only this time, the answer came back “YES! The time is here. It is now happening in your realm, and before your very eyes.” But it is easy to miss. And most of the world keeps riding right on by.

What do you really want? Do you know yet? Do you dare yet to believe that God wants LIFE for you, and will come through with as much of it as you can genuinely ask for – with as much as you are willing to receive? What do you actually expect to receive from God today? Will you dare to take it down out of the “religious” plane, and clarify in God’s presence what it is that you are really seeking?

“New lives for old!” That is what God offers – and what God places on the altar for us. There is no ceiling and no limit on it. It is Advent. He is coming – coming to teach us how to make the mark for infinity.



## THE FUGITIVE

From time to time, we need to take a journey into the dark side of Christmas. The reason is simple: If we do not know the darkness, we do not understand the light. If we do not know the dark side, we do not truly appreciate Christmas. Many people in our society have a tendency to want Jesus for our Savior, without admitting that we need saving. Or they think that maybe on some technicality we *do* need saving, but, since it's all automatic anyway, why pay attention to it?

The harsh side of Christmas is that it takes a lot more preparation than we want to admit is necessary. Receiving this Messiah/King requires more changes than we think we ought to have to make. For all our familiarity with carols and prophecies – with the pageantry and customs of a modern-day Christmas – nothing can obliterate the fact that Jesus was a surprise package. God threw us a curve. Jesus came through the back door of the world, to be a Messiah unlike anything the world expected – or wanted.

Upon arrival, Jesus was categorized by most people as a weirdo, a rebel, or a criminal. That turned out to be a serious blunder on the world's part, but the reality is nonetheless clear: Jesus was resisted, rejected, and exterminated. Those are the facts, however much we have tried to make up for it or make it over in the years since. And no matter how many lights we hang in December, the drama of Jesus' reception in our world remains essentially the same. This is not a Christian world. And even those of us unashamed to carry His name are constantly aware that the difference between His WAY and our ways is still very great indeed. Advent is a tall order for us earthlings. Jesus is always far more than we bargained for!

To help myself focus, I sometimes look for some appropriate theme or storyline in literature. Even when we can hide from the truth in our facts, it has a way of coming out in imagery and story. Why do you think fantasy survives in our culture? My own favorite for the Incarnation is the theme of the Prince in Disguise, but I'm saving that for another time.

A few years back, a program called *The Fugitive* was one of television's most popular shows. That story gripped the hearts and spoke to the loneliness of people all over the nation. A doctor is wrongly convicted and sentenced to death for the murder of his wife. His pleasant and

fruitful life is suddenly interrupted with tragedy and horror. As if the murder of his wife weren't tragedy enough, he himself is blamed for it. By a fluke accident, he escapes, and he wanders the earth as a fugitive. His only hope is to find the actual murderer – and sufficient proof of his own innocence – before he himself is recaptured. He keeps getting involved, helping people, caring about people. But each time he does, it brings him closer to being caught. Never can he let himself be known, fall in love, or put down roots.

*The Fugitive* touched people beyond anyone's expectation. People identified. People loved those who helped him and hated those who hindered or threatened him. If he had walked out of the television screen, few people would have refused to harbor and protect this man who was wanted for murder by all the laws and rules of our society.

It's nice to watch television because there we can be noble without taking any real risk of being put to the test. But in our hearts and minds, that program turned us all into criminals – willing to aid and abet this criminal – because we did not believe he was a criminal.

Hollywood always changes the stories some, from which comes the phrase "The book was even better." The Book is better this time too – the New Testament. Only, the story it tells of The Real Fugitive is true. And again there is human error: The Special Messenger – the Son of God – is wrongly convicted and sentenced to death for blasphemy. His mission of healing and love and redemption is tragically interrupted. As if the world's mockery of God were not enough, He Himself is blamed for it.

Jesus wanders the earth without home or family – constantly in danger for His life, doing good for the people He meets, but never able to stay in one place for very long, fall in love, raise a family, put down roots. Ultimately, He is caught and executed.

At the time The Book was written, Jesus – The Real Fugitive – was still an official outcast and outlaw in the eyes of the world. The Book was written in the hope of convincing people that they should go against society and take The Real Fugitive in – into their hearts, their homes, their lives. The New Testament is an appeal for us to trust and harbor this Fugitive, whose only home on earth is in the hearts of His people. This Book is about real life. And harboring The Real Fugitive puts us to the test – sooner or later, one way or another. That is why many people shy away from The Book, and prefer to stay with television stories.

## THE FUGITIVE

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Advent is a time when people decide how much they want to know and become involved with The Real Fugitive. Some of the noise and celebration are intended to distract us from the real story. But the story is so true and powerful that every year more people get caught by it, and get caught up into it.

*“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”* With such poetic beauty the event has been described – the coming of God’s Son, as a fugitive, into our world. *“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him ... in a manger because there was no room ....”* Clearly He was an outcast, and hidden away.

And this child would one day discover, or remember (which way it was for Him, we do not know), that He had been sent from another realm to be something in our realm that, without Him, we could never know.

So full of hope and meaning, so beautiful in the revealed possibilities, so full of truth and love has Advent become, from our perspective, that we forget how it must have been from the other side. Without meaning to, the outward celebration hides it. Behind the scenes, where Christ still comes to us individually – person-to-person – He still comes as outcast and outlaw and fugitive. He asks if we will take Him in, harbor Him, side with Him. And the price is always fiercely and frighteningly high. To harbor this fugitive is to go against the world. That is always our experience – sooner or later, in one way or another.

Sometimes I wonder if we try to make Christmas so joyful and comforting and beautiful as a way to try to quiet our shaking knees and trembling hands. If we sing loud enough, maybe we won’t have to hear what the songs are saying: God coming to call us out of this world and into a different Kingdom. At times it almost seems like we conspire together to make it through Christmas without noticing the phenomenal tension it reveals between our world and God. You would almost think, from our celebrations, that the whole world is *happy* about His coming – like He is being welcomed with open arms and rejoicing hearts; like we are actually ready for a Prince of Peace, a Leader of Love, and a Lord who will change our ways to match eternal values. Nobody will get cheated this Christmas? Nobody will get lied to? Nobody will get wrongfully laid? Nobody will get drunk? Nobody will get abused, or ignored, or written off? Merry Christmas indeed. The thing that moves us to tears when we stop to ponder or truly hear the carols we sing is not that light comes to a place of light; it is that light comes to darkness. (*“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.*" (Isaiah 9:2))

Yes, we really do want a better world ... sort of. And no, we really are not prepared for what that means. There is terrible tension and turmoil built into the very meaning of Advent. ONE is coming who is more than we bargained for!

Oh, do not think that I say such things to dampen Christmas spirit. Christmas is far more, not less, than we make of it. But we really cannot fathom the enormity of Advent unless we ponder the full significance of what was and is going on. We can even get so locked into our own rejoicing that we forget the other side of the drama. If we rejoice, naturally we assume that everyone everywhere should be rejoicing. To be sure, Christmas in its total context is the greatest thing the earth can imagine or contain – at least for humans. Have you ever thought about what it must have seemed like from Heaven's side?

I don't know how you picture Heaven, but however you do, surely you would not feel like celebrating being told that you had to leave. No analogy will suffice, but have you ever wondered what emotions went through the mind of Christ on the day He was called into His Father's presence and asked if He would take an assignment to earth? Mission Impossible! Suicide Mission! Yet nothing less had any chance of ultimate success.

To be stripped of eternity, its freedom, its love, its beauty and joy. To take on suffering. To be closed-up in the dim awareness of human faculties. To live in heat and cold and hunger. To feel men's hatred, and know their despair. To be caught in the tides of their passions and the rush of goals that Heaven hates. To be caught in it as a man, and to have no escape until men have done to you what they do to themselves and to each other. And to come at it all from Heaven's side. Could it be any worse than for you to be sent back to the slime and mud of some protozoan community that had only a dim awareness of what it was heading toward, eons away? Merry Christmas.

Oh, I am going to go on singing the carols and loving the Message with all my heart, for as long as life and breath remain. I just want to wake up – feel some awareness, have some appreciation for what it cost – and get ready to receive so it won't all have been for nothing. You see, the television story was much too sweet and simple. Not many of the

sons and daughters of earth were willing to harbor or protect The Real Fugitive. In the end, when the chips were down, none of them did. They all ran away. If it is our hope to become the people who will not run away, we need to get ready – so ready that we will not react in any of our normal, natural ways.

And it wasn't just the Cross, you know. That was only the final emblem of all that had gone before. That was only the summation of what it meant for Jesus to visit us – to live among us as a fugitive because we would have it no other way. Then comes the real question: Why was this His reception? Why does our world react to Him so? That is what makes Christmas real. It is also the very thing that makes His coming necessary in the first place.

We are told that He came out of love. Love was the motive. The only way we can even dimly perceive that kind of love is by looking for what such a deed meant to Him – by pondering the magnitude of a motive that would lead to Advent and Christmas ... to His coming ... HERE!

They say that no one can truly feel in the place of another. But at least we might stop to ponder and wonder until *some* emotion rises within us toward the ONE who would do such a thing for us.

We have always made a great deal, and rightly so, out of the realization that at Christmas, God found out what it was like to live in our shoes. All of us long for understanding, and it is precious truth to know that Christ understands us, having shared our kind of life.

Is it not a little strange then that we make such small attempts to understand *Him*? Is it really so weird that Jesus would tell a rich young ruler to give away all his money and come join Him; or call disciples to drop everything and follow Him; or eat with Zacchaeus, love sinners, or wait for the soldiers in Gethsemane?

There is nothing impractical about Jesus. Being practical is only the method we adopt to achieve the ideals and goals we truly believe in. We simply have different ideas than He does about what we want from life. Jesus is the most practical man who ever lived, if we remember the values He believed in. Yes, His teachings sound strange at first. We are never sure whether to laugh or go pout at some of the things He said. But whether we think them impossible or not, if we grant that God is the highest value in life and that love is the chief principle and greatest

power in Creation, then Jesus is the most practical man who ever walked the earth.

Christmas comes at a terrible cost, and the stark truth remains that no person sees it – no person notices it – without getting caught up in it. Christmas brings a profound disturbance along with its tidings of great joy. Those two always go together in this life, unless somebody is merely putting on an act.

After Christmas, the old world never seems like home again. It may be all right as a training ground – a good place to try on life and knock off some of the rough edges. But there is no room here for what you really seek, just as there was no room here for Him who helps you seek it.

The theme recurs from one end of Christmas to the other, and in all the personal Christmases ever since: No room in the inn ... no place to lay His head ... a borrowed tomb ... *“His own received Him not.”* He lived and died a fugitive, a stranger from eternity, a foreigner in an evil land. Until at last, *“He is not here; He is risen.”* And just precisely then, when the world finally starts weeping and mourning, Heaven breaks into peals of rejoicing once more – to welcome Him back!

The world was no place for Him and had no place for Him, and it could in no way contain Him. And you? Are you really so completely and altogether different? In many ways and at many times, do you not also feel a little like a fugitive? Full of a vast and nameless hunger for that which is too much for this place and cannot be contained in this place? So He went to prepare a place for you. And that is much of what He came to tell you.

If, in the meantime, He sends you on some hard mission fraught with sacrifice and understandable only to a motive of His kind of love – as He Himself was once sent – would that altogether surprise you?

After all, Christmas is not just His coming to us. It is also Him inviting us to come with Him. This thing – this Christmas event, this Incarnation – is beckoning again. And no matter what anybody tells you, it is always terribly and eternally personal. That is always, and exactly, what Christmas is: God getting personal!

## OUT-OF-THE-WAY PLACES

Do not settle for a Christmas where some Jesus comes who will make no difference in your life. Do not settle for a Christmas where all you get are slogans and pretty lights, but no relationship with the Living God. Jesus did not come – ending up on a terrible cross – so we could sing about a red-nosed reindeer and hang lights on trees. Which is not to say we should ban hanging lights on trees, or even stop singing about reindeer. Only, that is not the essence of it. That is not what it is about. Even in religion, maybe especially in religion, we have to learn to keep our eye on the ball or we won't be in the game for very long.

What I want to remind us of this morning – not tell you, but remind you, and myself – is that Christmas comes in “out-of-the-way places.” I do not know if it is God's sense of humor or if it is simply necessary to find some creative way to get past all our defenses, but God takes us by surprise. Building, hopefully, on the past two sermons and their reminders, I want to tell you this morning that you will not find Christmas by looking in the familiar places. You will not find it where you found it last year. You will not find it where most of the world's noise is focused and pointing. We have enough history now to know God's Christmas patterns. Christmas takes us by surprise. Christmas comes in out-of-the-way places. That means we do not know where to look, but we know where not to look. And we know we have to be alert – waiting and watchful – for the subtle, quiet, deeply loving surprise. When I was a kid, we used to call it “waiting on tiptoe.” I don't think the old body can handle that anymore, but the mind and the heart and the soul still can.

First of all, Mary and Joseph are themselves an out-of-the-way place. Partly because of our Christian heritage, and the democracy it led us into, we like it when our leaders go from log cabin to White House. It is still remarkable. It is still a surprise. We do not expect a great King, or the Prince of the Universe, to be born into a humble carpenter's family. He is even uprooted – a manger behind some inn, in a town where Joseph no longer has friends or relatives to take him in. Is it so familiar that we can no longer hear it? It is an out-of-the-way place. Only some weirdo astrologers with a miracle star to guide them would ever dream of looking in such an unlikely, out-of-the-way place.

But this story is for us too. God has been trying to reach us for generations – from the beginning. God cannot simply walk through the front door and say, “Here I am.” That would break free will. It would turn us into automatons. Besides, if God even hints at directly wanting us, the shields go up seven feet thick and we turn and run – or grovel so low that we cannot hear the message. The story is for you too. *Immanuel*. “God with us.”

As an aside, for a couple of friends: In Isaiah 7:14, the prophecy says, “... *and shall call his name Immanuel.*” But in Matthew 1:21, the angel tells Joseph he is to name the child Jesus. And in Luke 1:31, the angel tells Mary that she shall name the child Jesus. It is one of the few times in history that the angels gave a husband and wife the very same message. Talk about miracles! But if the prophet says His name will be *Immanuel*, why do the angels insist His name shall be Jesus? *Immanuel* means “God with us” (literally, “with us [is] God”). *Jesus* means “Yahweh is salvation.” Why is the prophecy wrong? Just one more biblical mistake? But you do not have to hear it like some rebellious youth looking for contradiction. The names play off each other. God is coming not only to be with us, but to save us. Can’t God up the ante if he wants to, or maybe hope that now we can get a bigger piece of the picture?

Bethlehem is an out-of-the-way place too. Jerusalem is where “it’s happening.” Bethlehem is the city of David, but that is only ironic. Bethlehem is just a village on the other end of the valley where they keep all the sheep that are going to Jerusalem for sacrifice. The name is full of charm and magic for us. But even in the prophecy in Micah 5:2 that names Bethlehem as the village from which a ruler of Israel will come, it is a big surprise. As the prophecy itself admits, Bethlehem is a no-account place.

I am taking too long and you’re already reminded, but Israel itself is an out-of-the-way place. The Roman Empire has conquered the world. Rome is the future. For this tiny little backwater country at the far end of the Empire, what puny glory it ever had is far in the past. The sweep of Hellenism, and the lure of religions far more sophisticated and appealing than its own, will doubtless eclipse what little is left of Israel and Judaism. One more generation and it will be gone. From a human perspective, you could hardly pick a more unlikely place for the Son of God to be born.



So that is the real story. What has that got to do with Christmas today? Well, many say that Christmas today has got nothing to do with the real story. But that depends upon us, does it not? On the other hand, what good is knowing the story if we do not learn from it? Every authentic story carries within it the innate principles that make it what it is. That means Christmas still comes – always comes – in out-of-the-way places. We will not find it at Macy’s. We will not find it at the parties. We will not find it in all the glare and glitter. We will not find it in the church services. By the way, “church” is not a good place to go if you are looking for Christmas; church is a good thing to *be* after you have *found* Christmas. In any case, all of these things may try to celebrate Christmas. They may honor or dishonor it. But they cannot bring it. Only God can bring Christmas.

Christmas comes in out-of-the-way places. Rarely does it come on December 25th, but you cannot be sure, since the real one did not. It comes where we do not expect to find it. God takes us by surprise. All we can do is stay alert, watch and wait – set heart and mind and soul on tiptoe.

*Immanuel.* God with us. God coming to save us. I know too many stories; you know more than you think you do. I will tell a few, and you must promise to remember to tell some of yours to those you know, before this season ends. These are stories of *Immanuel*. I do not necessarily presume that you will like them.

1.) I had a friend named Pat Pattenson. He was a conscientious, moral man. A good man. An agnostic. I only met him because his youngest son was in my high school youth group. I cannot tell it all, of course, but his middle son committed suicide. It was utterly devastating. There are no words for what the family went through. Some years later, Pat was a stalwart member of the church, a Deacon, one of the men I counted on most. We had not spoken of it for a long time, but one day Pat said to me, “The loss of my son is the worst thing that has ever happened to me. I thought it would make me bitter and angry forever. But I know now that what happened to my son was not God’s will. I would quickly give my life, or anything I have, to bring him back. But his loss brought me to God. And that is the best thing that has ever happened to me in my life.” *Out-of-the-way places.*

2.) Lionel (Lee) Whiston was one of the greatest living saints I have ever known. If you go to one of the prayer retreats I lead, a lot of what you hear will have come from him. When I was a young pastor, Lee led a retreat for clergy. It had a dramatic impact on my ministry. Among other things, he told us the story of his second conversion. At the time, he had been a minister already for about ten years – extremely devoted, working hard to make his parish strong and successful. Then he smiled and said, “The statistics looked pretty good, but it wasn’t much fun – not for any of us.”

One morning in his study, going dutifully through his morning prayer routine, Lee’s thoughts were interrupted by what seemed like a voice in his brain, which said, “What about the peanut brittle?” Used to unruly thoughts trying to interrupt important prayers, he shook it off. But for several days, no matter what he tried, each time he knelt to pray, that insistent voice said, “What about the peanut brittle?”

Finally, in total exasperation and frustration, Lee replied, “All right, damn it, what *about* the peanut brittle?” And the voice said, “You cheat.”

Lee had a custom in his family. He always kept peanut brittle on top of the refrigerator in the kitchen. Anyone in the family could help themselves to the peanut brittle at any time, except there was one rule: You could never eat it alone. You had to convince at least one other member of the family to come eat some peanut brittle with you.

Lee said to the voice, “You can’t be serious! I’m the father. I *buy* the peanut brittle. I work hard, come home late at night. I rarely have a chance to eat any before everybody else has gone to bed.” The voice said, “You cheat.”

After considerable further argument, the voice finally said, “Okay, if you are an exception and everybody understands that the rule does not apply to you, then go home and tell the family what you do.” Right then, Lee knew that he’d had it. There was no way he wanted to tell his wife and children that he had been eating the peanut brittle alone all this time. But the voice insisted. Lee said he never could have made himself own up to it, except he needed his prayers too badly in his work and, of course, the only prayers he could get now went straight to “What about the peanut brittle?”

Screwing up all his courage, he went to the dinner table one evening and told the family his dark secret. He figured that Irma, his wife, would probably forgive him eventually, but he could hardly stand the thought of how his children would react. He had certainly been heavy with the rule when it came to them.

To Lee's astonishment, there was no fire or hatred in the eyes of his family when he made his confession. Rather, after a strange silence, his youngest son told how he was the one who had stolen the pie that everybody had blamed on the next-door neighbor boy. He had hidden it under his bed and eaten it for two days, then thrown away the plate. It had caused an argument with the neighbors, and it seemed so serious to Lee's son that he had been too afraid to ever confess it. Now, with tears in his eyes, he told how ashamed he had been for stealing and lying, and how he thought it meant he could never be good again.

One after another, the stories came out around the table that night. Lee said, "It changed our family's life completely. We started trusting each other, bringing our problems to the table, helping each other with what was really going on in our lives. It changed what we thought prayer was about, and it changed what we thought was important to God. And after it got going in the family, I realized it was changing the church, and the very way I was going about my ministry. All because of peanut brittle." *Out-of-the-way places*. Do not settle for a Christmas where some Jesus comes who will make no difference in your life.

3.) I remember sitting on the floor, down an unused hallway, on the seventh floor of Cabrini Hospital in Seattle – the alcohol ward. I thought my ministry was over. I did not know how I would make a living, or who would take a chance on a known drunk. The only friends I hadn't alienated were down in California, and I realized now that they were drunks also. It was not certain, but I figured that by the time the dust cleared, I would also have lost my family. Who could blame them? So there I sat, with tears in my eyes and joy welling up in my heart – and I knew I had not felt so alive or so thankful in years! And the Spirit, who had never abandoned me through all the hell, was whispering, "Now maybe we can get somewhere again." *Out-of-the-way places*. *Immanuel*.

4.) I was talking to a young couple not long ago, and both were saying amazing things. He was struggling to give me a glimmer of how his life was suddenly so different. It had all happened so quickly, he said. Meaning: He had been in plenty of relationships and had his patterns

all worked out, and it was all going just fine, at least from any ordinary point of view. Then SHE came along and everything was suddenly different. It happened so fast. “I found myself apologizing when I thought I had done something stupid or wrong,” he said. “I’ve never done that before. I realized I couldn’t just walk away from this one if things didn’t please me. It’s like God has set this whole new life in front of me, and I don’t want to miss it.” *God takes us by surprise.* Yahweh is salvation.

5.) Someone discovered the diary of a discouraged Scottish pastor who lived in the late 1700s. The diary made quiet comment about how hard he had labored in his parish but nothing seemed to come of it. Things were so low one year that there was only one boy in the confirmation class – Wee Bobbie Moffat. Yes, well, “Wee Bobbie” turned out to be one of the greatest missionary saints of the nineteenth century. By the way, his daughter married David Livingston.

Shall we go on? Do not settle for a Christmas where some Jesus comes who will make no difference in your life. This is not about ritual or form or stories that dead-ended long ago. This is a Living Lord. He comes to save. But He comes in out-of-the-way places. He appears where we least expect to see Him. Stay alert. Watch and be ready. It is the time of *Immanuel*.

## UNTO YOU A CHILD

Christmas is not the celebration of Jesus' birth – it is the celebration of His COMING. Christmas is more than a birthday party – cake and ice cream and presents, all very pleasant to be sure. That may be a good place to start with children when they are four or five or six. But hopefully we don't leave them at that level – or ourselves either.

I am not trying to start any controversy with what happens “out there.” I know Christmas is a grand national and international festival. It's fine for it to be as meaningful and as much fun as possible, for as many as possible. But in here – that is, inside the church itself – we are supposed to know more than that.

His COMING is more than Happy Birthday. It is the coming of Messiah, the Christ – Incarnation: God coming to earth in the form of a man. And in the mystery and terror of how that is possible – and how much that is possible – all our definitions, expectations, hopes, and dreams are imploded or exploded. You can never look in the mirror again and see “mere human,” because the Christ of God calls you brother or sister. You can never think it will be over soon, because He is resurrected. You can never be content that you have done all things well or right, because He has such strange and awesome standards. And you can never count yourself out, because this One keeps healing the most terrible wounds and giving us brand-new chances out of the blackest pits we can dig.

No, it is not some neat little kindergarten package, all cut-and-dried, with Christmas at one end and Easter at the other – as if we could find a beginning or an end to this business. Easter is not the end; it is fantastic new beginnings – *endless* new beginnings. And Christmas is shot-through with Easter, and with the full impact of all that His COMING has meant and done. Christmas carries it all: fulfillment; fullness of time; Incarnation; “*Mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.*” (Luke 2:30) Of course, the secular world keeps trying to reduce it down to something more safe and manageable – like a birthday party. Just think about the baby and the birth; never mind who He really is, what He does, why He came, or how He changes life. After all, if you let some of the meaning in, you can no longer stay secular, now can you?

The dichotomy is always with us. Christmas is very different depending on whether you see it from “out there” or from “in here.” That is, whether you celebrate it as part of a faith family, as a member of the body of Christ – something you are part of, an integral part of your destiny – or whether you celebrate it as just a custom and tradition of the culture around you, a pleasant holiday that happens this time of year. Please do not misunderstand; I think the secular Christmas is an incredible event. Can you imagine trying to talk our nation into celebrating Christmas if we were coming from scratch, with no heritage or tradition or underlying spiritual meaning? Suppose we had no Christmas and you were a member of a large sales-force whose purpose it was to sell Christmas to our nation. It would be good for the economy; it would bring families closer together; it would be good for the level of caring and affection, at least for many people. Can you imagine the response if we had to sell Christmas from scratch? If we hadn’t grown up seeing it happen every year, we would say point-blank that it was absolutely impossible.

Think of the energy it requires, for instance, and the planning and the imagination it takes to decorate so many homes from coast to coast. To contemplate the amount of generosity that goes into each year’s Christmas celebrations is staggering. Can you imagine starting out from scratch to convince people that they should participate in all this giving and cooperation and coordination? The notion is clearly ludicrous. People might smile to think about it, but you could never talk them into actually trying it. The whole affair is far too idealistic, far too impractical, and so full of incredibly difficult problems – like manufacturing, transportation, distribution, organization, promotion. I mean, the idea is nice, but there is no way we could manage it. Can you imagine the endless meetings – and all the sane, practical objections – if we were trying to sell Christmas?

And yet our nation actually does it every year. Christmas Day is a wonderful parable, and we act it out every year. The question is: Will we catch on to the message of the parable some year and turn our world around? The answer, of course, is no. That would be impractical and impossible. But then, Christmas Day itself is impractical and impossible. Maybe someday that truth will dawn, and we will stretch Christmas from a day into a WAY of Life. Is that not what some of us poignantly mention every December 26th?

“What do you do for a living?” “Oh, I make Christmas presents. I take the gifts and the resources I have and turn them into deeds and services and creations of love. I do it for others in honor of Christ.” You see, we are not really very far from it already, in many situations. It lacks only the vision and the consistency and the faith. On the other hand, that is quite a lot of lack! It misses the core of it – the meaning and the power. We always want to substitute bootstraps and muscle for the Christ, so we can stay in control. But that misses the Christ, who changes us from within. It misses our being born over again. A new world requires new people. Toys and lights and tinsel and music and friendliness are never quite enough, no matter how hard we try. It requires, in the old language, a Savior.

Oh, there is no way to escape it, is there? Christmas is the most insulting day of the year. That is exactly why it is so full of hope. The message of Christmas is that things are not right and we are not whole. The message is that normal days and normal people are not good enough. We are not going to make it this way. We, together with our brothers and sisters everywhere, make the world what it is – and the world is not right yet. It needs to be changed. That is what Christmas shouts from every decoration and carol and gift. But it is not just the usual call to buck-up, or try harder, or blame somebody else, or go hang our heads in shame. The Savior, in love, has come to help us with the changing. That hope is so huge, we do not much mind the insult.

Well, we *do* mind the insult, and we do everything we can, at first, to rework Christmas into something less offensive. It is a universal human trait that we do not like to admit our need. That is precisely the problem we have with Christmas: admitting our need. We don't mind *wanting* something, but we hate to *need* something – even God. God's Christmas present to us is hard to take. The greater the gift, the greater the insult – and the larger the hope. God's present to us is very great, and very costly. “*Unto you a child is born ...*” (Isaiah 9:6) “*For to you is born this day ... a Savior ...*”

Can you picture someone opening this true Christmas package, expectancy and hope on their face – until the wrapping is off? Then: “I give up. What is it? A Savior? Hmmm ... How does it work? What is it good for? What do I do with it? Where can I exchange it for something I really want?”

I ask you: Is that what you want for Christmas? Is that what you think you really need – a Savior? Even after all these generations, the central meaning of Christmas still sounds a little strange, does it not? When we already have so much, how can we find the humility to admit that our need is still so great?

If Christmas means anything at all, it means that we and our world are in great need. It does not primarily have anything to do with wealth or position. Too many people live without meaning, without purpose, without goals worth having. Too many lives are joyless, without self, without soul. Too many people fear the loss of every tiny outward possession because the emptiness within is still so vast and painful. Too many people have killed their dreams and gone adventureless into the ruts and dead-ends that we call “security.” Yes, I do put it exceedingly mildly, as every day’s newspaper makes plain. And onto this bleak scene comes the great gift: Merry Christmas ... Merry LIFE. *“I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly.”*

A Savior to save us from what? **Sin**, of course – alienation, loneliness, emptiness. **Death** – which comes in many forms, none of which we have power over all by ourselves; all who really die, die before death takes them. And **Satan** – though many of you only dimly believe he exists, or you think you are quite competent to deal with him all by yourself.

Christmas is the invitation – from the God who made us – to live according to the integrity and eternity that God has put within us: joy; creativity; a value on your life; a purpose you will not stray from; a talent you will not defile. But the world considered it a terrible insult to be told that it needed a Savior. Savior indeed! Oh yes, the world was very polite about it on the surface, just as it still is every Christmas season – for that is the way of the world. It acted pleased and honored and humble and all. But from the very beginning, you could tell there was deep resentment underneath.

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## UNTO YOU A CHILD

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Dear World,

Have been watching your progress with avid interest for lo these many generations. While much that I see is reminiscent of the true design, it has become increasingly obvious that there is much confusion about the real purpose of life, and a nearly total blank-out regarding the method and availability of real love. It is harder for you than ONE would expect, considering the evidence I keep making available. I have had to conclude that you need dramatic and conclusive help.

Please accept this gift as an expression of my continued, deep, and abiding love. It will give you what you now lack.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

God

Dear God,

Thank you for your thoughtful concern. While recognizing the expense you have gone to, we are a little surprised and – if we may say so – a little hurt to learn that your evaluation of our progress is so negative.

From our point of view, we are doing quite well and consider your gift unnecessary and inappropriate. Your latest expert, while he may be well-trained and highly qualified, has done nothing but upset our procedures, disturb time-honored truth and patterns of behavior, and get everybody all in a lather.

Consequently, we are returning your gift, postage-paid, and we sincerely hope that, in the future, you will allow us to handle our problems in our own way.

HAVE A GOOD FRIDAY.

Earth

Dear World,

I had, of course, suspected this would be your reaction, though I was hoping all along that it would not come to this. No doubt it was inevitable. The greater the gift, the more likely its rejection. So be it. Your insolence has mounted, as the resources I gave you have been discovered and developed. More and more, you destroy and corrupt my world and the souls I plant there.

All right! If it is war you want, it is war you shall have. The Spirit of Him you slew shall be my army. He will strike your friends and steal your children. Without mark or sound, He shall come and conquer, and those He touches will be filled with a LIFE you cannot fathom. They will break your systems and storm your structures, and you will find no defense against them. You yourselves will never be safe, for He will ever be among you – to convert and to redeem.

You have killed my SON, and you think it's all over? **Don't you know who I AM?!** I send Him back. Now try to stop Him! The tomb you sealed is empty.

HAPPY EASTER.

God

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## UNTO YOU A CHILD

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There is an old Persian proverb: “God’s club makes no noise. When it strikes, there is no cure for the blow.” So it is, also, with God’s love.

So there is the drama and the reality of the true Christmas. But the world is beguiled by the humility and meekness and beauty of it. So it celebrates THE COMING of the One who will change it forever. The lights and the trees and the presents are only a “front.” Behind Christmas is the most powerful force for change and transformation in the universe. Kicking and screaming and fighting all the way, we are being dragged inexorably into joy and love and eternal LIFE. “Ain’t it awful?” Strangely enough, much of the time, we really think it is.

Either that, or we receive – with the humility of famished souls, with heartfelt praise and gratitude – we receive the LIFE of the One whom no cross could frighten and no death could hold. That is the story that unfolds endlessly from the birth of this baby.

*“Unto you a child is born ....”*

## I AM THE WAY

*Thomas said to Jesus, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. "*

John is not proclaiming this about, or at least not limiting this proclamation to, the earthly form of Jesus. He clears his definitions from the very first words of his Gospel: *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."* (John 1:1, 14) Clearly John is not talking just about the man from Nazareth, but about Christ's true identity in realms beyond our comprehension.

In contemplation of the wonder of Christmas – of His coming – the thing I know most of all is that I know so very little. In true identity, Jesus is beyond our grasp, beyond definition, beyond comprehension or understanding. The mystery of Christmas is that this is the very One who is coming so close, so intimately and personally, so caringly and personally. The mind is stunned. The soul stands still. This cannot be. Yet the message of Christmas is that IT IS. This cannot be happening – but *it is* happening. Hear the angel choirs!

Despite all our foolish mental gyrations, we believe that Jesus is THE WAY. He embodies it. He is all that we can see or comprehend of it – and more. It closes nothing down, wraps nothing up. It merely opens it. Despite all accusations to the contrary, I do not have to scorn or dishonor any other "Way." I merely choose this one. In fact, I cannot have this WAY *unless* I choose it. No one will or can force it upon me. If it is forced, it is not the WAY. The WAY of the Lamb wins us, heals us, forgives us, redeems us ... but does not force us. Coercion is not the Lamb's WAY. He goes to enormous lengths to reveal that – and to incredible trouble and pain to prove it.

At Christmas, it is also very, very clear to me that I am not the WAY, and never will be. *He* is the WAY. The very most I can hope to be, if I know this, is a follower of His WAY – a walker of His PATH. That is the reason I am here. I presume it is the reason you are here. In both honor and anticipation, we come here because we want to be walkers of His WAY. And it's not like we can do that just today. It is more like an anniversary. We do not want to let it go by without some acknowledgment.

He came ... He comes ... He is the WAY. Therefore, we are walkers of His WAY.

Only, following His New WAY is a lot harder and more exciting than most people think, and is light-years beyond what is usually described. We do not need to go over it all at this time. We only need to open it up, hint at it a little, get some brief reminders for the celebration.

First of all, to be a follower – a walker of His WAY – I must accept His Message, not as theory or concept or philosophy, but as real for myself. I have to accept His love, and the love of the Father who sent Him. We can sing all we want to, but we literally cannot walk His WAY if we do not trust, accept, and believe in the love He has for us. You cannot give what you do not have. You cannot have what you will not accept. We all know this pretty well, I suppose. Yet after all these years, I still get up some mornings and cannot believe it. And the moment I cannot believe it, I start to revert again to the “Old Ways” – my ways, and the ways of the world all around me. I will not go into all the ugliness and sorrow that has caused me, or you. Today is too beautiful and special. But first, if I want to be part of it, I must accept His Message, even for myself. So must you.

Secondly, I have to accept His Message for others. That is even harder – especially when all around me, most of the time, people are trying to tell me the opposite. That is, most of the time people are telling me that Christianity is about how much **I** am supposed to do for others. Of course, that just drags me back into the same Old Ways, where I am supposed to be in control and in charge. But Christianity is *not* about what I can do for others. *I am not the WAY*. It is about what *He* can do for others. I am supposed to carry a Message about what **HE** can do for others, not step in between and try to do it myself. And if I really want to follow the New WAY – if I have really accepted His Message – it is not about how much I can *give* to others; it is about how much I *believe in them*.

How do I know this? I know it by watching Him. I certainly would never have imagined such a thing all by myself. Jesus transformed person after person, not by what He gave them, but by how much He believed in them: by how clearly He knew and trusted in who they really were – their identity under God – and not according to any perspective in this world. He is not the King of Handouts! He is the Prince of Peace – Messiah, Savior, Son of God.

I read and read in my New Testament to see where, to whom, and how often Jesus gives handouts – how often He bases His work and His ministry on gifts of money or goods of any kind. I read in vain. Not a single time do I find Jesus giving money to the needy. Maybe He did and nobody recorded it. Even so, that is significant, don't you think? Nobody thought of Him in that way. Nobody thought of Him doing that sort of thing. We all think we are supposed to and we keep telling others they are supposed to, but it has nothing to do with Jesus or His ministry or His WAY.

Why do we keep insisting that Jesus is about what we call “charity” (*caritas*)? That is not a “new way”! Humans have always tried to feel good about themselves by their gifts. Humans have always tried to control or ingratiate others by their gifts. Nero was lavish with his gifts. So was Hitler. So were some of the worst mayors New York City ever had. It is typical for tyrants to try to “enslave” people with their gifts. Better to have them dependent rather than strong and free. Who was one of the first people to set up soup kitchens in Chicago during the Depression? Al Capone. We have news clips of people talking about how wonderful he was and how grateful they were to him. If we cannot tell the difference between Jesus Christ and Al Capone, what are we doing here?

So now the church has tried to convince the whole world that the essence of Jesus' WAY – the real purpose of Christianity – is to give generic, nonpersonal gifts to people you don't even know and have no intention of truly caring about. This is “love”? This is what we have done to Jesus' WAY? And some people do not believe in Satan! A total reversal and denuding of the most powerful Message the earth has ever known, and some of us do not believe in Satan! Is Christianity changing the world with its physical gifts? Is doing it our way working? Are we converting people with our Christmas presents? Are we converting them with our charity programs? And how is it that *we* know ourselves to be converted by the presence of the Risen Christ – by encountering the Living God – but we think that *others* will be converted by whatever good they can find in our good deeds? Evil, sorrow, loneliness, and fear can be healed and redeemed by handouts? Mine cannot!

Jesus empowered, healed, trusted, and believed in people one at a time – all the way unto death. He commissioned – called – and gave new hope and identity to everyone who would in any way open themselves to Him. They were never the same again because they could no longer see or know or understand themselves in the same way, not after realizing

how *He* saw them. They did not go away with His coins in their pockets. They went away with His conviction, His vision, and His love burning in their hearts. And they knew beyond words that God's love was behind His, stretching to eternity. Reconciled to God: *That* is why He is called the Prince of Peace. That, and because He is in mortal combat with all that ever again tries to reduce us to mere human, physical stature.

Jesus does things for us we cannot do for ourselves – to mind, soul, heart, hope, purpose, identity. But strangely, and consistent with His love, He does not solve our problems for us; He does not take away our struggles in this world. He believes in us and inspires us until we start doing those things for ourselves. Otherwise, you see, He would only keep making us weaker and weaker – like we keep trying to do to others, in His name.

First we have to accept and trust His Message for ourselves. Then we have to accept and believe it for others. Then we can begin to be walkers of His WAY – carriers of His Message. Only, we are not the WAY. HE is the WAY.