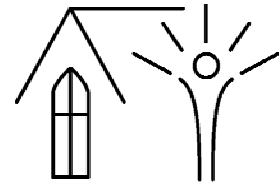




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Our Mission Statement:
*“To Know Christ,
To Grow in Christ,
To Show Others Christ”*

December 25, 2005

Christmas Day

Sermon – “The Light That Dwells Among Us”

Reverend Angia Snyder

I want to share a few stories with you this morning. The first is a Christmas story and it's a true story, a story remembered by its author from the Christmas of 1943, recorded in a book and published in 1999. It's the story of what led up to and then took place on Christmas Eve. Let me share with you Jean Gietzen's memories of that Christmas Eve as recorded in her book, *If You're Missing Baby Jesus*.¹

Jean's family moved around a lot in those early years of her life. Her father worked for an oil company and they moved from one small town to another in their home state of North Dakota. At some point, during a move between Christmas 1942 and Christmas 1943, their family lost their little manger scene, their crèche.

That Advent season Jean's mother happily located another at the local five and dime and took it home for her children to unpack and place near the Christmas tree. It was with a great deal of excitement that the children discovered that in their set they had not one but two figurines of baby Jesus. “One Mary, one Joseph, three wise men, three shepherds, two lambs, a donkey, a cow, an angel and two babies.”² As Jean's brother declared, there were “twins”, two babies, two of Jesus.

To make a long story a bit shorter Jean's mother insisted that the store manager post a sign over the remaining crèche sets, a sign which read, “If you're missing baby Jesus call 7162.”³

As the days of Advent passed, each time the phone rang, Jean's mother would say, “I'll bet that's about Jesus.”⁴ But as Jean recalls, it never happened, the phone call was never from anyone looking for baby Jesus.

Jean's father was, in her words, exasperated. He tried to explain that the figure could be missing from a set from anywhere, “Minot, Fargo or even Walla Walla, Washington for that matter. After all, packing errors occurred all the time.”⁵ His suggestion to his family was that they put the extra Jesus back in the box and forget about it.

But that didn't happen thanks to the protests of Jean, her brother and her mother. Instead they kept the two babies together in the manger, hopeful that whoever was missing baby Jesus would just call and ask for him to be returned.

¹ Gietzen, Jean, *If You're Missing Baby Jesus*, Multnomah Publishers, Sisters, Oregon 1999.

² Ibid. p. 8.

³ Ibid. p. 8.

⁴ Ibid. p. 13.

⁵ Ibid. p. 13.

Jean says it was special to look into the little manger and see not one but two of the Christ child, two babies lying “side by side gazing up into the adoring eyes of Mary. And was that a surprised look on Joseph’s face?”⁶

The days went by and no one called and at 5:00 pm on Christmas Eve, Jean’s mother insisted that her father go to the five and dime to see if there were any sets left.

Following a bit of complaining and protesting he set off with his two children to make the cold walk to the store where upon arriving, the children pressed their noses against the cold window, peering into the darkened store, and upon locating the shelf where the crèche sets had been, happily saw that they were all gone.

When they arrived back home they quickly discovered that there was only one baby Jesus lying in the manger. “Where was the twin and for that matter, where was their mother?”⁷ Both seemed to have vanished.

“Someone must have called, their father told them and she must have gone out to deliver the figurine.”⁸

When the phone rang, Jean’s father told her to answer it and to tell the caller that they had already found a home for Jesus.⁹

But the caller on the phone was Jean’s mother and the mystery wasn’t solved with her phone call, it only grew bigger.

Jean’s mother instructed her to gather blankets, cookies and milk and to go to 205 Chestnut Street.

This time Jean’s father really protested, a bit louder and a bit longer than he had before when he had been asked to go to the five and dime. “Why in the name of heaven can’t we get on with Christmas?” he asked.¹⁰

They walked the extremely cold eight blocks to Chestnut Street carrying the bundle they had been instructed to bring with them. “The house at 205 Chestnut turned out to be the darkest one on the block.”¹¹ And when they arrived they were greeted with acclamations of “Thank God you got here.”¹²

It was a story not unlike any that we seem to hear daily any more as we read our newspapers and watch our televisions.

205 Chestnut was the home of a young family, a mother, a father and five very young children. The family story was a little unusual for 1943 but oh so typical of the world we live in today.

The young woman’s husband had walked out on his family and when he left he took the bedding, the clothing and most of the furniture. The young mother had gone to work in order to support her family. She took in laundry to wash and iron for her neighbors and she cleaned the local five and dime store each day. And each day as she cleaned the area around the manger sets she saw the sign, “If you’re missing baby Jesus call 7162.”¹³

When the furnace in her home had gone out that night of Christmas Eve, it was Jean’s family’s phone number that the young mother remembered and so in a state of desperation she called and Jean’s mother answered.

⁶ Ibid. p. 13.

⁷ Ibid. p. 17.

⁸ Ibid. p. 17.

⁹ Ibid. p. 18.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 18.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 22.

¹² Ibid. p. 22.

¹³ Ibid. p. 25.

After the story was told, Jean's father assured the woman that she had done the right thing and had called the right phone number.

As Jean and her brother sat on the floor in the living room of that young family's home, they noticed that on the one remaining table in the room was the "figure of baby Jesus, the twin, lying in the center of the table. There was no Mary or Joseph, no wise men or shepherds. Just Jesus."¹⁴

One of the smallest of the five children began to cry and Jean's mother rushed over to pick him up and she began to sing to him.

*"This, this is Christ the King,
whom shepherds guard and angels sing.
Haste, haste to bring Him laud,
The babe, the son of Mary."*¹⁵

"Do you hear that? The young mother whispered to another child. The nice lady is singing about the Lord Jesus. He ain't ever gonna walk out on us. Why, He sent these people to us..."¹⁶

Jean's father managed to get the furnace to work again but the woman needed oil. Jean's father promised to make a few calls and return after reassuring her again that indeed she had called the right number.

Jean's family bundled up and headed out the door for home and this time her father didn't say anything until they "set foot inside the front door."¹⁷ He immediately went and picked up the telephone receiver and began to place several calls.

"It was a Christmas Eve like no other" recalls Jean.¹⁸

She writes that "Instead of going to bed in a snug, warm house, dreaming of a pile of presents to open on Christmas morning, we were up way past bedtime, wrapping gifts for a little family we had just met."¹⁹ The men in the neighborhood made two trips in her father's pickup truck that night. Not only had they found enough oil to keep the woman's furnace going for a while but they had found bedding, clothing and furniture.

Jean and her brother knew that Christmas would never be the same after the Christmas Eve experience of 1943. She writes that "the extra Jesus in our home hadn't been ours to keep after all. He was for someone else ... for a desperate family in a dark little house on Chestnut Street. Someone who needed Jesus as much as we did. And we got to take him there."²⁰

And John writes, "The Light shines in the darkness...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

It was a Christmas Eve in Kentucky, some time between 1977 and 1983. There was a knock on the front door. A young man very cold and without a coat had walked a couple of miles to the home of my parents. He had knocked on several doors between the place on the road where his car had broken down and the door that was answered by my father. He was on his way to his father's home but his father's home was far too many miles away for him to get to by foot on that cold Christmas Eve. At each door that he had stopped at and knocked on, on his way, he had been told to go to the home of my Mom and Dad. They had a phone and they would help him. And they did. They had him call his father; they provided him with a hot meal, food which my mother and I had been clearing from the

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 26.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 31.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 31.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 32.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 37.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 37.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 37.

table when we heard him come in the door. After a few hours, when my dad thought that the young man's father had had enough time to get to the agreed upon meeting point, my father gave him my brother's coat and then he helped the young man into my dad's old red pick up truck and he took him to meet his father. I must admit that I was frightened that night. I was older, I was even married, but I was frightened. How could my father invite a stranger into our home on Christmas Eve, feed him, give him my brother's coat and then set out on a journey with him, a young man who was a stranger. I had forgotten what it meant to be a Christian. I had failed to recognize the Light that shines in the darkness, the Word that had become flesh and dwelt among us. We read in Matthew:

*"...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing."*²¹

Incarnation, a word I can't remember hearing until I went to seminary, is a word that means, "God's becoming man; the revelation of God in the human life."²²

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. . . He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us."*²³

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us through the group who traveled to Mississippi several weeks ago to do hurricane relief on our behalf. It was dirty work and hard, physical, manual labor, cutting up the trees that had fallen down or been uprooted. But the work that was done was a light in the life of those for whom it was completed. Upon their return and in talking about their trip with the congregation, John Sheely shared a story he had heard of a little boy and his father walking along a beach covered with star fish, a result of an unusually high tide. The little boy would stop every little bit and pick up a star fish and throw it back into the water. His father asked him why he was doing what he was doing. He told him that there were so many of them that he could never throw them all back into the ocean. The boy, who was holding one in his hand, threw it back into the ocean and told his father "But it made a difference for that one."²⁴

*"Indeed the Light does Shine in the darkness and it's true,
The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."*

Jean Gietzen's family made a difference that Christmas Eve of 1943, they made a difference in the life of a young family in a desperate situation. They were for that young mother and her children "The Light that Dwells Among Us." For a young man, cold and coatless, with a car that had broken down on the side of the road, my father was "The Light that Dwells Among Us." For the hurricane ravaged victims in the area of Picayune, Mississippi, our most recent mission team was "The Light that Dwells Among Us."

"The Light Shines in the Darkness... The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Tomorrow my daughter Jennifer leaves on a ten day trip to Africa with a United Methodist North Central Jurisdiction Volunteers in Mission Team. She is one of a group of nine young adults who will be touring newly established United Methodist Churches and their health and wellness programs in Senegal. She will return to the states to tell the stories of what she has seen with her own eyes. For the people of Senegal she and her fellow team members will be the light of Jesus Christ.

"The Light that Shines in the Darkness... The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

²¹ New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, 1989, Matthew 25:35-36.

²² *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume 2, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1962, p. 691.

²³ New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, 1989, John 1:1-14.

²⁴ Source unknown.

A prayer attributed to St. Theresa of Avila sums up these Christmas stories very well:

*“Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands but yours,
No feet but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which
Christ’s compassion must look out on the world.
Yours are the feet with which
He is to go about doing good.
Yours are the hands with which
He is to bless us now.”*²⁵

Mother Theresa of Calcutta said “...we believe God loves the world through us. Just as he sent Jesus to be his love, his presence in the world, so today he is sending us.”²⁶

The Word was God who came to us as a human being – Jesus Christ the Light that dwells among us. Each of us is the light of Jesus and we must let our light shine. Today we go to our homes to celebrate the birth of the one for whom this day has been set aside. Some of us will celebrate alone and some of us will celebrate with family and/or friends. But all of us can celebrate this Christmas Day knowing that we are the light of Christ and that with the grace of God we can begin each day anew serving God. We **can** share God’s grace and love with those around us.

The Light of Christ Dwells Among Us.

Merry Christmas! Amen.

²⁵ Delaplane, Joan, “And the Words Were made Flesh” December 26, 1999, p.2. www.csec.org/csec/sermon/delaplane.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 2.