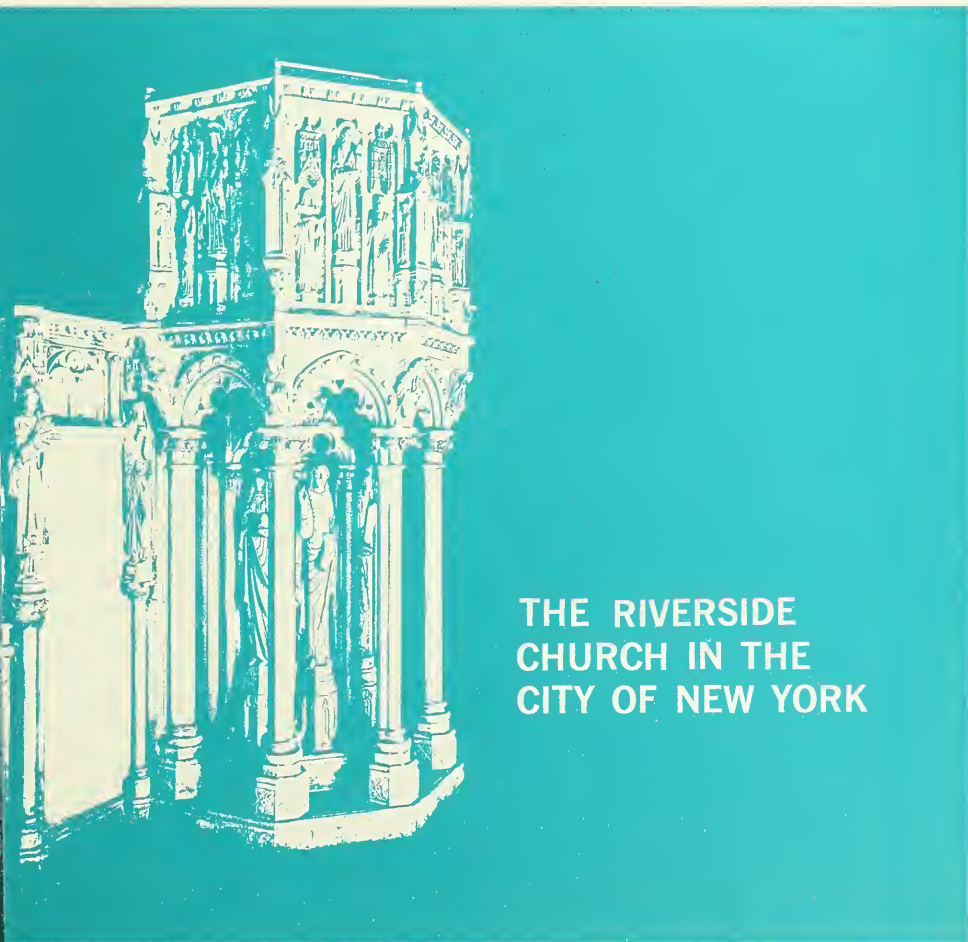


SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

BECAUSE HE CAME

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



THE RIVERSIDE
CHURCH IN THE
CITY OF NEW YORK

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BECAUSE HE CAME

The history of American business is crowded with story after story of companies that slipped out of the hands of their founding family and came under outside control. Poor performance together with a sound strategy for gathering up sufficient votes and proxies are usually enough to get the job done.

I've always had a soft place in my heart for family members who have been ousted in this way -- however deservingly. Once in charge of policy and production they look on helplessly as other hands and minds move in.

As a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ I confess to being grieved at times that Christmas has passed from the "family control" of the church and come under the influence of secular celebrants. In those alien hands Christmas has been trivialized, commercialized, vulgarized, mythologized and sentimentalized. Such is the price for going public!

What really hurts is that we seldom let the gospel message speak to us at those deeper levels of need where the human spirit cries repeatedly for hope and certainty. Christmas has some vital things to say to life's big questions. This morning I should like to illustrate what I mean. I should like to do so in the mode of personal testimony.

* * *

Because Jesus came, I have a different view of time than might otherwise be the case. Time is one of those realities we all understand until we sit down to think about it. At the personal level each of us must come to terms with time sooner or later. At some point along the way I suspect that every normal human being feels threatened by the irreversibility of time's one-way flow. We know that while the

clock ticks off time evenly we do not experience time evenly. Thus we can say on some occasions, "How time flies!" and on other occasions, "Time hangs heavy on my hands."

We try to respond to time by two main devices: memory and habit. When memory fails or we are forced out of old habits into new ones we sense that our very existence is threatened.

Most of us feel the need to manage time wisely lest we pay the penalty for wasted time. In our more cynical moments we are inclined to side with the sage who asked: "What is any of us doing but killing time until time kills us?"

But the big question regarding time has to do with its ultimate meaning. Is time going anywhere?

Loren Eiseley gives us a striking vignette of life as he encountered it while taking off from New York City on a weekend train. It was midnight and he was tired as he moved into the smoking section of the car. After seating himself he noticed a man a few seats forward who was obviously pale, poor and disheveled. The little brown sack in his lap suggested that this was all he had to his name in the world.

Let Eiseley tell the story from there: "By degrees the train filled and took its way into the dark. After a time the door opened and the conductor shouldered his way in, demanding tickets. I had one sleepy eye fastened on the dead-faced derelict. It is thus one hears from the gods. "Tickets!" bawled the conductor. I suppose everyone in the car was watching for the usual thing to occur. What happened was much more terrible. Slowly the man opened his eyes, a dead man's eyes. Slowly a sticklike arm reached down and fumbled in his pocket, producing a roll of bills. "Give me," he said then, and his voice held the croak of a raven in a churchyard, "Give me a ticket to wherever it is."¹

Is time going anywhere? The coming of Jesus into the world at a given point in time, after adequate pre-

paration in time, with a future mission and program for time, helps me to understand time in a linear way. Time moves on an upward slanting line. It is highly significant that the years, after Christ's birth, are numbered forward and backward from that centering event.

There are cultures in our world, and have always been, where time is seen as circular, cyclic and repetitive. In such a view of time nothing sticks, nothing finally matters. Time is simply a wheel that keeps turning on a fixed axis to no ultimate purpose.

Let us be reminded on this Christmas Sunday that we are heirs of the Hebrew view of time. We believe that time has a beginning and an end. We differ from our Jewish brethren only in our belief that the mid-point has already come with Messiah's birth in Bethlehem.

Christ rules times. Time is useful to Him. He has and does inhabit time. Every year is anno Domini -- a year of our Lord, just as every month, and week, and day, and minute, is of and to the Lord. Time is not the enemy of eternity. Eternity has come to dwell in time.

* * *

Because Jesus came I have a different view of history than might otherwise be the case. One way of looking at history, popular in our time, is to see it as nothing more than the result of natural necessity. Mindless forces simply carry life along. History is utterly lacking in any transcendent reference point and partakes of no durable forms of meaning. Shakespeare caught this sentiment and philosophy well when he described history as:

"A tale told by an idiot,
full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing."

Others hold that historical existence merely provides us with opportunities to lay hold on eternal

and changeless ideals such as goodness, beauty and truth. Such values ride high above the world and we can perceive them only as we transcend history. Ideals are like kernels for which history is the husk. We all know what eventually happens to husks.

Those who believe in a purely naturalistic view of history look for no salvation, for none is possible and none is necessary. Those who hold that history is merely the place where we lay hold on timeless values see salvation as a deliverance out of the flux and ambiguities of history.

With the coming of Jesus Christ into the world I learn that God takes history seriously and that I must take it seriously too. "The word became flesh" (not merely "man" -- but flesh, to underscore the point) "and dwelt among us." History is not to be endured. It is not to be transcended. History is to be thankfully received as the theater of God's works and glory. Like Peter of old, I must learn not to call unclean that which God calls holy.

Jesus, the child of Bethlehem, became early involved in the very concrete stuff of history. Does it ever bother you to find among your Christmas cards a notice from Internal Revenue or a letter from Bell Telephone? Why can't they wait so that we might at least have our happiness in certain months and our misery in others! But it is the very mix of Christmas and bills that goes to make up history. You always have the manger and the star connected, the shepherds and the angels, Ceaser and God. Jesus came into history in all of its concreteness.

Moreover, the religion that Jesus Christ centers is not escapist but of the earth -- earthy. Day by day in specific life situations we are to demonstrate our faith. Let it be remembered, especially on this Christmas Sunday, that God's glory and peace on earth are part of the same angel song.

It is ironical, if not tragic, that those who try earnestly to relate their faith to the ailments and

illnesses of mankind are considered suspect -- not only by the world outside, which is understandable, but by those within the church who purport to be expressing the mind and judgement of the master.

It has been cynically observed that once you have gained a reputation for early morning rising, you can sleep in as late as you wish. Once you have gained a reputation for being a Christian country, you can damn well bomb as you please because the myth will sustain you.

I should like again to publicly identify with those voices that are beseeching our administration to bring the bombing to a halt in Vietnam. Certainly the means that we are using are disproportionate and inimical to the ends that we have announced to justify our involvement in that tragic place.

We cannot at Christmas simply sing about angels and listen to the ringing of bells. To be consistent with the one whose birth we celebrate we must take history seriously. We must not weary in so doing. We must beware of turning to a pietistic inwardness that would renounce the world and live above the needs of men. God takes history seriously. Earth is not the opposite of heaven it is the object of heaven's love. We pray, as Christians have always prayed, that His will may be done on earth even as it is in heaven!

* * *

Because Jesus came, I have a different view of God than might otherwise be the case. Those who think of God at all tend to think of Him in terms of unapproachable majesty, power and righteousness. The common figures for God that rush to mind are those of moral judge, ruling monarch or omnipotent creator. When we contemplate the manner of Jesus' coming, the demeanor of his life, and the note of suffering love that marked his years on earth we must revise such views of God.

Care must be taken not to go along too glibly

with those who suggest that since man has so come of age God is merely on the inside in the role of a recording secretary. He still has power.

A professor widely known for his ego was recently one-upped in a very galling way by one of his students. This learned man was showing a friend into his office. As he neared his typewriter he noticed that someone had typed him a message. He couldn't resist taking it out of the carriage and reading it. The note said, "Today is Tuesday. Yesterday was Monday. Tomorrow will be Wednesday. Is this alright with you?" Signed, God. The Almighty is not in that position however much the advocates of Christian secularity might suggest to the contrary.

But as we near the Christmas story we learn that God came not to judge or condemn. He came to save us not from without by fear but from within by love.

God came in Jesus to make a name for himself. By the nature of Jesus we begin to learn what the nature of God is like. He was born of a woman. He bore our sins and suffering all the way to the cross. Through the lens of Jesus I see God as a father who loves and cares.

* * *

Finally, because Jesus came I have a different view of myself than might otherwise be the case. I confess that I frequently experience a crisis in self-confidence. Do I have some company among you? I feel so physically insignificant. When some of our finest men go cavorting into outer space they remind me again of how small we are in relation to the enveloping universe.

Light travels at a little over one hundred and eighty-six thousand miles a second, far beyond the conceivable speed of any space vehicle yet devised by man, and yet it takes light something like one hundred thousand years just to travel across the star field of the Milky Way. It has been estimated that to

reach the nearest star to our own, four light years away, would require at the present speed of our spaceships, a time equivalent to more than the whole of written history!

I feel politically insignificant. No matter what I think or feel or say, nothing really happens that I can see. I feel at times vocationally insignificant. Who of us is not interchangeable with another or replaceable by another? And when I look within I feel the pressure of my own moral failings, my sin, my lack of growth. The faults that I renounce in others are present in a large and annoying manner in my own life.

Yet, with Christmas I sense that however small my worth might be in my own eyes, I am of incalculable worth to God. I was made in God's image. I am the object of His seeking and saving love. He took my flesh upon Him. What higher compliment can be paid to man than this, that God chose to dwell among us as a man?

* * *

Because He came I have a different view of time, a different view of history, a different view of God, a different view of self. In short, Christmas is a revelation.

The correlate of revelation is faith. What is Bethlehem, or Nazareth, or Galilee, or Gethsemane, or Golgotha, or Joseph's garden, but an invitation to faith?

Lord I believe; help Thou my unbelief! (Mark 9:24)

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, clarify our thought and purify our
wills as we journey once again to Bethlehem.

Whatever be our state or condition our age
or education,

Grant that the wonder of the Word made flesh
may claim our lives anew -- with compelling
force and make us forever different.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Eiseley, Loren, The Night Country, pps.62-3,
Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1971.



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