

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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"SOME SONGS OF CHRISTMAS: III. *THE MANY MOODS OF CHRISTMAS*"

Text: "And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed . . . by another way." -- Matthew 2:12

The title of our sermon today, "The Many Moods of Christmas," touches a familiar theme: the variety of emotions which greet us during the Holiday Season. The topic is borrowed from the musical cantata of the same name, which is being presented today by our choir and orchestra. Robert Shaw's version of "The Many Moods" begins with the enthusiastic and stately "Break Forth Oh Beauteous Heavenly Light," then to the joyous and bouncy "Deck the Halls With Boughs of Holly," to the surprised wonder of an angelic presence as the Herald Angels sing; then to the pensive, solemn little "What Child is This?" There is a wide range to the emotional content in "The Many Moods." It catches the spirit of the season.

In Christmas Scripture readings from Matthew and Luke, we can also follow a similar change of mood: from the fear of Mary when the angel whispered that she would have a child; to the announcement of a menacing Caesar that new taxes would be raised, and everybody would have to pay them; to the bouncing, boring ride 75 miles south to Bethlehem on the back of a donkey on unpaved roads; to the fear of the shepherds when they saw visions in the night; to the joy and hush in giving birth to a child; to the Wise Magi mounting their camels far away; to the fear and terror brought afterward by Herod when he decided to execute every Jewish baby boy. It would have been a huge emotional see-saw for Mary and Joseph. And, while not in such extremes, Christmastime can be equally demanding. I do not know what mood you might be in this Christmas. I hope it is a good one. It surely is for us. Either way . . . let me expand a little on the variety of moods.

The first mood of Christmas I will call "Memory," the sentimental attachment to the days of long ago. Memories dominate Christmastime: how it used to be back when the children were young, or when your parents were still here, or when you were strong and optimistic and had everything to look forward to, when you could anticipate something new and marvelous every passing year, when life was out in front of you. Then it settled in to a routine. Enthusiastic joy became hard to find. "Sometimes," Livingston wrote, "Life promises more than it delivers." We can set ourselves up. Christmas memories can promise more than they deliver, too. You need to guard against the boredom of the years.

I preached a sermon one year on Christmas Eve called, "Are You Going Home For Christmas?" I had really worked hard on it. I thought it was good and useful. The point was that you should go back to the place where you are safe and secure. You should be attentive to your wife, or husband, parents or children. Afterwards, an old friend came up to me and said, "Richard, that was a hard sermon to listen to." I said, "What do you mean, Kirk?" He said, "There is nothing more I would like to do than to return home and reclaim my family. But don't you remember? I'm divorced and I don't have that privilege any more." Watch the mood of memory as you tiptoe through the coming holidays. Live more in the present. Savor all the might-have-beens; but live in the reality of what is here and now. Don't let your memories get you. Move on. The first mood of Christmas I call "Memory."

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But then, turn the page: The second mood I want you to think of is "Hope." Kierkegaard once said that if you have hope or memory you should not be unhappy. Life goes around in a great huge circle. And as you travel about, there are times when there are things to worry about, but think of the joy of the Season. Not only is the Christ Child born to Mary, but He is also born to you and me. And as He grew up to be your Saviour, He can save you, not only from your sins, but from all those other burdens, too. *"Cast all your cares upon Him, for Christ careth for you."*

That will be especially helpful to those of you who have had a hard time this year. Psychiatrists have diagnosed what they call a "Christmas Neurosis." The rush of festivities at the end of the year tend to make the accumulation of the debris of the days and decades very hard to bear. "I can't wait for the season to be over," one woman said to me last year. I will pray for each of you who have had difficult times this year. Holidays can be hard, so major in hope.

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I grew up in what you might call a bifurcated family. My mother a Christmas addict. She was a woman of modest means, but oh dear, talk about extravagance. She began her Christmas shopping in June and never stopped until Christmas Eve. I used to tease her that her major joy in having grandchildren was that she had some new little people to buy for. I scolded her one Christmas after my father was gone. "Hush now, Richard," she said, "it makes me feel so good. It's the only extravagance I have."

My father, on the other hand, was a Christmas Scrooge. He would actually refuse to open his presents for weeks, even from his children. He didn't believe in buying gifts for other people. He would ask, "Whose birthday is it anyway?" The only present he received that made him smile was a little pillow from my sister with the inscription: "Bah, humbug!" Don't get me wrong, he was a good man and a great father. He was generous with what he had. He just didn't like Christmas. He did have the

joy of Christmas in his heart which he passed along to his son. No matter what the year had been, my dad rejoiced in the birth of the Christ the Saviour.

Whatever the burdens of your year, the joy and hope of the Incarnation of Christ means that you do not have to carry them alone. If something or someone you love is missing, or if you have had bad news, or if you are experiencing family conflicts, pray to God to hold you by the hand and walk you through the season. There is a mood of hope, mixed with memory.

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Then move on . . . thirdly, think of the mood of "peace," the peacefulness which surrounds you as you sail on the wings of the season. Allow Christ to lift you up. If you are worried for someone you love, that it might not be working out the way you want it to, then pray and work and hope that Christ will bring peace to your home, that He will soften the harder issues, that He will fill the empty spaces with the power and peace of His presence. The mood of peace. Glory to God in the Highest and on earth peace, goodwill to men. Peace.

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Then, there is a mood of fear. How often that word comes up in the Bible Story. Every time the supernatural breaks in upon the natural, when life or death or any in-between power from on high comes suddenly down, it is different, and it brings fear. The Christmas holidays can also bring fear. I'll call it the fear of failed expectations. A fear that Christmas will not set it all right again, as we always hope it will. Fear that we will be disappointed. So much is invested in the holidays. 50% of retail sales come in the last month of the year. 75% of emotions crowd into the Holiday Season.

Then, if you don't watch out, that fear can turn to anger. Anger often arises at Christmastime. Nerves are frayed. Expectations are plentiful. We do too much and exhaust ourselves, and energy runs out. The things people say to each other in unguarded

moments are never forgotten.

It sounds so easy to yearn for family to be together. Children and grandchildren coming from far away, or you going there to meet them, and of course, that is a great joy. But the family conflicts also come when everybody is back together again, the rivalries, the jealousies, the different ways of doing things, the Mary/Martha problem: some doing all the work, others doing all the play. The fear can turn to anger. So I want you to look out for the right things this Christmas, for the extraordinary peace of Christ to come into your heart. You have to look for that peace in order to find it.

Loren Eiseley was/is one of my favorite authors. In *All The Strange Hours* he told the story of Radnor, an astronomer who spent his nights on the top of a mountain, peering into outer space through the huge Mt. Palomar telescope. Radnor was a bit eccentric . . . as professors can often be. Dr. Eiseley talked to him one night: "What do you see out there, Radnor?" . . . "Stars." . . . "Anything new?" . . . "I am looking for the remains of a missing planet," Eiseley replied, "I never heard of a missing planet." Radnor continued: "In between the fifth and sixth planets there is some cosmic dust (there is), and there is space enough there for a missing planet that was out there. It's gone now. It blew up, as all stars have or will." Eiseley said, "If it is out there, Radnor, why is it that no one else has ever found it? Why didn't someone else see it?" Radnor said: "They were not looking for it." They were not looking for it.

If you are not looking for a missing something this Christmas, you will never find it. You will slide on by into the New Year, going to parties, having some fun, guessing, hoping, thinking, being tired out and sometimes disappointed. If you are not looking for something extraordinary at the Bethlehem manger, you will never find it. . . . I'd hate to be here with you next year, or the year after that, and still have you not know where you are going, or where your anchors are, or how you take hold of yourself. . . .

Remember the memorable story about Charles

Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." Scrooge was a man who never caught the spirit. At least not until Dickens got hold of him. Dickens himself had a miserable childhood. He was deprived. His father was in a debtor's prison almost all his youth, while Charles worked in a "blacking factory," abused in the child labor conditions of the poor. Then at age 31 he wrote "A Christmas Carol." It is a suspiciously aggressive story. Dickens wanted the world to change. It is not very religious, not on the surface anyway. What Dickens was saying through a winsome little cripple named Tim, plus a few ghosts from the past, is that you have to change your heart. What the carol says is that we don't need social legislation, or a revolution. We don't need Karl Marx (who lived just down the street, by the way); what we need is a change of heart. Until the change takes place inside of you, no change will take place anywhere else around you.

There was no room in the Inn for Mary and the Baby. Wouldn't it be sad if there were no room in your heart for the Saviour? The wonder of this child, who grew up to be a man, who lived and loved and died, so that you and I might live. What child is it? The one that God has sent, for me, and for you. For now and forevermore. Amen.

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