

The 3rd Sunday of Advent: Holy Trinity Church: December 17, 2017

John 1:6-8, 19-28: *Among You Stands One*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

If people had only known who was in their midst when Jesus walked the byways of Israel more than 2,000 years ago, a cry would have rung out, spontaneously, joyously, and loudly, “The Messiah is here! The Messiah is here!” But only a few were blessed with that insight. The first was John the Baptist. That locust, honey eating, leather belt wearing eccentric preacher screaming at the top of his lungs in the wilderness to repent.

We read his story in the first chapter of John’s Gospel: As we continue our Advent preparations for our celebration of the Lord’s coming, I want to focus on these important words spoken by John to the Pharisees: “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. . .” What powerful words

those are: “Among you stands one you do not know.” Who was this one that the world did not know? It was, of course, God Himself in human form.

One of the great stories of my childhood was Robinson Crusoe who was shipwrecked on an island. He was all alone, stranded for days, weeks, and months. But one day, he noticed a footprint in the sand and that footprint was not his own. Immediately, Robinson Crusoe knew that he was not alone. Someone else was on that island with him.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, Christmas, is the story of God putting God’s human footprint into the Palestinian sands of earth, so that you and I will know that we are not alone on this island called Earth. “Among you stands one,” declares John the Baptist. So, just think with me for a few moments about the difference that the coming of Christ made in the world.

Let’s begin here: With the coming of Christ, light came into the world and the light was God’s love. That’s the way the Gospel of John describes the difference that Christ’s coming made in our world. “In him was life, and that life was the light of all. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” This is why churches and homes throughout the Christian world display candles and tree lights this time of year. We celebrate the light that has overcome the darkness. “Among you stands one . . .” When Christ

came into the world, light penetrated the darkness, the light of God's love.

That's the beautiful thing about Christmas. Love permeates every aspect of this wonderful celebration.

Several years ago, I read a story about a lady named Sheryl Van VleckWells.

In this story she tells about her favorite Christmas. It is a true story that

happened many years ago in the life of Sheryl's mother, Phyllis. Phyllis grew

up in a very poor but very happy family. One year, just before Christmas,

Phyllis contracted diphtheria. Diphtheria was a serious and highly contagious

illness, so the whole family had to be quarantined for many weeks. Every

Christmas Phyllis' mother had sold baked goods in order to buy Christmas

presents for the children. But this year, due to the quarantine, her mother

wasn't allowed to sell any baked goods, so there would be no fancy gifts

around the tree. Seven-year-old Phyllis' biggest concern was that the

quarantine would keep Santa from coming to their house. The poor little girl

spent the weeks leading up to Christmas in a depression.

On Christmas morning, Phyllis' father went up and brought his daughter

down from her bedroom so she could see her surprise. Under the tree was the

most beautiful doll Phyllis had ever seen. For years she would recall that doll

as the best gift she'd ever been given. Years later, Phyllis learned the secret of

the doll's origins. Phyllis' mother had taken one of Phyllis' old, ragged dolls and washed and painted it. Then she took her one and only dance gown, the prettiest dress she owned, and cut it up to make a dress and booties for the doll. Finally, she cut off a length of her own beautiful hair and fashioned a wig for the doll. Her mother's sacrifice, says Sheryl, resulted in a Christmas memory that will be passed down through many generations.

My brothers and sisters, that's the sort of response to adversity only Christmas can provide. Light came into this dark world when Christ was born in Bethlehem, the light of God's love.

This brings us to a second thing to be said: When Christ came into the world, a new way of living was revealed. So, let me ask you a question: Is the Christian faith a belief system or is it a way of living? Now I realize that it is both, but for you, which best describes our faith, a belief system or a way of living? I hope you answered a way of living. I believe this is a truth that explains why some people live such lukewarm lives. For them faith is merely a belief system. As long as they check off a few core beliefs about Jesus, then they win the grand prize, life after death. They believe the man of Galilee lived, died, and was resurrected, but they've never seriously considered

themselves as one of his followers. They've never involved themselves in seeking his kingdom here on earth.

One of the movies that it is difficult to miss on television this time of year is the Frank Capra classic; *It's a Wonderful Life* starring Jimmy Stewart.

Stewart plays a man named George Bailey. George is a man with great dreams and ambitious plans. He wants to get out of the tiny town of Bedford Falls and make a name for himself, but fate seems to have other plans.

Problems begin piling up on him. As he heads off to college his father has a stroke and George must take over the family business. His brother comes home from college with a new wife. Again George's dreams are put on hold.

Then George gets married, but there's a run on the bank and he and his bride must use their honeymoon money to bail out the family business. He even fears that he will be tried and sent to jail over money that has disappeared

from the family business. He finds himself saying, "It would be better if I had never been born!" Believing he is ruined, George determines to take his own

life. He is prevented from suicide by an angel, named Clarence. Clarence gives

George a chance to see what life would have been like for everyone else if he had never been born. His faith in himself and his neighbors is restored as he

finds out that his acts of kindness have made a big difference in many lives in Bedford Falls.

One of the most important questions that each of us confronts in life is this one: Is the world a better place because we were born? Have we left a trail of acts of kindness that have ennobled our legacy? We know the babe of Bethlehem left such a legacy. The whole reason for this season is that his birth changed the destiny of this planet. What kind of difference will your life make? The coming of Christ set into motion a magnificent example of caring, kindness and great love. The influence of Jesus the Christ touched every aspect of human existence: families became better families because of Jesus, marriages became better marriages because of Jesus, the fate of the poor, those sick in mind, body and spirit were healed, restored and made better because of Jesus, hospitals were built for the sick because of Jesus, schools were established for the young. All of this happened because Jesus once walked the sands of Palestine. Ripples of influence from his life still continue today. And if we count ourselves as followers and disciples of Jesus, then all of these acts of kindness, caring and great love continue through all of us.

“Among you stands one . . .” When Christ came into the world, light penetrated the darkness, the light of God’s love, and, thus, a new way of living was revealed. Isn’t that what the spirit of Christmas is all about? For at least a brief season, human beings show their love for one another through such

things as the giving of gifts and generosity toward the poor and the needy.

People open their hearts in a way completely unique to this time of year.

Let me close with a story that shows such love poured out. It was a chilly night in 1949, just a day before Christmas. Elizabeth English and her husband Herman had an unusually busy day at the store, and all they cared about was getting a good night's sleep. The only thing left unsold in their store that day was a layaway package that was never claimed. Elizabeth carefully put it away before closing the store. The next morning, after she and Herman and their son Tommy had opened their presents, Elizabeth was cleaning up the kitchen. Suddenly she felt a gentle urge that she should "take a walk." It was crazy, it was cold outside, but she could not deny the power of this strong urge. And so, on this chilly Christmas Day she said to Herman, "I'm going for a walk." Reaching their store, she encountered two young boys. They were poorly dressed. Their clothes barely covered them against the cold. When they saw her one of them exclaimed, "There she is. See, I told you she would come." "What brought you boys here," Elizabeth queried. "We came looking for you," one of the boys declared. "Our little brother Jimmy didn't get any Christmas gifts and we want to buy skates. We have \$3, see." With tearful eyes, Elizabeth was about to tell them they had no more skates. But then she remembered the unsold layaway package she had carefully put away the

previous day. She opened the store and reached for the package sitting on the topmost shelf. And what do you know? The package contained a pair of skates. Amazingly, the skates fit perfectly. "Have this," one of the boys said, offering the \$3 they had to Elizabeth. But Elizabeth wouldn't take the money from them. "Go buy yourselves some nice gloves," she said with a sheepish smile. Then she said to the boys, "How lucky you were that I came." "I knew you would come," the older boy said. "How?" she asked. "I asked Jesus to send you," he said. Elizabeth felt something tingling down her spine. It appeared that God was somehow involved in this beautiful event. "I asked Jesus to send you," the older boy said and somehow she knew it was true. Elizabeth walked home with a warm glow in her heart. Dinner tasted more delicious that night. She went to bed with great joy in her heart. But the one thing that made that Christmas really joyous was the one thing which makes every Christmas joyous, my sisters and brothers, Jesus was there. His love had touched her life. I hope and pray Jesus' love has touched your life and that you will touch someone else's. When Christ came into the world, the light of God's love penetrated the darkness and a new way of living was revealed. May this spirit of generosity and love continue to spread through you and me until the day comes when God's love blankets the Earth. Amen.