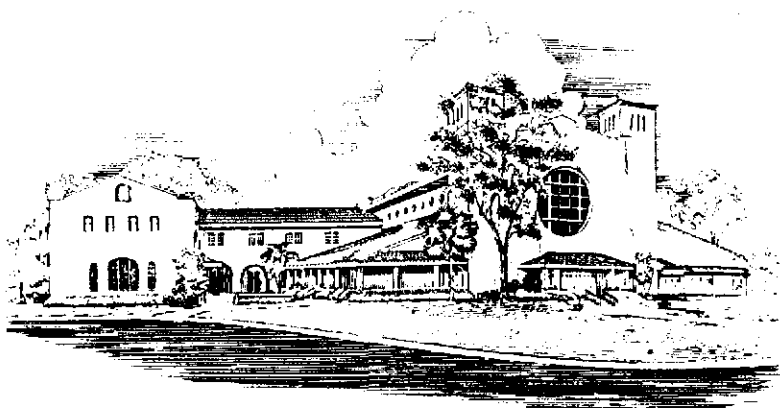


First Church Pulpit

Christmas Eve

"How To Give Yourself Away This Christmas"



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Someone popped a little cartoon on my desk this morning. I don't know why or where they found it, but it was a picture of a wife with a rather crotchety-looking husband feeling sad and self-righteous, sitting in a big stuffed chair and in the caption, she is across the room, barking at him: "I think everyone is a child at Christmas except you!"

How to give yourself away this Christmas?...A woman told me at Six O'Clock: "I have already given everything I have. I am exhausted. Running this race, which begins at Thanksgiving, trying to keep up with everything and everybody." Tired and worn out by Christmas. You know, I think that is probably what the Wise Men felt when they finally got there, rather tired and wondering whether the journey was worth it. Right? All worn out straining their eyes looking up at a star, thinking it was the right one, but getting mixed up as they went; dropping off at Jerusalem, what with Herod jerking them around a little bit, until they did not know what was going on. Knowing that the world is full of fraudulent people as Herod was, privily calling his Wise Men together, he was trying to get them to tell him where the Christ Child was, not so that he could go and worship (as he said), but so that he could go and snuff out his life. If you think the world is not

what it should be today, it was not what it should have been back then either.

So I come with a tiny little Christmas Eve message, in four little itty-bitty parts, just for you to take something home, and to know that you have been in Church and listened to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I. The first thing that I want to say is that Christmas (Are you listening?) is a time to be happy. I know that it is a time which makes many sad. I know there are all kinds of rip-offs in the world, and I know that some of you are facing tremendous struggles, and carrying enormous burdens, but as your minister and friend, I am so very proud of you and the way you manage it. I want to weep and laugh at the same time.

Funny world...I remember driving through Duncansville, Pennsylvania on my way to Penn State University (who, I warn you as a native Pennsylvanian, are soon coming to Miami's Orange Bowl), and, don't you know, in Duncansville, out in front of the little Methodist Church, there was a beautiful manger scene, somewhat smaller than life-sized, but all the figures, even the baby Jesus, were chained to the oak tree, so nobody would steal them. Can you imagine such a world?

I know there is trouble, I know it is a time to be sad, and I can tell you I know it is a time to be sentimental, too. But I have come to tell you this is the season to be silly, to relax a little, guys and gals, to be kind to each other, to put down the cudgels which you can pick up again come the New Year.

Oh, I knew a friend years ago, who split with his wife on Christmas Eve. He had a little too much to drink, I guess; but soon after the church service where I had preached, he marched out the door, went home, marched out, and never came back. Wow! Wouldn't you say he missed it? Christmas is a time to be happy, to be nice to each other. She is a good woman, trying hard to do her best. And, he is a good man (if you have got one), dying to be more than he is. Christmas is a good time.

In the Middle Ages, the Devil taught all his Assistant Devils to work against Christmas. "Wipe out Christmas!", he commanded, "And we've got them!" the Devil said. It is a time to be happy, so smile, we've to turn the tables on all that is small and unlovely.

II. Secondly, it is a time to remember. Sometimes the memories are painful. Sometimes they are not what they should be. I remember reading the story

of the life of Bing Crosby the year after he died. He sort of made Christmas, didn't he -- he and Dickens. Bing said: "I have lived to make a lot of money, and I have seen a lot of great Christmases, and a lot of wonderful presents from people I don't even know, but the gift I remember best was the year when I was ten. I couldn't afford the sled that I thought I could make enough money to buy. Come Christmas, and my poor daddy helped me (and boy, was he poor) to buy it. The greatest ride I have ever had was the one up Ledgermain Road with my daddy pulling me to Saint Aloysius' Church." We have all been given a lot, my friends. And whether the people who gave it to you are here, or whether they are not, it is a time to remember!

It is a time to remember too, isn't it, that others have needs. But the most marvelous thing about that is not that they have needs, of course they do, so do you and so do I, but the greater thing is that we can help to meet them. When two people carry a burden, it is not as heavy as when one person carries it alone. Right? It is that simple. It is older than Eden, when we say: "He ain't heavy, he's my brother", my brother in Christ. Christmas is a time to remember others.

But, it is a time to remember what God has done for us. We are going to light the Christmas candles in a minute. Light in the darkness...

Let me tell you a little story: Two years ago, in the north end of Fort Lauderdale, where we live, on Christmas night all the lights went out in the whole neighborhood, all the way from the Ocean back to Federal Highway, and goodness knows how far north and south. Some of you remember it. All of you, if you know me, know that I am afraid in the dark. And in our house the alarm system went off, and everything went dark and still. There was a friend with us that evening, whose daughter was staying in one of the apartment buildings out near the Ocean on the Intracoastal Waterway. The daughter had just gone into the washroom, and was pulling the door behind her when all the lights all over North Fort Lauderdale went out. Her Mommy was with me, her Daddy was gone away, and she was all alone. She thought the world was ending. I'll never forget what joy she had...Oh, was she happy! when I tiptoed up the steps (I had to walk up three flights to the fourth floor in a darkened corridor, can you imagine me - I was scared to death!) but I got there and in the darkness, I had a candle just like this, it was my Christmas candle from this church the night before, and I rapped on the door, and I said: "Joanie, it's me, everything is O.K." Oh, was she happy! The light was given in the darkness. Did you get it? And all the darkness in the world can never put it out. It is a time to remember.

III. It is also a time to dream. One time down in Houston, Texas, there was a manger scene (There are three of these now, don't miss them. Remember the one about Duncansville where the manger was chained to the oak tree?). Well, the second one down in Houston: two nuns were standing looking at it, adoring it. It was a manger scene, the creche, life-size again. And all of a sudden, they noticed in the manger (Holy mackerel!) the baby was moving! There was a live baby in the manger! Now, that could have been a happy coincidence. But the baby had been left there by the baby's mother. Imagine her pain, when she abandoned her child. Imagine what a power inside before she would ever let her baby go. But I want to tell you, she knew where to put it. She knew that in that manger, somebody would come along looking for Christ, and would have found him. And finding the baby, would give it a home, which she could never give him. And though she wept for the rest of her life, no doubt, the baby had a home. She had a great dream.

I wonder what your dreams are for you and yours. You'd better have them high. You might not live to fulfill them all, but then, if you did, you don't have enough dreams. I want to die climbing mountains and looking for another one to climb. A time to dream. One day it began...a little baby. One day it will end. Then one day, it will begin again.

When Christ has come again, or when He is standing there to greet you, to welcome you home. That is for real.

IV. Lastly, it is a time to give. I have an old friend in Pittsburgh. He has a lot of money now. He likes it, counts it all the time, I think, always tells me what he has. Hmmm...he's got a lot more than me, and you, no doubt! But in the Depression, he likes to remember, he did not have a dime (Some of you can identify with that right now!). He did not have anything, and neither did his wife, and neither did his children. So you know what they did? They got out magazines, catalogs, maybe Sears, Montgomery Wards, and they tore out pictures of what they thought the others wanted: Want a new radio? There it is. Here's a gold bracelet. Do you want it? It's yours, honey. New bike? It's yours. Then he said, "All we gave each other was pictures (Remember he is old now and has a lot of money), but that was the best Christmas we ever had." And do you know why? He gave himself, and so did they, with the little picture of a gift. You don't need money to give, because giving is easy when you give yourself. Excuse the colloquial, but "it don't cost nothin'" to give love.

Now I have told you there were three

manger stories, you have had two. Do you remember them? Here's the third, and then we are done. It is a story (I don't know if it is true), which Morey Callahan wrote (You Canadians stand up and applaud for Morey Callahan. What a writer! Beautiful!). This is the story: It was Christmas morning, and two priests came out of St. Catherine's Church in Ottawa (Cold up there!), and don't you know, they forgot to chain the baby Jesus, like they did it in Duncansville, and He was missing! Empty. "Oh", the priests said, "What a rotten world we have. I mean, I don't know how you can live in a place like this, when people will steal the baby Jesus!" They called the police. The police came and said: "This is nothing, you should have seen last night, and the night before, and the night before that. And wait until New Year's Eve!" The two priests were commiserating with the two cops.

All of a sudden, up the street (Some of you know the story, don't you?) came a little boy about ten, pulling a red wagon, brand new, which he had received for Christmas. And there (are you ready?), the little baby Jesus was in the wagon, and the boy was riding him down the street, having the time of his life.

The priest said, "Why did you do it?" The little boy started to cry and answered: "I promised the baby Jesus that if He got me a new red wagon, He would have the first ride!"

I don't know what you were promised, or hope to get this Christmas, but whatever you get, and whatever you got, and whatever you will get, offer it first to Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for you. Right? Right! For now and evermore. Amen.