

SERMON – FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS – 1 JANUARY 2012

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

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This morning I do not intend to complicate your Christmas holiday by choosing to preach a heavily theological message. To be honest, I had seriously considered doing what the Priest who married Sandy and I, and for that matter our oldest son and his wife as well, had once done in one of his services. He stood up at the appointed time and announced that since the day was a legal holiday, he was taking a holiday as well, and would deliver nothing more than a brief thought that everyone could meditate upon for the following week. However, Christmas is surrounded by so many biblical truths that I just can't walk away saying nothing about them at all. Christmas is not just another simple festive event, as the world likes to think.

Understanding these truths about Christmas helps us to understand why the holiday exists when so many people seem to have forgotten that fact. Christmas Day is the great feast of the Incarnation of God; it focuses on how God the Son humbled himself to be born of a Virgin, so that he might redeem us from sin. The Epistle for today changes the emphasis. It speaks more to what will be the result of the Incarnation; it focuses on the great exaltation of human nature that occurs when we are adopted as God's sons. The balance of the twelve days of the Christmas Season continue the Incarnation narrative, and end with Epiphany, or the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.

But I'm going to adopt a more reflective approach this morning. This is after all a reflective time of the year, is it not? The hustle and bustle of the Holiday Season is behind us, as is the year of 2011. This is the time of relaxing and reflection on the events just concluded. It is also a time of resolutions for the future, based on reflections of the past. In this spirit, let me deal for a few moments with several thoughts hopefully worthy of your time and consideration.

The first of these has to do with the contrast between the real and the apparent importance of the Birth of Christ. The apparent importance seems very low to a large portion of the world's population, almost non-existent in many cases. This is certainly the case for people of religious persuasions other than Christianity. Even for many nominal Christians, the apparent importance lies more with the gifts and the celebrations and the secular side of things. It has been this way for a long time.

Put yourself in Bethlehem on the night of Christ's birth. The event which took place may well have seemed at the time commonplace. An infant was born under circumstances of hardship; in a wayside stable. To those who did not look closely into the circumstances, it might have occurred that a like event had often happened before, and would often be repeated. Everybody did not hear the song of the Angels, or visit the Virgin-Mother and her newborn child. The Kingdom of God had entered into earthly history, but the full meaning of His Birth, the opening of a new era in the history of the human race, was pretty low key. In fact, for the next five and a half centuries, Christians continued to reckon the passing years by the names of the Roman consuls, just like the pagans around them. It was only in the year 541 that Dionysius the Little, a pious and learned person at Rome, first arranged the history of mankind around the most important event in it—the Birthday of Jesus Christ. Christendom at once recognized the justice of this way of reckoning time; and no attempt to supersede it has since had a chance of success. But it took 5 ½ centuries to proclaim the Birth of Jesus Christ as an event of such commanding importance that all else in human history is relative to it; interesting only as it precedes or follows it! So it has been ever since; so it is at this hour. Real importance is one thing, apparent importance another. The events which move the world are not always those which men think most noteworthy. Those who most deeply influence their fellows are not necessarily those of whom everybody is talking. The currents of thought and feeling which will shape the future are not necessarily those which are published by the organs and interpreters of current opinion. When Christ appeared, the Palace of Caesar seemed to be more likely to govern the destinies of mankind than the Manger of Bethlehem. No, my friends, depend on it, the apparent is not always, or even generally, the real. (summarized from H.P. Liddon – 1879)

Another thought to ponder regarding the birth of Christ; what is its' practical importance to us now and in the future? Probably every one in this church has said to himself today, this is the first day of the New Year, and the first Sunday in 2012. Yes, my friends, the hours of yet another year are beginning; and as those of us who have reached or passed the middle of our life look forward, we are prone to put more importance on answering this question. It seems like yesterday when we were gathered here at the start of 2011; yet since then how much has

taken place, how much has there been to think about! Many who are near and dear to us, and who started last year with us, are no longer here, and many who pray and listen here this morning may follow them before the first Sunday of 2013. Certainly 2011 was a year of anxieties, a year of struggles, a year of natural disasters, a year of surprises, a year of achievements, a year in which, whether for good or evil, nations were as the phrase goes, “making history.” As it passes, it leaves us with a double burden on our hands; widespread problems at home, and one, perhaps two wars, abroad. This is not the hour to discuss it controversially; those who come after us will be better able to bring knowledge and impartiality to the estimate of what it has really meant to our country and to the human race. But as a new year begins, we enter it with sober and anxious thoughts and serious misgivings. Perhaps we catch a glimpse of those great realities which we too easily ignore or forget; that all of us at some point will leave this earth for a new world. In that world there will be no distinctions of race, or rank, or wealth, or accomplishments, but only the great and inescapable distinction between those who are saved and those who are not. Surely, as we look out into that coming world, with its blessed and terrific possibilities, we must lose no time in addressing (and fixing if necessary) our relationship with Him, who, for love of us, was conceived by the Holy Ghost, and born of the Virgin Mary; our present Redeemer, and our future Judge?

As we ponder that question, let us consider the resolutions that we might make to address an answer. Let's go up into the attics of our minds, and dust off a word that maybe many of us haven't used for a while, and consider making it a part of our daily lives. The word is “Confession”. (The following is condensed from *The Art of Confession: Renewing Yourself Through the Practice of Personal Honesty*, by Paul Wilkes, the author of many books on spirituality and religious practice.)

Confession historically has been reserved for musty confessional booths of Catholics, the sometimes perfunctory religious rituals of Jews, or the fire-and-brimstone sermons of Protestants. It can be a powerful force in our lives, if we look at it in a new and fresh way – as an art to be practiced rather than an exercise in guilt. I believe that deep within each of us is

the desire to do the right thing, to be a good and decent person. We often don't live up to what is best in us, and end up feeling rotten about it, and not knowing how to help ourselves. In these days of drip-dry morality and over-sharing of ourselves online and in front of TV cameras, let's look at what a real and honest daily and private look at ourselves might accomplish. Confession is not a sign of weakness; confession can make us strong. Bearing the burden of the duplicities, false pride, greed, lusts, and self-importance that all of us have in varying degrees, is what makes us weak. To carry this physical load is "grievous unto us; the burden is intolerable". That's why, when we are honest, when we admit our shortcomings — painful as it can be — we feel relieved and refreshed. We don't have to live in the shadows of deceit; we step into the light of "Here I am, imperfect though I may be".

Here is a way you might go about it. Each night before or as you go to bed, simply review the day in your mind. Let your mind meander back through it. Ask yourself what you did that you would do over again, and what you did that made you ashamed. Be honest; no one is listening except you. What this self-reflection really is is the practice of confession, confession in its purest sense - self-confession. Just zero in on one thing that showed you at your best and resolve to repeat it tomorrow. Think about one thing that you didn't like about yourself and try not to repeat it. The objective in a Christian context is to find and reinforce those habits that enrich your relationship with God and your fellow man, and find and eventually put aside those habits that inhibit such relationships. This is not intended as a substitute or replacement for the practice of asking God's forgiveness for your sins. Rather it is a proactive effort to act on God's forgiveness by forging ahead with his assistance to do what is right and avoid what is wrong. See how the next day goes. I think you'll find yourself starting to stop short of doing those things your reflection showed aren't good for you or for your relationships with others.

So there you have it; some reflections from Fr. Sam on what's important at this time of the year, and at this time in our individual lives. Take it for what it is worth. And as you head toward Epiphany, remember that the reason there was no Nativity Scene in Washington DC this

year was not because they couldn't find enough animals to fill the stable; it was because they couldn't find three wise men.

Amen.