

“The Same Yesterday, Today, and Forever”

Tonight we welcome our Lord Jesus Christ who was, who is, and who will be forever among us. In honor of Christ’s presence among us, I would each of us to transcend this particular moment we are in and consider that Christmas is not just an historical event that occurred some two thousand years ago, but a timeless in-breaking by God into human existence. An in-breaking that cannot be contained in the past, present, or future, but rather transcends all time.

- I. Introduction: We all have our memories of Christmas past. If, like Ebenezer Scrooge, I was visited tonight by the Ghost of Christmas Past, I would no doubt be taken to New York City, where as a child my family and I went every year to see the Christmas show in Radio City Music Hall. We were in awe of the live camels, sheep, donkeys, shepherds, and wise men who would parade across the stage in rapid succession, passing by the Holy Family at least three times. Perhaps we then would go to Horn and Harduck's, one of my father's favorite places to eat in New York City, where you looked through small glass windows and selected food that became mysteriously available when you put change in nearby slots; or we would go to Rockefeller Center, where the Christmas ornaments were as big as basketballs. The Ghost of Christmas Past might instead take me to revisit the Christmas evening that my father fell through the ceiling onto my bed surrounded by Christmas presents which had been carefully hidden away in the attic; or perhaps we would go to see the quickly moving Lionel train set under the Christmas tree that had a hole in the engine where you dropped smoke pellets and then watched the train as it climbed over trestles and passed rapidly through Plasticville. Memories past--memories filled with wonder and joy and days of anticipation thumbing through the thick Sears Christmas catalogue.
- II. Were we visited tonight by the Ghost of Christmas present, I wonder, yes, I wonder, what might each of us be shown — Might we see the face of Christ in those who surround us in our lives in the here and now, certainly things that otherwise we would not see on our own. Or might we see the faces of our families and friends who are with us for Christmas but yet in many ways are distant from us? Might we see that we

might be looking past our families and friends in order to "get all the things done" that we imagine must be finished in order for Christmas to be the way "it needs to be?" Perhaps were the Ghost of Christmas Present to show us ourselves through that spirit's eyes, we might be able to see ourselves with greater self-awareness.

What does Christ want us to see this Christmas? The focus of Christmas Present is to be the sign that God sends us, a child, lying in a manger, surrounded by those who love him. It's as simple as that. Christmas Present is a time for opening our selves to Christ in this moment and being transformed by that presence. And I must tell you I know that this is hard to do. We have overlaid our Christmases with untold expectations that deflect us from coming to see the true Son of God in the beauty and simplicity of his birth.

Did not Jesus tell us this in the chosen circumstances of his birth? He was homeless, his mother, Mary, was unwed, and his first visitors were the most common folk--most likely unschooled, unbathed, and of very low social status. The setting of Jesus' birth emphasized humility and commonality. But what happened there when Jesus was born was also remarkable and exciting! For the common folk, the shepherds, who were led to Jesus that night, alerted to Jesus' presence by an angel, dazzling with white that stood before them. The angel told the shepherds where to find Jesus and with the angle a great multitude of the heavenly host praised God, singing, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among persons of good will." There's the wow factor in Christmas Present -- the surprise that catches us off guard, the sign that tells us that God is with us and the wonder that always accompanies our being in God's presence. Let us open ourselves up to the presence of Christ this night and be prepared for the unexpected. Let us not let the distractions or the weariness of holiday cheer choke out the joy and wonder of what Christmas might be for each of us here tonight.

- III. Where would the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come take us this evening? If we were allowed to see the future, we could expect be shown the natural outcome of living our lives as we now live them. Our friend Ebenezer lived a life of greed and isolation and was on a trajectory to end his life alone and unloved. I have often observed first as a therapist and more recently while providing pastoral care that many folks face the end of their lives in a manner highly consistent with how they have previously lived. Those who have been isolated and rejecting of others often continue to push others away. Those who have loved freely often love generously in their final days. But the

wonder of Christ's birth is that this outcome, this natural trajectory in our lives, can be altered. We can and will, if we are open to it, receive new life through the presence of Christ in our lives. Look at key elements of tonight's readings: Isaiah tells us that those who have walked in darkness can see a great light; in fact, that those who have lived in a land of darkness can not only see the light, but have that light shine upon them. What happens in that light? That light, even one small flicker of that light, can destroy the darkness. The light shown upon the angel and the heavenly host said, "Do not be afraid...do not be afraid - for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people." My early training as a psychotherapist taught me that fear is a very powerful negative force. God knows that and the injunction not to be afraid is given over 365 times in Scripture. Do not be afraid, Christ tells his disciples, for I am with you even unto the end of the age. Can we imagine this: living our lives with joy and wonder because our lives are changing and being remade in Christ's image. Christian writers, such as C. S. Lewis, have described how this transformation never stops but goes on for eternity.

Recently, I have been deeply touched by a contemporary woman named Susan Boyle from Scotland who sang one of my favorite songs on the show, "Britain's Got Talent." The song "I Dreamed A Dream" is from *Les Miserables*. It is sung by a young woman whose name is Fantine. She has been crushed by life's circumstances and sings about the dreams of her life that have been ripped apart by the tigers that come at night. Her dreams are dead, never again to return, and she herself is dying. She sings a song that many of us know--a song of hurt, brokenness, and defeat. Susan Boyle, an obscure singer was catapulted to fame overnight by her beautiful way of singing this song. She was the odds-on favorite to win the final competition but due, some believe, to the incredible pressure upon her, she appeared to lose her edge and came in second place. She was apparently devastated and descended into a time of discouragement and despair. Her dream of 24 years had been smashed. But she arose from the ashes and earlier this week, I saw an hour-long special in which Susan Boyle sang beautifully and received an award for selling over one million recordings.

God has created the human spirit to be one of resilience and endurance. And especially, with and through Jesus Christ we can have the wonder and joy of being made new every day of our lives. We are promised that we can be one with Jesus Christ--that he who comes to us will never leave us and will provide the constancy of unconditional love forever. Through him our dreams will never die, our wonder will never cease, and our joy will become complete. Tonight, in this Christmas Present we have

another opportunity to open ourselves to Christ's presence within us and through that presence, to be made new every day of our lives. Thanks to be God for sending us our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who has been, now is, and will be forever among us.

Amen.