

SERMONS

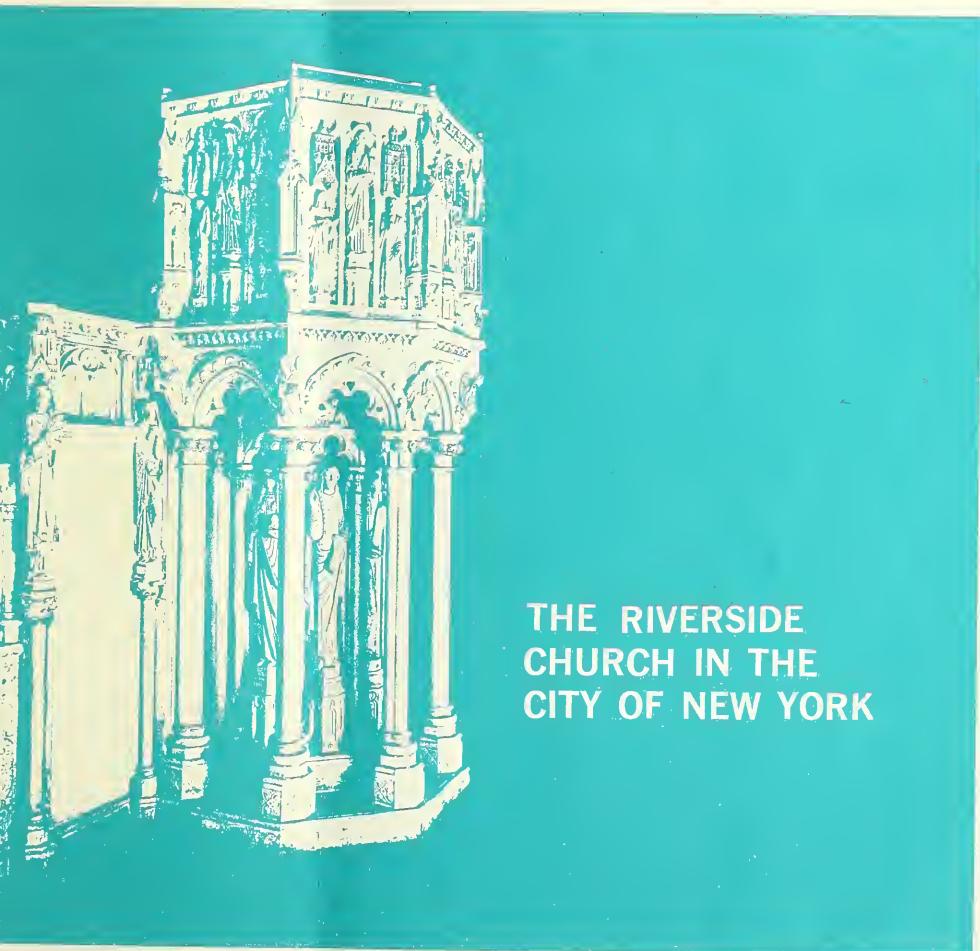
FROM RIVERSIDE

THE GOD WHO DIED AT BETHLEHEM

*"No one has ever seen God, but he has
been revealed to us by his only son."*


John 1:18

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



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William O'Dwyer was unmistakably Irish but he spoke Spanish fluently. One day in his role of Mayor of New York City he welcomed three businessmen from South America. "How long will you be staying?" he asked one of the visitors. "Two weeks," came the reply. "Well," said the Mayor, "you will doubtless get to see a lot of New York City." "And you," he asked the second man, "how much time will you be spending here." "One month," came the answer. "Good," said the Mayor "you will get to see plenty." He asked the third man how long he would be visiting. The gentleman replied with a smile, "I'll be here for one whole year." "Ah," said the Mayor, "then you're not likely to see very much."

Familiarity blunts perception. That's what worries me about Christmas. We know the story so well that we do not know it. Too easily we miss it for the wonder that it is and see it for the trifle that it isn't.

What the world has done with Christmas will be the theme of many Advent sermons. More to the point, I think, is what the church has done with Christmas.

* * *

Ten years ago Christians were rocked back on their heels when several of their number took themselves to a high mountain -- would you believe "Time" magazine -- to announce that God was dead. What Nietzsche had willed Christian theologians had delivered. Solemnly here, jauntily there, the death of God was declared. The outrage that followed was of panic proportions. Card-carrying atheists came out of hiding to say, "I

told you so all along." Devout believers shouted, "Never!"

The well-being of God became the subject of lively debate. Pope John suggested that God wasn't dead, he was simply missing in action. Billy Graham said at one point, "I know God isn't dead, I spoke to him only this morning."

The funeral, to my knowledge, never came off. God is always dying but he never does. What did come out of it all was a drastic overhaul of what it means to speak the word "God."

* * *

In a most important and special sense it is correct to say that God died at Bethlehem! The marginalia of Christmas should not obscure for us, or others, the indisputable fact that with the birth of Christ there came into the world a radically altered way of thinking about God. This is why angels sang and shepherds ran. This is why Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are called "gospels," because they bear good news. Old notions of deity were overturned and a new conception of God was reinforced.

I like the way John Cobb puts it: "Just as the people joined in the ancient cry on the death of a king, 'the king is dead; long live the king!' so I wish to join the chorus that today is proclaiming, 'God is dead; long live God!'" 1

What is the Christian claim concerning God? Advertisers tell us that when a product is commended a specific claim should be made for it. Take this and your cold congestion will break up. Use this, it will taste as good as butter. Put these tires on your car and you'll never get stuck in the snow. Brush with this and it will help prevent cavities. What is the precise Christian claim regarding God?

John's Gospel is regarded by many as the Pearl of

Great Price in the New Testament. In turn, the excellence of that gospel is its prologue. It is in the immortal words of that prologue that we find this statement, "No one has ever seen God, but he has been revealed to us by his only son." The point is not that God suddenly became with Jesus what he had not been hitherto, for John also states in his prologue, "Jesus Christ is and always has been what God has to say to mankind." (John 1:1)

How faithful are we to that disclosure? In general, the prevailing view of deity -- before Jesus came and even now subsequent to his coming -- is one that sees God as having unlimited power, unrivaled majesty, unchangeability of action, unapproachable holiness, and inflexible righteousness and judgment. Human history is crowded with instance after instance of the theological and psychological damage that such a view of God can inflict on men and women. Indeed, it does more harm than good. "No one has ever seen God, but he has been revealed to us by his only son."

* * *

Were we to factor out all that we believe about God that does not square with Jesus, and factor in only what we know about God through Jesus, what would God be like? Or, in terms of our text, what kind of God has been revealed to us by his only son?

I would answer in the following way. First, we would be given a God who not only reigns above his creation but works within it too. In Bethlehem he became as one of us to signify his identification with us. He is sensitive to our pain and anguish and does not live above it all.

Perhaps you have read Graham Greene's novel, A Burnt Out Case. It is a winsome, simple story about a leprosarium in the old Belgian Congo. At one point, toward the end, Dr. Colin, a humanist with little time for religion, comes into the church-run institution and asks the dispenser, "How many patients have turned

up today?" "About sixty," comes the answer. Dr. Colin, saddened by this high number, remarks to the Father Superior, "Your God must feel a bit disappointed when he looks at this world of his."

But the Superior holds his ground and says, "When you were a boy they can't have taught you theology very well. God cannot feel disappointment or pain." The doctor answers tersely, "Perhaps that's why I don't care to believe in him." 2 This wrong view of God is behind most of our questions having to do with theodicy and suffering.

We have the notion that God is something akin to what we would be if we were unlimited. That he can do whatever he wills, as he wills when he wills. We must learn from Bethlehem, if from no other place, to see God's power as power that is proper to a person. That is to say, it must be purposive, intentional, and deliberate. God is not some kind of cosmic magician able to bring off any trick that he desires to perform. He is not related to the world the way a director is related to a play; writing the script, directing the actors and assuring the outcome. He wants us free and loving and responsive. He yearns to participate in our life with us, not regiment it from outside.

I learned recently of a woodcarving that is better known in Europe than here. It depicts two boys, one with a slingshot in hand looking proud and defiant, and the other a little frightened and ashamed. The carver had placed around them a kind of presence. He called his carving, "God saw the sparrow die."

* * *

Second, a view of God derived primarily from Jesus would be one in which God welcomes and encourages man's initiative. In every age there has been a notion of God that has made humankind mere respondents to a strong-willed deity. Men and women, in this outlook, are reduced to pawns that merely go where they are pushed. Earthly strivings are seen to be presump-

tuous. They are looked upon as challenges to the sovereignty of God. This view has trailed in its wake a whole host of men and women who lost their ego and their drive, all in the name of commitment.

But in Jesus we learn that God wants us to take part with him in the venture of creation. There is a dynamic interaction between God and ourselves. He trusts us with a task. Our Process theologians like to speak of God's "consequent nature." By this they mean that God makes moves that counter and complete our moves, just as a good teacher tailors her teaching to the actions and reactions of her students. Instead of the world being all sewed up in a kind of divine "do-it-yourself" operation, God wills that his creation be sustained through us.

This is what salvation is all about. It is an experience of grace that re-connects us with our true vocation. Any understanding of salvation that takes us out of history and away from the moil and turmoil of man's common life is at its core unbiblical. God's salvation redeems us from sin but not from the burden of creativity. When God reaches down in grace it is to re-align us with our primary work. We learn this from Jesus, for in him God called some of the least likely of earth to forsake the conventional securities of life and rise up and follow.

* * *

Third, the God whom we come to know and meet in Jesus is one whose ways are unfailingly persuasive and non-coercive. The wonder of Bethlehem to me is its modesty of method. Jesus, at his birth, was edged out of the inn into a stable. At the end of his life, he was edged out of the world onto a cross. This modesty of method on God's part is what keeps us returning to Bethlehem and Golgotha time and time again.

"How silently, how silently
the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts

the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him,
Still the dear Christ enters in."
(Phillips Brooks)

God will not take advantage of us. He is not interested in presenting a cosmic "spectacular" that will overrun our judgment and override our will. He is no hustler of souls. What we could have done with that incarnation if we could have connected it up with Madison Avenue! He won't leap from a temple so that people will rush out to follow him.

And all of this because he is love. He will not love us in any way that violates our freedom. He deigns by non-coercive persuasion to win us to his side. We read so often in I Corinthians 13 that, "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right." (I Cor. 13:4-6) Even as we read those words and discover their abstract nature we are reminded by the Spirit that this is primarily a definition of Jesus. But more. Those words are not only a definition of Jesus but a representation of God!!

His suffering, non-coercive love is most seriously and remarkably demonstrated in the cross. The accruals of sin are always bitter and negative. We know that hate begets hate, that jealousy begets jealousy, that suspicion begets suspicion, that injury begets injury. Our only hope is for someone to absorb an indignity or an injury and not return in kind. And that is precisely what happened in the crucifixion of Jesus. As Peter said, "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree... By his wounds you have been healed." (I Peter 2:23-24) He will not coerce us, he will only draw us to his side by love.

* * *

Christmas can be taken at many different levels, but at its deepest level it has to do with the nature of life itself. Bernard Meland, in one short sentence, said it for me: "The issue is between the life of power and the life of sensibilities." 3 What sensibilities? Things like caring and forgiving, and lifting and healing, and listening, and binding up, and loving. Such values always seem so frail, and they are always under threat. So we say "It's nice to think about them once a year, but the real world is other." But, my friends, the real world isn't other. The ultimate reality of life is more like the stable in Bethlehem than Herod's palace, and more like Jesus' cross than Caesar's crown. Love is the meaning of it all.

I have found my faith stimulated in recent months by reading the 5th chapter of the Book of Revelation. Let me try to give it to you in my own words and then read just a little of it in the language of the Scriptures.

John is in the Spirit on the Isle of Patmos wondering the problem about which all people wonder, "What is the ultimate meaning and reality of life?" In highly pictorial language he sees a large scroll which is the story of man's life. Somehow in that company of heaven there is no one able to break the seals and read the scroll. Which is to say, there is no one present that understands the meaning of man's years.

Finally, one of the number says, "Who's he?" -- pointing to an overlooked figure. They turn to look and, behold, they see a lamb standing as though slain. He takes the book, breaks the seals and reads, because the meaning of our life is suffering love.

"Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals? And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or look into it.... And between the throne and the four living creatures, and among the elders, I saw a lamb standing, as though it had been slain....And he went and took the scroll....

And the four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb....And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy art thou to take the scroll, and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God.' And the elders fell down and worshipped him." (Rev. 5)

In the beginning, Love.
In the middle, Love.
And Love at the very end!

"No one has ever seen God, but he has been revealed to us by his only son." A child in a manger. A man going about doing good. A cry of forgiveness from a cross. A Lamb standing as though it had been slain. So that's the way it is!!

CLOSING PRAYER

*Forgive us, Lord, that we so easily
set aside the lessons of Bethlehem.
The world is too much with us
and its gods at times
too strong for our resisting.
Re-establish our confidence in the
supremacy of love.
And help us so to live
that others too will be persuaded.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen*

FOOTNOTES:

1. Greene, Graham, A Burnt Out Case, p. 248, Viking Press, New York, 1961
2. Cobb, John B., Jr., God and the World, p. 41, The Westminster Press, 1965
3. Meland, Bernard Eugene, Seeds of Redemption, p. 7, The Macmillan Co., New York, 1947

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