

A Dangerous Report

A Dangerous Report:
Challenging Sermons for Advent and Easter

By

J. Harold Ellens

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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Challenging Sermons for Advent and Easter,
by J. Harold Ellens

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This volume is published in honor of five close friends: Robert Brunner, Beuna Coburn Carlson, F. Morgan Roberts, Mary Wittbold and Virginia Ingram who heartily esteemed my ministry of the word and sacraments, urged me to make my sermons available to a wider audience, and carefully read them all for pleasing homiletic style, aesthetic felicity, and engaging language.

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FOREWORD

I write this foreword as a weary traveler who at last has found home. J. Harold Ellens' volume for Advent and Holy Week is an excellent offering of Christmas and Easter sermons. I am now in retirement after having spent a half-century in the pulpit. I find myself starved at the high holy days of the Christian year, hungering for sermons with scriptural substance, imaginative insight, and courage to confront the challenging questions that, sadly, most preachers avoid.

During the month of December I am almost tempted to stay away from church because I do not want to hear another sermon bashing the commercialism of an American Christmas. Instead, I would like to hear some preacher tackle the question of why the church makes so much out of the event of Jesus' birth, concerning which most New Testament writers were either unaware or else chose to be silent. What is it really about?

Then we come to Easter and I am told that Jesus' resurrection is the guarantee that believers will get to heaven. I feel like a captive in the crowded pews amidst the obscenely overflowing attendance. I am not inclined to spoil anyone's traditional Easter. Nonetheless, I rage within at the thought of such a conditional gospel. I want to cry out, "Don't you know that Easter is about life in the eternal now and that "going to heaven" is not the same as eternal life?"

My hope is that this book of provocative sermons will fall into the hands of many preachers and that, whether they shamelessly plagiarize them, refashion them into their own sermon style, or even attempt to refute them, the final result will be that people in the pews of many churches will be given some real meat upon which to feast at the holidays.

Of course, these sermons are not just for preachers. Many thoughtful folks in the pew, denied of a real message from the pulpit, may read them as subversive literature and thus find fresh meaning as they come to these festive seasons of the church.

I am not, for a moment, so oblivious to the general situation in our churches as to think that everyone will like what they read in these sermons. A few may be so angry at Harold Ellens' painful truth that they will not finish reading the book. Fine! Indeed, all the better if these sermons become the beginning of a long day's journey into the real truth of Christmas and Easter.

I hope, however, that all readers will stay tuned long enough to hear that one message that always comes through loud and clear from every book that Harold has ever written: the message of the radically uncalculating and unconditional grace of God: “that acceptance which is greater than all our dysfunction, that grace we cannot sin ourselves out of, that long embrace out of which we cannot squirm.” If just that one single, shining shaft of gospel truth gets through to each reader, this book will be truly a Christmas surprise and an Easter gift.

F. Morgan Roberts
Season of Pentecost 2012

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“Harold Ellens knows how to craft a memorable sermon and how to always have something new to say, a new angle of vision, a beautifully told anecdote from his own immensely varied life experience. Shows why reading sermons need never become an old-fashioned pastime.”

—David J. A. Clines, Professor of Biblical Studies, Sheffield University

“As facets on a gem reveal its hidden beauty, so Dr Ellens’ Christmas and Easter sermons disclose the depth and beauty of the scriptures relating to these two great festivals of the Christian year. His long career prepared him well to author this book. With the approach of a scholar, the patience of a teacher, and the understanding of a pastor, he gives the reader new insights into these familiar scriptures. To read one of his Christmas sermons on a glorious summer day is to know ‘Joy to the world, the Lord is come’ or to read an Easter sermon on a day of great need, will give the reader reason to be grateful for this book.”

—Beuna Coburn Carlson, Church Administrator and Christian Educator,
PCUSA, Retired

“I have only actually heard one sermon by J. Harold Ellens, but reading this wonderful collection reminds me why he has long been one of my favorite homilists. More like a conversation than a monologue, these sermons immediately pull me into dialogue within myself and with God. Read them and be challenged, stimulated, provoked, informed, and edified. Receive them as medicine for your spirit and soul. Be prepared to be blessed by the Spirit that inspired them.”

—Dr David G. Benner, author of *Soulful Spirituality and Spirituality*
and *the Awakening Self*

“Throughout Harold Ellens’ life he has been called professor, doctor, and colonel. Yet, Ellens is never happier than when people call him pastor. He is a man who loves to preach the good news of the Bible; something he clearly articulates as grace which is universal, unconditional, and radical. Yet, for Harold preaching is not reserved for the pulpit, his students know that God’s grace is available to everybody, his patients know that God loves them no matter what, and the soldiers he counsels straight from the battlefields of Iraq, know that God’s grace gets to the very core of their being and can heal the pain of their souls. However, it is in the traditional setting of a church on Sunday morning where Ellens preaches the message of grace with a craftsmanship honed over sixty years of service as a priest. All of his sermons are written with love and experience, and are always aesthetic, humorous, intelligent, relevant, and life changing. It has been a pleasure to read this book.”

—Dr Virginia Ingram, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

“Dr Ellens’ resources are inexhaustible. Now he offers us a collection of provocative sermons for Advent and Easter. He breaths new life into our preaching by sermons that both enrich and challenge. He calls us back to the radical nature of God’s grace at a time when we are not sure that it speaks to our age. I highly recommend this book to anyone, lay or professional, who deals with God’s gracious relationship with us.”

—LeRoy Aden, Professor Emeritus of Pastoral Care, Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia; author of *Guilt and the Search for Fulfillment*

“These sermons will inspire from the full power of grace, teach highlights of relevant biblical research with clarity of insight, and counsel the broken heart with meaning from out of the depths of a blend of mature psychology and the rich heritage of Christian thought and struggle. They are the fruit of a professional ministry which counsels with expertise, teaches with academic rigor, and dares to preach with prophetic sensitivity.”

—Jack T. Hanford, ThD, Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies,
Ferris State University

“In thirty-one sermons, J. Harold Ellens provides a lucid, challenging, and inspiring demonstration of the art of preaching in the two busiest seasons of the Church Year: Advent and Easter. Every page bears testimony to the professional background and life experience of the author, as professor of theology and philosophy, as pastor, as US Army Colonel, as psychologist and founding editor of *The Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, as research specialist in ancient Near-Eastern studies, as prodigious author, and as past master of the pulpit. He has preached ‘the Word’ in 11 different countries from India to South Africa, Brazil, Australia, Great Britain, Germany, and Estonia. The sermons in this volume attest to Ellens’ controlling theme that the irrepressible human hunger for meaning is universal and that Scripture addresses this hunger in unanticipated, grace-filled, and saving ways.”

—Wayne G. Rollins, PhD, Professor Emeritus of Religion, Assumption College;
Adjunct Professor of New Testament Hartford Seminary

“As a parishioner privileged to attend to Dr Ellens preaching, I found my understanding of Christianity overturned and re-formed by his themes of radical grace, wholeness, health, and the enjoyment of life. In later years I have never seen a congregation pay more rapt attention to a sermon than when he was a guest preacher at our small congregation of retired Florida sunbirds. I think you, too, will be entranced and energized as this series of sermons expounds these themes—from the introductory sermon’s setting out of the issues, through Methuel the depressed angel, the controversy over using ‘live it up’ as the benediction, to Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem ‘mad as a wet hen.’”

—David Gritter, MS, Mechanical Engineer, Devoted Churchman,
Lay-Theologian, and long-time Ruling Elder

“In these Advent and Easter sermons one finds far more than a preacher’s facility with words. These sermons embody soulful and genuine response to sacred texts. Jay Harold Ellens’ attentive love for these scriptures is evident; the vision they inspire is clear and compelling. Addressing basic Christian truths these sermons inform the mind and strengthen the spirit.”

—Ralph Underwood, PhD, Professor Emeritus of Pastoral Care,
Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“Imaginative, informal, engaging, informed, playful, and confronting, Hal Ellens’ sermons will make you laugh and cry—and stay awake, because he cuts through to issues that matter. Keen to see that ‘the center holds,’ as he puts it, he keeps coming back to ‘unconditional and universal grace and love,’ which both preserves the connection with the text and the connection with us, the readers. From the experience and wisdom of 60 years of preaching—a gift to savor!”

—William Loader PhD, FAHA, Emeritus Professor, Murdoch University,
Western Australia

“A fine collection of scholarly sermons presented over time noting major societal changes that engage one’s interest in the seasons of Advent and Lent. Refreshing and most thoughtfully presented for one to ponder. An occasional sentence of wit and a dry humor sneaks in and you find yourself checking the scriptures. We’re reminded how our stories blend with the Jesus story and what matters is the message. The Holy Spirit has been at work a long time and good sermons are truly a gift.”

—Helen Morrison, Presbyterian Elder, Presbytery Staff Person, Director of Christian Education, Pastoral Associate, General Assembly Council, and President, Presbyterian Older Adult Ministry Network.

“Harold Ellens’ *Dangerous Report* is that if we really read the Bible, the Christian mandate turns out to be: ‘live it up.’ For Ellens, that means, first, ‘live upward.’ Live not toward a set of rules or the fear of judgment but toward that Lord who was among us as a man, and now is among us both spiritually and personally. ‘God is not in the business of shaping us up but . . . of freeing us for spiritual and intellectual growth . . . to guarantee our mental health.’ Second, ‘live it up’ means, ‘Be joyful.’ The ‘good tidings’ were intended specifically for ‘great joy!’ Finally, it means to live with abandon, God’s abandon: of that inner voice that says we are not good enough, God’s love could never be for us. Grace is given without any constraint—to all. There is the dangerous part of the message: it is given to all humanity of all descriptions, just as they are—whether we like it (or them) or not! To live with God’s abandon is to understand that it is God who is our worth and who gives it to everybody without exception, including the direst enemies who have no faith in God. Ellens has captured the intent of Creation and the intent and outcome of the journey from Eden to the new Jerusalem. We are going to have to give up a lot of presuppositions and prejudices to read and appreciate this book of sermons. But if you can without throwing it down in rebellion against that dangerous message, the prize at the end is grace, come in person, for you

personally. God cannot resist you; can you resist him, as he comes to you through Ellens' soul-challenging sermons?"

—Kamila Blessing, PhD, Episcopal priest, New Testament scholar, and author
of *Speak Ye First the Kingdom*

“Radical grace: the action of God. Radical change: the response of people. These are the two themes that run through all of these sermons for Advent and Easter by Hal Ellens. Readers—both clergy and laity—will find here a depth of biblical insight and spiritual imagination that will enrich these two crucial seasons of the Christian year. These are sermons that will nurture and inspire an individual and a congregation.”

—John M. Mulder, former President of Louisville Presbyterian
Theological Seminary

“There is a Jewish saying, ‘Whatever is not in the Torah is not in the world.’ Hal Ellens knows the world, and he knows his Bible. He has been tested and tried by life, so he uses life to interpret the Bible and the Bible to interpret human existence. He is a theologian who combines scholarship with empathy and compassion. Whoever reads his sermons with an open mind and an open heart will be nourished and enlightened.”

—Schuyler Brown, Anglican Priest and Professor Emeritus, Toronto, ON, Canada

INTRODUCTION

These advent and Easter sermons were first delivered in various of the fifteen congregations I have served as pastor during my 60 years of preaching ministry. Since they were received with appreciation by my parishioners, they are published here with the hope that they will continue to be of spiritual inspiration to an expanding fellowship of the faithful. I herewith cast my bread upon the waters in hope it will do some good in a world that badly needs spiritual renewal. Many of these sermons were also preached in far-flung places around the world with positive reception: South Africa, Brazil, Argentina, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, Germany, Estonia, Finland, and India.

I have been impressed and heartened that the elements of these proclamations which engaged people positively were essentially the same in every culture in which I delivered them. The human hunger for meaning is universal and irrepressible, both the meaning of our horizontal connections with other people of the same spirit, and the meaning of our vertical connection with God. It is this universal and irrepressible hunger for meaning that I think properly defines spirituality. It is the deepest inner drive of the psyche and the soul. I believe that hunger is God as Divine Spirit in our spirits, calling us to communion and union in the Stream of the Spirit in the universe.

This volume presents sermons for the seasons of Advent and Easter. Advent, of course, is a celebrative period of more than five weeks, running from the first Sunday of the Christmas Season to Epiphany, twelve days after Christmas. The Easter season is a longer period, from Ash Wednesday to Pentecost. These are two crucial seasons of celebration in the liturgical year of the Church and have been since the third century after Christ. It is likely that this pattern was started even earlier in some places like Antioch and Alexandria – very close in time to the well spring of our Faith in the stable in Bethlehem.

It is important to me that these sermons are useful for genuinely inquiring persons. I hope that the story of God's grace is clearly painted in them, that the metaphors and illustrations are lively, and that the language is readable and engaging. I offer these sermons freely for anyone who wishes to use them, with or without reference to their source. If my ideas are life changing and the images I paint are inspiring, borrow them, steal

them, use them, proclaim them, and most of all savor the flavor of them with humor and joy.

This volume is the first in a series. I leave it to the all-pervasive Divine Spirit to determine where they will go and whom they will bless. These sermons and my entire ministry were a gift of the Spirit to me and now I give them to the church and the world.¹

¹ The scriptural quotations in this volume are all my own translations from the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek languages in which the Bible was written.

ADVENT SERMONS

SERMON ONE

A DANGEROUS REPORT: ISAIAH 11:1-3, 6-9, MATTHEW 1:18-2:2

The wolf shall dwell with the little goat and the lion shall lie down with the lamb,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

It is a dangerous report that “the lion shall lie down with the lamb” (Isa 11:6). We hear the Christmas story repeatedly every year. We will continue to hear it so often in the lessons and carols of this season that we will eventually stop listening. But we had better pay attention because this story has at its core a very dangerous idea. We get accustomed to it, even calloused to hearing it. It really is so familiar and so often repeated that it seems benign; but this story is dangerous. If we really let it sink into our inner selves, into the deep world of our minds and spirits, it will be explosive. God’s story, when it gets loose in human persons, cuts across our stories in a compelling way and will always produce radical change.

My emphasis in ministry has always been specifically and centrally on the radical nature of God’s Grace. I make no apology for that because I am convinced that whoever really hears that word of God’s Grace is radically changed. Whoever really hears with the inner ear the message that God’s grace is unconditional and universal will not say, “Well then I can do as I please.” That person who really “gets it” will always turn and say, “Wow! If that’s the way God feels about me then I want to be God’s kind of person.” That kind of definitive change is the inevitable consequence when God’s stunning story really cuts across our ordinary stories.

When you read Isaiah 11 and Matthew 1 in juxtaposition to each other, it is that surprising and thorough-going change from our everyday kind of lives that is so evident. That radical change results from the insinuation of a sense of God’s unconditional grace into your and my spiritual bloodstream in such a way that we can no longer get along without it and cannot get it out of our systems. That is not an experience of salvation as

an achievement, but of salvation as a gift. It is a gift given us in spite of our selves, and a gift for everybody, in spite of themselves.

The Christmas story, both in Matthew's gospel and in Isaiah 11, is a story of tranquility and harmony, inner equilibrium and outer peace. It is a story of change from the ordinary in human life to the ideal in God's worldview. Isaiah's vision that the lion shall lie down with the lamb is almost impossible to imagine. It is something that none of us has ever really seen. Nonetheless, there it is, the promise of the coming reign of God; the kingdom which has been breaking in for thousands of years. Inner equilibrium and peace is the message of that vision. Outer communion and union between humans is its consequence.

"A child shall play with the lethal insects and serpents," says Isaiah. The animals which have an inherent alienation to each other and see each other as food rather than friends, shall become friends rather than foragers. Lions or leopards eating grass? I don't think the lion would be very pleased about that, unless some radical change happened to his or her gastrointestinal system. Isaiah's vision is inherently unbelievable and at the same time it is the symbolic promise of that kind of radical change which God intends for us. It is on the one hand apparently impossible, but it is on the other hand our only real hope.

A little child shall lead the whole community of humanity. Isaiah's vision, 600 years before Christ, is a vision of the reign of God coming, starting with a little child. It is no different than the vision expressed in Jesus' own words when He said, "Unless you shall become as a little child you shall not be able to see the kingdom." Jesus really believed that God's kingdom was breaking in upon us, in and through his person and through his mode of operation. It was happening in this world in and through his story. Jesus believed that his story was God's story and that it was cutting across the human story at all the crucial junctures. He envisioned this unfolding in such an invasive fashion that rule of God's grace and love was really going to pervade the world as Isaiah had promised that it would. The central symbol would be the little child leading.

Of course, you and I know that what Jesus meant when he said, "Unless you become as a little child you shall not be able to see the kingdom," was simply "The kingdom is breaking in around you all the time. God's reign of grace and love is all the time appearing in history. It is a reality not just to be hoped for as Isaiah suggested, but to be realized, grasped, and seized. However, most people do not see it." Most people can not see the kingdom present. Most people do not see the evidences of the operational presence of "grace that works and love that heals." Unfortunately, they do not have the inherent hopeful trust of a little child.

What does it mean to be like a little child so that you may have the right eyes to notice the reign of God when and where it is happening? It means to have that unquestioned sense of trust that what you see is what you get; what you see is the real stuff. C.S. Lewis said that we all have numerous moments when the numinous luminescence of God's presence in our lives is so evident that we know at that moment that it can only be accounted for as the presence of the Divine Spirit. This can happen to us in events, relationships, unexpected experiences, paranormal illuminations, or remarkable insights. "In that moment we know it is of God," said Lewis, "but then we spend the next 6 weeks rationalizing it away." I do that. You do that. All of us do that. People did it in Jesus' day. People did it when they heard Isaiah proclaiming his promise of the coming kingdom.

The kingdom of God is the rule or reign of God in this world in subtle and surprising ways around unexpected corners in unexpected people. That reign of God's grace and love is an operational force in our inner and outer world. I have tended to address the issues of that inner world, the world of personal spirituality because I think everything starts with our personal tuning to God's radical message. The danger in the advent story lies in its message about the grace and love of God being potentially evident in our personal spirituality in such a way that it shapes our world-reformative objectives as persons and as a community of believers.

The Christ child is obviously the child that shall lead as Isaiah promised. The gospel writers and the early Christians really believed that was true. Jesus, the child born in Bethlehem, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in the manger really was the graphic and tangible fulfillment of Isaiah 11.

In 1995, the December 24 issue of the *New York Times Magazine* carried an article by Jack Miles, a Pulitzer Prize winner. It was entitled, *Jesus, Before He Could Talk*. Miles developed a wonderful narrative about the meaning of the presence of God in Christ as the baby in the manger. Before he could talk Jesus' very existence was a remarkable message displaying the nature of God's reign among us. There was that little child asleep in the manger instead of a luxury hotel. Thus he was identified from the outset with the human predicament of limited resources and incongenial settings.

Can you imagine for a moment what it would have meant to deliver a baby in those circumstances rather than in a modern well equipped hospital delivery room? In that manger in the hay! Tell the cows to move over. Push the cattle out of the way. They are going to be very interested. They are going to be sniffing the mother and the baby. The cows will

probe them with their large tongues. The snot will be running from their noses on the mother - on the child. They will contaminate the site if you do not push them way. Flies and bugs will be crawling in the straw; spiders dropping any minute from the ceiling in a stable, on a manger. A 14-year-old girl delivering an 8-pound baby by herself in one of life's typically dangerous settings! There is only an old, silent gentleman standing there trying to figure out what to do. Probably the old man was available for marriage to this young girl because his first wife and baby had both died in childbirth. Can you imagine how immobilized by fear Joseph must have been?

Can you put yourself into those circumstances? Jack Miles wants us to *see* the message. He wants us to *see* that from the outset in this event of the advent of that baby God is identifying with us at the most precarious place you can find yourself in life - the precarious moment of getting safely through the birth canal into this alien world. Moreover, that is just the beginning. This baby was pursued by death and tragedy from the very outset of his life and until his final moments. Before he was two years old the king instituted a pogrom to exterminate all of Bethlehem's children under the age of two. He wanted to be sure that the baby from the manger was caught in his net; that one of whom it was said that he was born a king. From the outset in that manger the cradle was shadowed by the cross.

It is in this context of the story that the advent of the God's reign in the world is set, the outcome of the peaceable divine reign of Isaiah's prophecy. What a prophecy that is! "The wolf shall live with the little goats. The lion shall lie down with the newborn sheep and goats. The calf and the lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. They will not hurt or destroy anymore on all my holy mountain, and the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." A reign of peace! Well I wish it would hurry up, don't you? I worry prayerfully everyday about two boys I know and care for dearly. One is just back from the war, the other on his way. I think as well of all the other young men and women caught up in the maelstrom of battle.

As a retired army Colonel, I cannot forget that the present conflict is the tenth war of the USA in my personal experience. Eight of them were during my tenure as a soldier. Where is the Peaceable Kingdom? Where is the radical change? Where is Isaiah's prophecy? We hear the Christmas carols. We hear the cadences of the moving scriptures of the Christmas narratives. We know what God's story is. How shall we hang onto this hope? Is it really as efficacious a life-changing story as it claims to be? Can we count on it for that ultimate kind of change? Is it really a

dangerous report because it has life-altering and world-reformative power and potential?

Recently I attended an ecumenical pastors meeting in our town. My elder, Tom, went along. This was our third meeting with that group. In the first meeting we attended I could not figure out what was going on. It turns out that nothing was going on. From the second meeting I came away saying to Tom, "I can't believe these guys have all this time to sit around and talk about nothing." So at the third meeting I raised a question that I thought was substantive. Three hours later we were trying to figure out how to disengage ourselves from an intense debate that the question had raised. It was an interesting debate. One of the pastors was aggressively holding out for all the things that the church should be doing to radically change the world. The other group of pastors was holding out for the notion that the real issue is some kind of inner spirituality - internal personal change. Both were right, of course but they were a long way apart on their idea of how we ought to go about building the peaceable kingdom.

At the end I asked myself, "What is my job as a pastor? From this meeting I have to go back to my congregation. What should I say there? What should I do there? How can I implement the achievement of God's intention, of the prophets' promise, and of Jesus' presence in history?" Then it came to me that perhaps a pastor's job is to make sure that in this world the center holds; hoping that the outer extensions of our enterprise of life and spirituality are open ended for continual development and growth. If the center holds we can continue to explore the possibilities of God's reign in the human community.

Inner peace is certainly the center. The center is the inner personal conviction of God's unconditional grace and acceptance for me and for you, and for the enemies who do not like us very much and are killing our boys and girls, and whose boys and girls we are killing. Inner peace! Peace that comes from giving up every need for fear and guilt and shame. These are useless emotions before the face of the God of the radical grace-story; the report of radical, unconditional, and universal grace and love. God has removed those useless emotions from the equation of our relationship with God. The center of things is God's offer of peace that comes from giving up all of these notions that constipate our spiritual growth and produce such useless emotions.

There is a story in the old prophesy of Zachariah in which all the sins of God's people are gathered up symbolically into the decrepit robes of the chief priest. Laden with all that human iniquity he is standing in God's eternal tribunal - God's judgment hall (Zach 3). The record of the history

of God's people is read into the record of the heavenly court. It is a record of centuries of God-forsaking, covenant-breaking behavior. This is read into the record by a figure who is supposed to be the defense attorney for Joshua, the High Priest who represents God's people. However, the figure turns out to be the prosecuting attorney and by the end of the story we know it is Satan himself reading into the record of the court all the wretchedness of God's people throughout the centuries and all the wretched consequences in history.

As the narrative builds to its crescendo and you see the hammer of justice ready to come smashing down on that poor priest, condemning all God's people to perdition, the Angel of the Lord steps into the center of the courtroom. He interrupts the proceedings. He looks at Satan and says, "The Lord rebukes you, Satan, the Lord who has chosen this people, who has plucked them like an old piece of drift wood, out of the bonfires of hell. God rebukes you! God, who is polishing this worn and weathered piece of drift wood to set it on the mantle on the universe for all generations to notice. The God of grace rebukes you. That God declares that these people are God's people. They are God's people, in spite of themselves, and nothing can take that away; not even their own sin and perfidy. The Lord rebukes you Satan. You seem to have gotten everything right. You have an incredible memory for wicked histories, but you have missed the one central point. God loves them in spite of themselves." No human can sin himself or herself out of God's grace.

A pastor's job is to see that that center holds. If that center holds, that center of God's unconditional acceptance and forgiveness, then there is lots of room for us as the faithful community to explore the extensions of our ministry and mission of radical grace in God's world. Then we have the time to explore together how to press the claims of God's reign in all the varied settings in which this world needs to be reformed. That reform will surely always require the building of union and communion. It will mean finding the spirit and skills of unconditional acceptance of others. It will mean loving our enemies.

It is interesting that in the parable of the prodigal son, that boy did everything wrong and came back unable even to ask for forgiveness. He could only mutter something about being conditionally returned on probation to his father's household to prove himself as a hired man. Instead his father embraces him unconditionally. "Let me work myself back into your favor," pleads the son. "Make me your hired servant. I am not worthy to be your son." His father (God) responds in effect, "How can you be my servant? You are my son! Your sonship does not hang on your character and quality as a son, but on my character and quality as your father. I will

never devalue you. You cannot sin yourself out of my grace nor squirm out of my long embrace." The bottom line in this story ends up being a question. "Can the prodigal son accept unconditionally his father's unconditional acceptance of him?" That is everybody's bottom line! That is the issue for you and me. Are we able to unconditionally accept God's unconditional acceptance of you and of all humanity - even Osama bin Laden?

That's the center. My job is to see that center holds, that it is never in jeopardy or confusion, that it is always clear. That is the message of the coming of the kingdom in the Christmas story and it implies a world-reformative ministry. The acceptance of others, Muslim fanatics, al Qaeda, the Nazis! We may need to set limits on them for their own good and ours, but not out of vengeance; only out of grace and love, even when they are killing our boys and girls. The Christmas story, you see, is a dangerous report. It will cut across our stories and it will radically change our way of thinking and our way of doing if we really let it in.

Who is a God like our God? God pardons iniquity, passes over transgression. God does not operate out of anger, and delights in steadfast love. God is faithful to us when we are unfaithful to God! God tramples our iniquities under foot and casts all our sins into the depths of the sea of God's eternal forgetfulness (Micah 7:18-20)!

"Friends, let us love one another because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his unique son into the world so that we might live through him" (I John).

Amen, So let it Be!

SERMON TWO

A CHRISTMAS CHARACTER: JOSEPH

Matthew 1:18-2:12, Luke 2:1-32, 2:41-52
Joseph did as the Angel of the Lord commanded him.

A great deal is made of Christmas these days. This is not new. It has always been so since the birth of Jesus was first celebrated as an international festival 1600 years ago. This may not be so surprising to us, since everybody likes a good excuse for a party - for festivity - especially for a religious festival. However, it is a surprise from one point of view. We know so little about Jesus' birth. Indeed, we know so little about his entire life. John's gospel tells us the story of his life for only the first and last weeks of his ministry, perhaps little more than the brief note about the week of his baptism and the last week of his life. Mark tells us only of the last year of his life. The other two gospels give us a longer narrative but have only half a chapter each on his birth, a brief mention of him at age twelve, and the rest of their story is about the last two or three years of his life.

We have all read the entire biblical record of his first 30 years. It really takes only a few minutes to do so. We know quite a bit about Jesus' character, as this is manifested in the way he related to people at the end of his life. We know a lot about the theological meaning of his life and death, but we know virtually nothing else about him historically, or about the other characters in the Christmas story. The main character, about which we know perhaps the least, is Joseph. Joseph seems to be a very active agent throughout the Christmas story, but he is absolutely silent the whole time. He never speaks and no other character speaks to him, except the two sentences by the angel.

Yet Joseph had enormous import for the story. He did the worrying when he found Mary illegitimately pregnant. He bucked up, swallowed the shame, and after the short crisis counseling session by the angel, carried on with protecting Mary's person from stoning and her reputation from shame. He did the planning for paying the taxes when the census was

required by Caesar Augustus. He took care of things for the trip to Bethlehem. Unfortunately, he did not do well on advanced reservations in that tourist town. However, you know how things are with the Holiday Inn and the Marriot, particularly if you arrive after 6:00 PM and without your credit card. He paid the bill for the space in the stable. He rented a house in Bethlehem for at least two years until the Wise Men came. He organized the trip to Egypt to get away from Herod's murderous minions. He financed the family for at least another two years in Egypt until Herod died. He apparently supported them there by his skill as a carpenter. The story would not have worked, and could hardly have become the drama that it did, without this main character, Joseph, who never says a word.

However, it seems apparent that Joseph had enormous influence on the shaping of his adopted child. Instead of calling this sermon, "Christmas Characters: Joseph," I might have entitled it, "Jesus, and How He Got That Way." Perhaps a lot can be learned here about quality parenting. While the Bible tells us virtually nothing about Jesus' childhood development and adult life before he was 30 years old, it gives us four clues that make all the difference in the world. First, the Bible tells us he was born an illegitimate child, that is, what his community would have called a bastard, a *momser* - a sinner and an outcast. Second, when his Bar Mitzvah was held at age twelve he proved to be unusually bright, independent, spiritually and intellectually preoccupied, focused upon God as his father, and not on Joseph. When his parents noticed they had lost him, and then found him in the temple discussing scripture with the elders, it is his mother, not Joseph, who scolds him like any Jewish mother. "You made *us anxious*."

It is very interesting that Joseph does not speak on this occasion either, and the Bible says Mary, not Joseph, pondered these things in her heart, mystified by what Jesus was up to and by his remark, "Do you not know that I must be about my *father's* business?" Joseph does not seem to have her kind of trouble understanding Jesus' spiritual preoccupation and independent style. It was the same as Joseph's own focus and style. Third, Jesus grew up after that in more wisdom and psycho-spiritual prowess, and in great esteem in his community (Lu 2:52). Fourth, as a result of all that, he undertook at about age 30 to give his life for us. The Hebrews Epistle declares that he "learned obedience through suffering" and thus it became possible for him to become our savior.

Recently I saw the movie, *The Nativity*. You need to see it! It is a rather accurate visualization of the biblical story. In the light of what I have said so far, one line in the film is worth the whole movie. "Joseph looked to the needs of others before himself." That cryptic statement is

the only way to describe accurately this silent but significant saint in the Christmas story. Joseph lived his life for others: for God, for Mary, for Jesus, for his own children, for his community. When, at the outset of his ministry, Jesus preached with impressive theological wisdom in the synagogue in Nazareth everyone was surprised by his erudition and spiritual authority. It was easy for the crowd to recognize who he was. They said knowingly, "This is *Joseph's* son!"

Now we know what it means that Jesus was able to debate theology with the best scholars at age 12; that he continued thereafter to "increase in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man," and that in the end, as Paul says, "He gave his life as a ransom for many." He was Joseph's son! Just as his adoptive father, Joseph, he was "busy about his heavenly father's business," looking to the needs of all of us, before himself.

Christmas is not really about the baby in the manger. That is really only the anchor in the story about what became of him. Let us take the long view of Christmas and notice what good, godly, though silent, fathering did to save the world. Joseph looked to the needs of others before himself. The people said, "Jesus is a son of *Joseph!*" He gave his life a ransom for us all! His life, so that we might really, deeply, truly live!

Merry Christmas!

Amen, So let it Be!

SERMON THREE

A CHRISTMAS FESTIVAL: LUKE 2:1-20

An angel from God appeared to them and the illumining presence of God enveloped them ... good news ... great joy ... a heavenly host praising God.

It is clear that God, as described in the entire Bible, is a God who likes festivals. The first five books of the Bible report on God's prescriptions for ancient Israelite worship in the tabernacle. It was to be a grand and dramatic liturgical festival.

After the golden age of David's kingdom similar drama attended the temple worship in Jerusalem. Almost any religious event in biblical history seems to have been a good excuse for a festive celebration, as were many family and social events as well. When Jesus attended the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee, he seemed to have no trouble with the festivities going on, even though the crowd seems to have consumed a rather lot of wine. He was no party spoiler. He had a reputation for lusty eating and drinking, often for festive fellowship and celebration with those whom others shunned. They said of him that he was "a glutton for food, a heavy drinker, and a friend of whores and thieves." He certainly knew how to have fun.

Parties, and particularly this party at Cana, seem to have been one of the few occasions when Jesus does not scold or express some negative view of the practices of his society. Then in the end Jesus set down the program for the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. We reenact his drama at the sacred table as often as possible in every church around the world. Many churches, particular those that arose soon after Jesus' life, such as Coptic, Orthodox, and Catholic communions, celebrate it every Sunday. Moreover, the Bible depicts heaven as a cosmic sized wedding feast. Obviously, without apology or embarrassment, God likes festivals and so should the people of God.

Christmas is a festival. It is festive on many levels. It is certainly a commercial festival and the commercial festival is intended to endorse and support both family and social festivity. For a month or so we hear the