



TRINITY METHODIST CHURCH

ALBANY, NEW YORK

ALWAYS A STRANGER

A sermon by
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"...because there was no place for them in the inn."

Luke 2:7

"The Lord is at hand."

Philippians 4:5

In an old Jewish story a man of faith confronted a number of very learned rabbis with the question: "Where does God dwell." They laughed at him and said: "What a foolish thing to ask! Do you not know that it is written, The whole world is full of his glory?" He smiled and then answered his own question: "God dwells where man lets Him in." It is rather terrifying for us to realize that you and I can shut out the glory of God from our lives. So many times we close the door and refuse to admit the finest things into our experience. I remember that as a boy I thought it quite wonderful that I could hold up my hand and shut out some very large object from my sight. We become proud of our strength, of our wisdom, of our abilities, of our achievements, of our own cleverness. With this pride we even shut out the light of the sun.

Humility is not a popular virtue in our world. The success courses, the advice of Madison Avenue, the drive of our times takes us in quite a different direction. Compare the moving picture screen in the average theatre of yesterday with the great wide screen which is common today. We come to expect that life must be played on a wide screen. Today everything is colossal and super and blaring. We have a tendency to transfer this to the Christmas story. In the midst of all of the pomp that we see at Christmas we need to remember that in the real story of Christmas the scene of Jesus' birth was a manger and that the participants were humble people.

One carol has the line, "Why lies He in such mean estate." Another sings: "Gentle Mary laid her Child lowly in a manger. Such a Babe in such a place -

astery comes the most deeply satisfying bread you have ever tasted." My eye shifted and I read that Del Monte Prune Juice will keep you humming a healthy tune." I was told by another sign to chew a pellet of P. K. gum for a pleasing little pick-up. I was reminded that it was the time for me to open my Chanukah Club at the Dime Savings Bank. And then in turn I was urged to speak out against prejudice; to prevent forest fires; to buy U. S. Savings Bonds; to cross at the green light; to cast my ballot for a cleaner New York; to use Post Office certified mail; to be a Red Cross Volunteer; to stay in school and graduate; to help retarded children; to give to the leukemia society; to give to the fund for the handicapped; to the multiple sclerosis society; to the united epilepsy association; to the shelter fund of the humane society; to help those overseas by giving to one great hour of sharing; and to help my college by strengthening our country's higher education. Believe it or not - all this in one subway car. I took out my notebook and wrote it all down. I can sympathize with the innkeeper. If he had as many guests as we have causes to support I know how he felt. We fill our lives with all manner of activity, some of it very good, but then one day we realize that something great has passed us by. Always like a stranger the finer things of life come.

Only a little later as time goes - perhaps thirty-three years - the early Christian community took up a cry, "The Lord is at hand." This became their watchword. People who had missed Him at the inn, people who had not recognized Him as he sat with Publicans and sinners, people who could not believe they saw Him on a cross missed Him again. Always like a stranger. This word, "The Lord is at hand," became a very important note in the celebration of the season called Advent which started the Christian year. In one sense this can be interpreted as "we know not what a day shall bring forth." We think of those people on the two planes that crashed over New York

the other day. They had no idea what the day would bring forth. No one of us can walk out of his house any morning and be sure that he will return at night. The chance for disaster in our modern world is much greater than it has ever been before. Our modern life preaches the apocalyptic with more zest than all the preachers. The religion of the New Testament was very aware that Christians were in constant danger and that Christians were living on the edge of things. For many life faces extinction constantly. The Lord is at hand. This certainly is a large part of the message of Advent.

But this can also be interpreted in another sense. The Lord is at hand. God is ready to reveal to us as much as we are ready to take. The old man was right, God does dwell where man lets Him in. You boys and girls will find as much in school and in your homes as you are willing to take. When I think of all I missed! I had so many chances to learn so much. What did I do? I kept very busy, my life was always full but I missed the best. It was there but I did not see it. What is worse neither I, nor your teachers, nor your parents can get you to see it. You older people will find as much in life as you are willing to take. You can shut out everything with the palm of your hand. What do you choose from life? What will you entertain? Who will be the guest at your inn? There is so much today that it is difficult to decide. But we must decide today. I have been watching the Christmas shoppers. Some of them sort of wander about not having much of an idea what they want. Others know exactly what they want and they push their way through the crowds with great purpose. At Advent we must ask ourselves, what do we want from life?

The Lord is at hand on this Advent Sunday - the Lord is here. He is here as this congregation gathers in Christ's name to worship. Do you feel His presence? Have you come expecting to find Him or have

you just come? He is here in the preaching of the living word. He is here in the sacrament of His realized presence. Sometimes people wonder why we have a Communion Service on Christmas Eve. It is important to take communion at any time because we believe that in a very wonderful way Christ is at hand - he is present in our Communion. So on Christmas Eve we not only prepare to observe all the fine old customs which have grown up around Christmas - we also come here, where we may be sure that Christ is present.

The Lord is at hand in the judgment that comes into our lives. We do not have to wait for some day in the future to be judged. Judgment comes to us every hour of every day. Did you see the sunrise or were you too busy? Did you stop to worship as the sun set and as the west was aglow? Probably not because these are busy days and you thought something else was more important. At that moment you faced the judgment. You were going to stop to see that friend, you were going to send that card, you were going to say that word of appreciation but the time has past now.

The Lord is at hand in the reassurance which He brings that the humble man, that the humble woman, that the boy or girl, the wise or ignorant, the rich or poor, the good or the bad may find Him. But always he comes like a stranger and if we are not careful we shall miss his coming. Strange indeed, if you or I were in Bethlehem we would not be surprised to see a star. But really we do not look for it in Albany. We talk with great conviction about how he came long ago. But he comes today. The Lord is at hand. We scorn the innkeeper but we still have no room for the Christ. We look for the Babe in a manger? Do we look for him at our address? Always like a stranger he comes.

A PRAYER ON CHRISTMAS DAY

So long ago humble shepherds saw the Star and heard the glad tidings. So long ago wise men found in the babe that which they could not find in the wisdom of the world. Now we come, Our Father, seeking this same Saviour. We have so much more than the shepherds, we know so much more about our world than the wise men knew. The simple world of the shepherds has gone but their needs are still our needs. On this day our world still toils for bread and shelter, people are still oppressed by tyrants, men still seek for freedom. On this day men and women still search for answers to the questions that have always bothered sensitive spirits. It has been so long since that first Christmas and yet we still cannot find that for which we seek. Guide us, O Thou giver of all Wisdom, in our search. Show us that the answer comes as we find our way once again to the source of all life.

We thank Thee that we may worship here in this lovely sanctuary but we pray that its beauty may help us to discover the Eternal Christ, and may not obscure our Saviour. Help us to remember that he was born in a manger and that always life's values consist not in things. May the memorials in this chancel remind us of our heritage, of those who have gone before us and to whom we owe our very life. We thank Thee for the years they were with us and for the precious memories that remain. May the red of these flowers remind us of the sacrifices they made and also of those men and women who have carried the Christmas story down to us through the ages amid fire and sword. We would remember the many who must seek the Babe of Bethlehem this year in conditions of peril and danger and suffering. Make us aware of our persecuted brethren who live under the tyrants of our world. We pray for all Christians who must make their witness in the midst of war and revolution.

In the past week so many people have asked that

we remember them in our prayers today. Be with all those who are in hospitals, or who cannot worship with us because they are too ill or too weak to come. Bless them with Thy strength and may those who care for them minister as Thy servants. Bless all doctors and nurses and those who care for the sick.

If there are people here today who are discouraged give them reason for hope. If there are people here who are ashamed of that which they have done give them the assurance of Thy forgiveness. If there are people here who are tired give them Thy rest. Help us all as we seek the Babe of Bethlehem to rid our hearts of selfishness and thoughtlessness and pride so that we may hear the Christmas angels sing their great glad tidings and so that the Eternal spirit may descend upon us and abide with us. Amen.