

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the Second Sunday of Christmas, January 2, 2011 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

### A Final Look at Christmas

*The Christmas Season is just about over. The sixth of January is Epiphany, the last of the traditional 12 days of Christmas. So, as far as church Sundays, today is our final look at Christmas. In a way, today is a dash of cold water in the face. As you probably have noticed, the scripture readings move from the story of the birth of the baby Jesus toward what happened next—away from the charming story of the babe in a manger and immediately into a flight-for-your-life story. Jesus and the Holt Family are fleeing to Egypt to escape the anger and hatred of a dangerous rival who wants to kill him. Reality intrudes in the dream of “peace on earth and goodwill toward all.” Today reminds us that, as the poet says, “the world is too much with us.”*

Still, it's important that we be reminded that Christmas means nothing at all if it doesn't relate to everyday life. It would be very easy for us to sentimentalize Christmas and then just go back to “business as usual” as if nothing were changed. Jesus comes into our everyday world precisely so that EVERYTHING might be transformed and renewed. He came among us to show us that God's presence, pardon, and power is able to make all the difference in the world. He took on human form to give us hope and to heal us from all our fears and anxieties. He came to show the incredible potential that lies within each one of us if we choose to live with courage and trust—even in the face of hostility and rejection. Whether you understand God's entrance into our world as a literal historical event or as a symbolic truth, you have to wonder at the power of that story—God with us, Emmanuel, the Incarnation of the divine, God translated into the language of a human life, God becoming **one with us**.

As we look ahead to a new year and try to understand just what difference the Incarnation makes, I want to share with you a story that I came across just the other day. The story is a metaphor and, for that reason, it's not perfect; it has to be interpreted wisely and well. I can't give credit to the author because there was no indication of the source. I like the story because, in the simplest terms, it helps us see just how God's decision to come among us as one of us—to literally take on flesh and live as a human being right in our midst—makes it possible for us not only to survive but to thrive!

Once upon a time there was a man who looked upon Christmas as a fraud, a lot of humbug, much ado about nothing. He wasn't exactly like old Mr. Scrooge in the Dickens story. Actually, he was a good and caring individual, considerate to all his friends and family, just in his dealings with his neighbors and business associates. He just didn't understand or believe in what he took to be a lot of nonsense about God coming to us in the form of a human being. The church services celebrating a baby born in a stable as the King of all Creation seemed to him a fairy tale. The whole idea of God leaving a throne up in the clouds to come visit the silly little human creatures here on earth defied all the laws of physics and common sense. He was much too honest intellectually even to pretend that he saw Christmas as anything other than a chance to have a look weekend off from work.

His wife was like most women who are married to men who want to deny that that they ever were children and who want to put down anything that smacks of fun—she just put up with his sourpuss, half-hearted involvement in the Christmas celebration. She loved life, welcomed the holidays, and looked forward to a season of caring and sharing. And, so, when she went off with the children to attend Christmas services she never nagged him about staying home. Truly, he wished that he could join the family at the midnight Christmas Eve service so he sincerely apologized to his tolerant and understanding spouse. “Have a good time”, called as they went out the door into the swirling snow. “I just can’t go with you because I would feel like such a hypocrite. But I’ll stay up and wait for you all to come home. I’ll make us a big pot of hot chocolate.”

So his wife and children left for church. He watched them leave and stood looking out the large front porch window, watching as the snow fell harder and piled up in the yard and street. He thought to himself, “Well if there’s going to be such a thing as Christmas it’s nice that it’s going to be a white one.” A little later on, when he was sitting in front of the fireplace, waiting, and reading the afternoon newspaper, he heard a kind of bumping, thumping sound. Then he heard it again. Looking up he couldn’t see anything but then it happened once again. Was someone throwing snowballs at the house, he wondered? He got out of his chair and went back to the window. Immediately, the mystery was solved. A flock of birds, trying to navigate in all the wind and snow was flying toward the light and they were running right into the large front porch window. Several of them were right there on the porch, kind of huddling against the house, cold and obviously a bit stunned. They were flopping around and it made him feel sorry. He wondered what, if anything, he might do to help them.

He thought about the little lean-to shed around the back of the house—the place where he stored his lawn equipment and the trash cans. It also housed all sorts of tools and had a workbench with a light. It occurred to him that, maybe if he opened the door, and turned on that light, the birds might go inside and at least have a little shelter from the cold and wind. He went to the back door and pulled on his boots and coat. He trudged out to the shed, where he opened the door and lit the lamp. He looked around to see if there were any birds. He noticed that there were some birds in the tree branches overhead but they certainly didn’t show any interest in what he was doing nor did they make any move to take cover. He wondered how he could get them to come in out of the cold.

Then an idea came to him: I’ll go get some breadcrumbs. Maybe if I scatter some all around the door to the shed it will attract the birds. So back he went to the kitchen, found some bread, and tore it into small pieces. Going outside again, he put it on the ground and made a sort of trail of breadcrumbs leading right up to the door of the shed. Surely, he thought, they will get the idea now.

Well, the birds seemed totally oblivious to what he had done. They ignored the breadcrumbs completely. Feeling frustrated, he decided to forget the whole idea. Maybe, he thought to himself, they’re afraid of me. There’s no way I can get them to understand what I’m trying to do for them. They’re never going to trust me. Why should they? Then, a miracle happened: in

a moment of what he considered complete silliness, a strange idea popped into his head: What if I could become a bird, just for a few moments? I could **show** them what I'm trying to do. I could lead them to warmth and safety.

As he was mulling over that bizarre idea, the church bells suddenly began ringing out all over the neighborhood as the Christmas Eve services ended. He stood there in the snow listening to the bells and, suddenly, a connection got made. He knew exactly what Christmas was all about...it all made sense to him. He sank to his knees in the snow, looked up toward the starry sky above, and addressed God for the first time in years: "I get it. I really understand why you had to become one of us. It's the only way you could get through to us."

Well, that's the story—a final look at Christmas. In that story we have one more chance to understand the depth of God's love for us. Despite all the other trappings of the holiday season—the gifts, the food, the drinking, the travel, the lights and decorations—if it hadn't been for this event—the way God lowered himself to come to us in the person of a helpless child there would be no way for us to move so confidently beyond our doubts and fears. We wouldn't be freed, we wouldn't be led from the cold hard winter of life into the warmth of God's love and into the comfort of Heaven, that protecting shed prepared for us by our Savior.

That's it, one final look at Christmas. Merry Christmas to you all!