

“Christmas IS our Connectedness”

Sermon December 30, 2007 – Christmas I

The Reverend Elton O. Smith, Jr.

St. James' Episcopal Church, Potomac, MD

This morning with Christmas hymns and Christmas decorations still with us in this service, let's pause and reflect on some special Christmas moments before 2007 is just a memory, and savor what is in those moments to fill a New Year only about 37 hours ahead!

If there are ever moments to be savored, Christmas has them, if we pause not only to enjoy them, but now to ask some questions about them before they get away. Why, indeed, do we bustle so frantically at Christmas time, or at any other time? What moves us? Why are we cynical-- or hopeful? What thrills us? Why do we love? Why do we pray?

What truly does Christmas mean? Can we answer this question honestly, not from rote, not with pretense, but from the depth of our being?

I realize that we're not used to asking questions about Christmas. It's harder to ask big Christmas questions when a tragic assassination has just shaken what we have of global hopes for peace. We want Christmas to just happen: it's a marking point in the year. After summer vacation we look forward to Christmas; after Christmas, we look forward to summer vacation! Sometimes I think we actually want things always to be the same this way. That's why at St. James' we like to sing the **same** hymns every Christmas.

Every family has their own Christmas traditions, and it's hard to let go of them. When I was due to leave Korea in December of 1952 I wanted desperately to be home for Christmas-- because I had never spent a Christmas away from home before. But I didn't make it. It was among the many traditions that have gradually slipped away in the fast-paced changes of time.

In Advent I remarked in a sermon that we should go deeper into the meaning of Christmas to find what matters the most. But now after another Christmas I'm realizing that the traditions are not necessarily just the frosting on the Christmas cake, but part of the cake's ingredients.

Why do you think that is? Because Christmas traditions give us the **connectedness** that we all need. The Christmas hymns and carols, Mary and Joseph and the shepherds gazing on the baby Jesus, the Christmas decorations, the presents under the tree, the cultural ways we celebrate on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day (even to the kind of dressing we have with the turkey), gathering with and making phone calls to family and friends. We keep these traditions as we try to keep the connectedness that everyone of us yearns to find.

But will traditions alone give us enough connectedness to bring some special quality to a New Year? No, we need more than that. We need a deeper meaning that puts life all together for us, a meaning that **transcends** anything else we hear in the Christmas season, On this

Sunday after Christmas our Gospel gives us something that we need, something that shouldn't be buried in the beauty and traditions of a midnight Christmas Eve service or packed up with all the Christmas decorations when it's all over.

You'll note that the Gospel according to John we hear this morning doesn't give us the traditional Christmas story at all. We read this Gospel after Christmas, so it is not as familiar to us. Nevertheless those few verses give us an expanse of meaning that is for Christians the answer underneath the deepest and broadest questions about life. The lofty, majestic prologue of John's Gospel reads like an eloquent poem inviting us to gaze upon the mystery of the universe, a mystery of intimacy that surpasses all human logic.

It begins with "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" and concludes with: "*The Word became flesh and dwells among us.*" for "it is God's son, Jesus, who has made him known"

Those few lines capture the wondrous meaning of the Incarnation, the birth of God among us. These are astounding words if you are willing to pause and think about them. They reveal the difference that the Incarnation makes in the life of the world and our personal lives.

The story of Jesus birth we heard at all the Christmas services last week, from the Gospel according to Luke, is a portrait painted on an earthly canvas. It's part of our familiar traditions. John's portrait this morning is painted on a **cosmic** canvas. It is not enough for John to explain Jesus in human origins of time or place or ancestry. He doesn't even try. Instead, this Gospel writer sees the story of Jesus as explaining the ultimate meaning of our entire existence.

"The Word became flesh." The same Word that God breathed out, that took part in creating all things, now takes on all the frailties of flesh and blood. John tells us that God could have chosen to be revealed in all manner of ways; he could have chosen to simply watch it all happen from afar, but instead God chose to connect, to interact, to walk with us, and experience the human condition with us, to literally dwell among us.

In recent years we have learned to appreciate how much we have in common with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters. But it is only Christians that make the astounding statement that the God who created the universe has been incarnated, made flesh, into the glory and misery of human existence. I don't pretend to understand that totally, but if I **could** understand and define it, then this would be another too-small god among the many other too-small gods that people have dreamed up and described to fit their needs. None of these are big enough to fill the **god-blank** in our lives.

I am not a musician, or a poet, or a philosopher, or an artist, or a scientist. But I am grateful that God has chosen to reveal himself in the themes of music, poetry, philosophy, politics, art, and science, and--finally and eternally-- to live out that reality in the connectedness of our lives of flesh and blood.

If you have ever seen or know about it, think of Michelangelo's painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. It's the portrayal of the awesome figure of a bearded God

reaching out to touch the outstretched finger of the first man, Adam. I will never forget studying that ceiling during a visit to the Sistine Chapel many years ago. I remember how that painting expressed for me the yearning that we all feel to touch, if we can, the hand of God.

In the mural the hands do not quite touch. But now, as my mind relates that scene to the words of John's majestic prologue to the Gospel of Christ, it speaks to me in this Christmas season to the connectedness, the hand of God touching our hand, the at-one-ness with God that we all yearn for, and that finally is the most ultimate gift of all.

Some people have built great barriers between themselves and God. They have chosen to see the world as evil and depraved, deserving nothing more than God's wrath, and they have chosen to relate themselves to such a world. But John's words dignify all creation by connecting it to God through Jesus. *"All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being."*

I was cleaning up breakfast dishes two mornings ago when I heard on the "Today" show that Benizir Bhutto had been assassinated just minutes ago. So did the Wall St. Stock Market, which plunged just afterward. This was a stark example of how closely our communications are interconnected now. But it is more than that. We cannot separate ourselves from other people and the created order except at our own peril. When we do violence to each other, we do violence to the Creator. When we love others and treat them with respect, we love and respect the Creator. PEPCO is right: we are connected with more than just power lines!

So in this Christmas season, whether we prefer Luke's beautifully descriptive but concrete Nativity narrative or John's lofty, magnificent poetry, the message is the same: we are dealing with a God whose love for us is so profound, whose concern for our relationship, our connectedness with the Creator and with each other is so vital, that God chose to come and dwell among us. Nothing in heaven or earth transcends that for us!

If we can seek to grasp that message for us this morning, then this will not be just another Christmas fading away. We will not have been just "spending" Christmas this year or "observing" it, but we will have kept it in our hearts-- in **humility**, knowing that we do not catch the spirit of Christmas but that it catches us,

and in **joy**, knowing that as we hold Christmas in our hearts we are held in its hope.

AMEN!