

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Christmas Day
December 25, 2005

The Radiance of God's Glory

Hebrews 1:1-4; John 1:1-9, 14

You may have been hearing the great fuss that's being made
about the Mega-churches canceling services on Christmas Day.
These huge churches across the country,
with thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of members
are seen by many as being on the cutting edge of evangelism,
reaching out to contemporary culture with the gospel
and having great success at attracting large numbers
into their fellowship.

Willow Creek Community Church, outside of Chicago,
Southland and Crossroads in Kentucky,
Fellowship Church in Texas,
Redemption World Outreach Center in Greenville, South Carolina,
North Point Community Church, near Atlanta, GA,
Mars Hill Bible Church in Michigan,
and Orchard Hill Church, right here in Pittsburgh,
are a few of the more famous.
There are about 1,200 across the nation.

All have decided that Christmas is an important day to be with family,
and so they've cancelled services and encouraged families
to stay home and worship together.
Some have even produced a DVD for Christmas day
featuring a heartwarming contemporary Christmas story.

It seems that for every member of the Mega-church
there are at least 3 critics of the Mega-church,
and these critics have been quick to point out
that "skipping Christmas" just continues the "theology lite" approach
so typical of these so-called seeker churches,
which try to remove anything offensive or challenging
from the gospel message,
in order to make it easier for seekers to enter the church
and feel at home.

Critics say this is simply capitulation
to the self-centered, me-and-my-family-first agenda
of the larger culture.

and that it removes the prophetic edge from the church's message.

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But, before we – who managed to make it to church this morning –
jump on the bandwagon of criticism, let's ask
what's really wrong with this approach?
Our scripture today affirms that down through the ages,
God has spoken to our ancestors in many and various ways:
through voices, events in history, visions, dreams,
stories, theophanies –
why not a DVD in the comfort of your own home?

Doesn't our theology affirm that
"God is with you everywhere, no matter where you are,
even in your own living room"?
Isn't Christmas about Immanuel, "God-with-us"?
Isn't the meaning of Christmas
that God has come in the flesh of a human being,
Jesus of Nazareth, who is the Messiah?
Of course, these are the glad tidings of great joy.

But remember, these are glad tidings of great joy for *all people*.
The Word becoming flesh, to be near us,
is not only supposed to comfort us in our living rooms.
It may be intended largely to get us out of our living rooms.
Like the shepherds going to Bethlehem,
then going to announce what they have seen and heard.
Like the wise men following a star far away from their homelands,
then going home by a circuitous route
to protect the child from King Herod.
These glad tidings may be more about going out in the cold,
than settling in by the fire.

There is something *decisively public* about the Christmas Proclamation:
The messenger of Isaiah
who stands on the mountain and announces peace
gives his proclamation to *all of Zion*.
Sentinels stand all along the watchtowers of a city wall,
proclaiming to all who live within the city, *and on the outside*,
that the Lord God Almighty reigns.
From their perch on the wall they can see that
the Lord is coming to his people,
and so the sentinels *break forth together in singing*,

together, because the whole city is going to be saved,
and the salvation of the city has implications for the world.
All the nations, all the ends of the earth
shall see the salvation of our God.
The good news is about more than me-and-my-family.
The good news of Christmas is nothing, if not a public event.

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Now we don't have to be rigid about how we celebrate this day.
I don't know that one *absolutely must* join in *public* worship
on Christmas Day;
it seems the Christmas Eve service serves very well
to make our Christmas proclamation public.
In fact, at GPC we do not even normally hold Christmas Day services
except for when Christmas falls on a Sunday.
And, in fairness to the Mega-churches, many of these churches
will be holding two or three Christmas services
during the week leading up to Christmas Sunday.
Truth be told, a lot of the criticism comes from our pleasure in
finding chinks in the armor of the celebrities of our culture.
Still, there is something troubling about sending such a strong message
that Christmas is *more* about nurturing family time
than about the public proclamation of the coming of God's
very public, and very political Messiah.

Yes, public worship provides a recurring time and place
for testimony to be given by those whose individual lives
have been changed, have been transformed,
by the Incarnate Word.
But beyond that, it is the time and place for the church to announce
how the Incarnation of God's eternal Word
makes an earth-shaking difference in the world of power,
economy, and violence.

It's OK to be comforted by the message of the Incarnate Word:
we're supposed to find comfort in the presence of God.
But it's not OK to domesticate that Word.
The Cosmic World-making Word cannot be tamed
or house-broken.
The Word causes a disturbance in normal life,
it over turns the tables of money-changers in the temple,
withers fruitless fig trees,
calls demons by name and casts them out

of human lives and relations,
and turns water into the wine of public celebration.

When the Cosmic Word comes on the scene,
things change,
things are transformed,
hearts are broken, and mended, and made new again,
human structures and institutions are overthrown and rebuilt.

The very sentinels who announce the Lord's coming
from atop the walls of the city,
may have to scurry down off those walls
because the Messiah comes to tear down walls that oppress
and divide humanity, in the name of protection –
like the wall that is still being built, even now,
around the state of Israel,
turning pockets of Palestinian neighborhoods into ghettos.

The Lord who comes into cities, and families, and hearts,
may startle us with all that he demands.

The Word made Flesh may well begin with the story of a cute little baby
wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a bed of soft hay,
surrounded by warm fuzzy farm animals
and exotic camels.

But the reason we gather in worship is not to feel warm and fuzzy,
but because the one in the stable who cries for his mother's milk
is the Word Who commands stars to shine and they obey,
Who creates this world and all others,
Who is sovereign in this age and the next,
and Who intends to bring the powers of this world
into accord with the One Holy Power of Heaven and Earth.

That means our power arrangements will probably get messed with;
Immanuel, God with us, may be as much an irritant
as a balm.

Hebrews says that the Son is the reflection (or radiance) of God's glory
the exact imprint of who God is.

We would do well to remember how frightened the early Israelites were
of coming face to face with God;
in fact it was believed that no one could survive the encounter.

Even Moses was only allowed to see a part of God's back.

Those who want to bring this powerful Word into their living rooms,
need to be forewarned that things may never be the same.

You may be compelled to start giving more away at Christmas,

than what you spend on yourself and your family and friends,
or even just splitting it half and half,
as Rev. Allison so powerfully shared with us last night ,
of the lesson she learned one Christmas Eve,
when her parents took them around to deliver gifts
to people in dilapidated houses
in impoverished neighborhoods.

You may find yourself being called to take a stand
for the sake of truth and justice.

You may find yourself with more enemies to love.

You may be called to confront your inner demons
that would silently destroy you, while you remain unaware,
until, prompted by the Word, you engage them,
and they strike back with every ounce of strength
they can muster.
The Incarnate Word calls you into this spiritual struggle.

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In ancient times, the use of a word, the use of language,
was more than just semantics.

A Word was not just sound, it was a thing,
a power, a means of moving people,
a force acting on the world.

It was by God speaking the divine Word
that the universe came into existence.
God [simply] spoke, and said, "Let there be..."

The 6th book of the Narnia Chronicles, entitled *The Magician's Nephew*,
is the prequel to *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

It tells the story of how Aslan, the Great Lion,
created Narnia with a song.

Beginning in utter darkness,
the main characters, children and adults, first hear a song,
then as light emerges, they watch in amazement
as the Great Lion, the Son of the Emperor over the Sea,
sings Narnia into existence.

As the music radiates from the Lion's mouth,
light flickers and expands from it
and the hills and trees and grasses and rivers

and stars and animals begin to spring into life.
These are not mere words, they are the Word of God,
the power of Life
they radiance of God's powerful love overcoming the darkness.

It is not surprising that the prologues to the Gospel of John
and the Letter to the Hebrews
are believed to have incorporated hymns,
or we might say ancient Christmas carols,
from the worship of the ancient church.

Songs are words that sound like the power they contain.
Songs teach the faith to a child
even before he is able to read or understand.
Long after an adult realizes she really doesn't understand
as much as she thought she did,
songs communicate deeply.
Songs are powerful, and can have a lifetime effect.

This is the power of our favorite Christmas carols,
which have their greatest effect when they are sung publicly,
either on the town square,
or on the front steps of the neighbors home,
or in a sanctuary where the people of God are
gathered for public worship.

The voices of the waiting, hoping, longing people of God,
lifted up together in joyful praise,
display better than almost anything,
the radiance of God's glory
who comes to earth on this holy day.

And this radiance should not be hid under a basket,
but set up high in the midst of the city,
so that it gives light to those who walk in darkness.

Standing together, shining this light,
is a good thing to do on this Christmas Day.
I'm glad you're here!

Amen.