

Christmas – The Season for the One Who Is Lost

“What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of the them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.”

Matthew

18:12-13

As we come to this Christmas season, we are aware that the facts of disillusionment, hatred and war are really more real to most of us than any ethereal message of the Christmas season. Joy, yes, but mostly smothered by fear – a fear that is fed by our own guilt in what is – a fear built upon the fact that what we have been doing we probably won't stop doing, and what we haven't been doing, we probably will continue not to do. Thus it is for us, for a lot of you this season.

You can exit this sermon if you identify with the ninety-nine who are comfortably in the fold, because we are not talking about the safe, nice, ninety-nine who obey all the rules, and come in at night on time. We are talking about the one who is wandering. We are talking about the growing concern of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to go searching for the one. It is for that one who is lost that this season is – for the one who has, for some reason or another, lost his or her sense of belongingness.

The message first dawned to a people in exile – a people who had been given all the resources and the insight essential to the fulfillment of life, and then turned their backs upon the Giver, the Source. People whose lostness is a factor of their own action – not in terms of some theological notion about Adam. No. We don't need Adam and Eve to do the thing for you. Most of us have done it and are doing it to ourselves. It is for us, in exile: “Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel. Save us from our captivity.” And as you think of those words, and the plaintive cry in those words, and then as you put that over and against the prophetic

vision, it is almost as if there is some strand based in life that keeps people dreaming dreams that are never fulfilled. And so as you hear and experience vision, you wonder why it never happens. But what I want you to understand this morning is that the prophecy is really for you.

Religion as you have known it has stood between you and your ability to understand the meaning of prophecy in your own life. Prophecy is really an illustration of God's ultimate hope for you, in you. When there floats over your consciousness the language of the prophets who talk about justice and quality of life and even dream of a remote possibility of brotherhood, what you are hearing is the dream that life has embedded in you, for you. It is the language which talks about the fact that you recognize that the relationships between life forms is not right, and that the only hope that life can be life is that the wrong be righted. And what is wrong has been articulated. Not by angels. Their glory of music floating on the wind just reminds us that something is wrong. But what is wrong is known by you. You can tell us what is wrong because you're living it.

Prophecy. Visions of a better world. "Comfort ye my people; speak comfort to Jerusalem, tell her that God is going to give her another chance, that her iniquity is forgiven." And what do the people say? Here comes the classic argument: "Surely the people are as grass." You know what grass does. It withers and fades. The people are just like that, so you can't really expect anything from them. They are people in exile.

But I hear a trumpet blowing to awaken a nation. Surely the people are as grass, but then the voice of God speaks: "Prepare ye the way . . . every valley shall be exalted." Surely the people are as grass. What are we talking about? How do they get that kind of encouragement, that kind of power? How do they sustain it? They wither and fade, you know. "Prepare a way in the desert." Surely the people are as grass. But God, the word of God, is not grass. The word of our Lord standeth forever, and there is, in the midst of the people, a clear guide, a plumb-line dropped in their community. They know, "You were made for this. You

in fact are prophecy's instrument. It depends upon you – hearing it, owning it, and being encouraged by its vision in the midst of a troubled community.”

Now this is not easy, because I'm not talking now about a prophetic vision that develops no reality. I'm not talking about the Word of God in some heavenly context. I'm talking about Truth – the sense of wrong that continues to argue with your silence and your uninvolvedness. That's the Word of God that we are talking about.

That little baby wallowing around there in the straw one day grew up and said, “This is my body.” That's the Word. That's why we are here today. The world has never been able to know what to do with a life that becomes an authentic instrument of prophetic vision. Don't think you can write it off and say, oh that was two thousand years ago. You can live the centuries in your own lifetime. Two thousand years becomes two hours when you are talking about eternity.

It is so easy to get a cheap hope going at Christmas – a cheap hope that is no more than the lure of our giddy desires. The kind of hope that I'm talking about is based on an intelligent assessment of the situation. It is no wishful thinking, but it is, as Doctor Chalmers said, directed and practiced desires. Don't own any hope this Christmas that you are not prepared to practice. Don't slip in to anything that you are not prepared to own. I'm talking about hope that you are prepared to pay the price for with discipline of body, mind and spirit. I tell you this Christmas, before you get too ethereal about it, when you look at the hellish condition of the world, recognize that it does not have to be this way, and remember that every time a person has caught a glimpse of this and lived it, lived it, through directed and practiced desire, it has been such a rare event that one of the major religions of the world has been born.

Oh come, oh come Emmanuel, and make us know what has to happen to us. Make us guilty that prophecy goes so unfulfilled. Make us restless with the mess that we are feeding by our inaction.

I close with the wife of the Innkeeper in Benet's "A Child is Born."

"We are his earth, the mortal and the dying,

Led by no star – the sullen and the slut,

The thief, the selfish man, the barren woman,

Who have betrayed him once and will betray him,

Forget his words, be great a moment's space

Under the strokes of chance,

And then sink back into our small affairs.

And yet, unless we go, his message fails."