

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

God with Us Brings Hope

Sunday, December 1

Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb, Senior Pastor

Tom Long tells of the time when he visited a Sunday school class and heard something he had never heard in church before. The topic for the day was quite simply, “The Church.” The teacher was talking about all the tough times the church has endured throughout history. He spoke of the hypocrisy, the scandals, the persecution—the awful things that have been done in the name of the church and of God.

As he was lecturing, a woman in the class raised her hand. She was obviously a visitor because no one in the class had seen her before. When the teacher called on her, she asked, “Given all these heavy burdens of the church, I want to know, what keeps you coming to church?”

The teacher pondered the question for a second and then responded, “I’ll tell you what keeps me coming to church…” And every eye-ball in the class suddenly focused on the teacher. In fact, the teacher was taken aback by the sudden rush of interest in his response. But he pushed on, “I’ll tell you what keeps me coming to church. It’s strange, I know, but I get the feeling here at church, like nowhere else, that something is about to happen.”

I think all of us know something of what this teacher was talking about. For this time of year, we seem to do what the text says, we wait and we prepare for Christmas. We shop, put up the tree, decorate the house, and plan our trips. We wait on our tip-toes because we sense that something is going to happen.

It’s like those brief moments in a concert hall when the lights go out and you can dimly see your favorite band take the stage. It’s like that moment when the curtain goes up and a hush falls over the crowd. It’s like that moment when you are told that

you can take the blind fold off. It’s like that moment right after your parents have read to you “Twas the night before Christmas” and they have tucked you into bed, and you wait anxiously for morning to come.

Yes, as we begin the Advent season I think all of us get the feeling that here at church, like nowhere else, that something is about to happen.

But what is it, exactly? When we say that we are waiting for Christmas to happen, what are we expecting to happen?

Some of you are expecting to receive that one gift that you have been bugging your parents for since September. Like the boy in the movie, “A Christmas Story” who yearns for a Red Rider BB gun, you have done everything in your power to influence, connive, and manipulate your parents to get you that one gift that is essential to your health and growth as a human being. And if you don’t get it, your parents will just have to live with the consequences of your future pain and dysfunction—Kids, I am trying to help you out!

Others of you are expecting to sit around a beautifully decorated table and savor the tender turkey, the creamy mash potatoes, and the warm homemade bread. In fact, as you sit here in church, you can almost taste it.

Others of you here are expecting to sit around a living room and hear the voices and laughter of your family and friends, feel the warmth of a loved one’s hug, and see the joy on the faces of your children or grandchildren.

Yes, during this special season, these are some of the wonderful things that many of us are expecting to happen.

What if I told you that something is about to happen this Christmas that will make all of your expectations for Christmas fade into the background? What if I told you that something transforming is about to happen that will change your life? What if I told you that something is about to happen that will be the greatest gift you have ever received? Perhaps you would say, "Where do I sign up?!"

The answer is found in one word in Matthew 1, one word sums up the promise of Christmas. And the word is Emmanuel which means "God is with us."

This is Christmas: "Behold, a virgin shall bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us.'"

The impact of this promise is transforming. When you believe that "God is with us," will absolutely change your life! The strength, hope and joy it bring to you is unlike anything you have experienced.

For, if the truth be known, all of us have deep needs within us that cannot be satisfied by perishable gifts wrapped in shiny paper and pretty bows. All of us have hunger pains that cannot even be satisfied by turkey and pumpkin pie. All of us have yearnings that cannot be satisfied by shallow sentiments of the season or empty phrases of holiday cheer. We all need more than a card decorated with glitter wishing us all the best at Christmas and in the New Year.

What we need is to be loved by a love beyond ourselves. What we need is to be forgiven by a power beyond ourselves. What we need is to be accepted by a grace beyond ourselves. What we need is to be found by Someone who knows us better than we know ourselves and can truly give us the peace, joy, hope, and security that the world promises but never delivers.

There is a great old story about a group of Christians on a cruise together. On this cruise just about every Christian denomination was represented (What a wild ride this must have been!). Well, about midway through the ship's

voyage one of the passengers fell overboard, and all the Christians ran to one side of the boat to find the drowning man.

The first person to call out to the drowning man was the fundamentalist. And he said, "It's too bad, but you should have done what the good book said!"

The second person to call out was the moralist. He said, "You must not be living right!"

The next person to call out was the revivalist. And he said, "I see that hand. Are there others?"

Then a Baptist screamed out, "You are doing it right, son. That is the only way to be Baptized!"

Then a Presbyterian yelled, "I am sorry. You were just predestined to be there!"

Then a United Methodist screamed out, "I'll tell you what we are going to do. We are going to form a committee to look at your problem!"

Then a Quaker yelled, "We'll be praying for you!"

Then a loving stranger did not say anything, and jumped out of the boat, took hold of the man and brought him back to the ship. The stranger? Jesus Christ.

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" and took hold of us and brought us home.

You see, we can only stay afloat in life for so long. At some time, the tides of life roll and roar, and we cannot keep our lives above rough waters. At some time, life takes us into the depths, and when that happens the deep in us calls out for some great deep answer. And what is that great, deep answer? Well, it is not saying, "Look what the world is coming to, but look what has come into the world!" The answer is an invasion of God in Christ, the only one who can reach the depths of our souls. It is this divine invasion that is about to happen. Fredrick Buechner says it well for us:

Once we have seen God in a stable, we can never be sure where God will appear or to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation he will descend in the wild

pursuit of each of us. If the awesome power and majesty of God were present in this birth of a peasant's child, then there is no place or times so lowly or earthbound that God cannot be present there, too. And this means that there is no place that we can hide from God.

Advent can be summed up in one sentence by Will Willimon: "God refuses to be God without us." What this means is that you are valuable. You are loved. You are accepted. You are God's child.

"When Terry Bowden was in his first year as head coach of Auburn (1993) he won the Bear Bryant Coach of the Year Award. What made the story so amusing is his father Bobby Bowden was nominated for the same award. He was at Florida State. There was a lot of good-natured joking and teasing at the banquet about this father and son being considered for the same prestigious award... and of course when Terry Bowden won... nobody in the room was happier or prouder than his dad.

"In his acceptance speech Terry Bowden thanked his team, his fellow coaches, Auburn University, and then he thanked his family.

"I owe so much to my parents," he said. "Many of you in this room know my mother and you know how special she is, but let me tell you about my father. My parents always took us 5 kids to church. Even when we were on a trip, they took us to church. Once while on vacation, we went to this church that was a little more emotional than we were used to. The minister was shouting and pounding the pulpit... and he began to look around the congregation for someone to single out... and he spotted my father.

"Mom and Dad had marched us down to the front pew. Mom was on one end, Dad on the other end with the 5 kids squeezed in between to be sure we would behave in church. The preacher pointed dramatically to my Dad and this conversation took place...

"You there... Do you have faith?" "Yes, I have faith," Dad answered.

"The preacher said, 'If I put a 2 x 4 board down there on the floor, do you have enough faith to walk across it?'"

"Yes, I could do that."

"But," said the preacher, "what if I took that same 2 x 4 board and placed it across the top of the two tallest building in New York City... would you have enough faith to walk across it then?"

"No, I don't have that much faith," Dad answered.

"But what if somebody were standing on the other end," said the preacher, "and dangling one of your children off the side... would you cross the board then?"

Terry Bowden said his father turned and looked down the pew at his 5 kids, and said, "Which one?" (King Duncan).

Terry Bowden was just kidding around but this is my point: Advent shows us that God does not say, "Which one?" He doesn't say, "Which one should I lay my life on the line for?" or "Which one should I put skin on and come to earth for?" No, "God so loved the world..." This includes you. You are valued. You are loved. You are forgiven.

Some of you need to receive this grace and love of God this for the very first time today. You have never truly embraced God's embrace of you. Do it now. It will change your life.

Others of you need to come back to God's embrace. You have drifted away. You have become distracted and have forgotten your first love.

Remember the old story about the elderly couple driving down the street one day. They were listening to the radio as the man drove the car through the busy Christmas streets. As they listened to the beautiful music of Christmas, the wife became nostalgic and she said, "Herbert, do you remember how when we were younger we used to sit so close together as we drove along? It was so wonderful back then. What happened?"

“I don’t know about that,” said Herbert, “All I know is that I haven’t moved.”

Well, Christmas comes each year to remind us that God is not the one who has moved away from us. No! We are the ones who move. We are the ones who drift away from Him.

But Christ still goes after us. Christ will never let us go. That’s how much he loves us. He proved it to us.

“In a philosophy class at Rice University, the professor told the students to bring blue books for a test the next day. On the test day, the professor said to the class, ‘Your test today is to write an essay on the topic, “What Is Courage?”’ The students began to write furiously. All, that is, except one young man. He sat there quietly, thinking deeply for five minutes. He then took his pen, wrote the title, “What Is Courage?” at the top of the page; he then wrote down two words... just two words which comprised his entire essay. Then he turned in his test... and walked out of the classroom.

“Most of the students took the full hour and filled all the pages of their blue books writing on the subject “What Is Courage?” That evening the professor telephoned the young man who turned in

the two word essay... and informed him that he had given him an A+ on the test... and that he would like to get to know the student better. The professor congratulated him and hung up.

“I suspect that you already trying to figure out what those two words were... Well, the two words the student wrote in answer to the question “What Is Courage?” were these: “THIS IS” (story from King Duncan).

“This is”... you see what he did? He didn’t just define courage. He demonstrated it. He acted it out by having the courage to simply write two words down on a final exam and turn it in.

That’s what Jesus did. He didn’t just define love, courage, and forgiveness. He demonstrated by coming to earth and dying on a cross. He said, “You want to know what love is? This is...” And he stretched out his arms and died for us and then rose again.

May this Christmas be a Christmas when something happens, when something really happens – when God loves you all the way into your heart.



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