

## **Sermons at St. Luke's**

*A sermon preached by the Rev. James B. Craven, III on Sunday, December 19, 2010.*

In the name of God-Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

Nostalgia is big this time of year. I doubt I am at all alone, as Christmas approaches, in having my thoughts often go back to my own childhood, and I suspect my meanderings may parallel some of yours. There is always a child in us, and I am not talking psychobabble. Last Sunday one of our young folks here said to me "You are the most like us of all the priests here." I didn't know what she meant frankly. Us? Who's us? "You know, us little kids here." Anne may well agree, but I chose to take it as a compliment. The little kid, the child in all of us is often at the forefront at this time of year.

We have old, very old, family home movies of my mother as a little girl, hanging her Christmas stocking. We have a picture of me at a very young age, in a Navy coat and looking most serious and pensive, on Santa's lap. It was suggested once I was missing my father, but that couldn't have been it, as I had never known him. He came into my life only after the war, and my mother says I treated him initially like the perfect stranger he was. My father told me once how he just broke down and wept upon hearing a scratchy rendition of White Christmas by shortwave from San Francisco while on an island in the Solomons.

I well remember how excited I was the first time I was allowed to go to the midnight service on Christmas Eve at Grace Church, Morganton, where we usually had snow at Christmas, and over much of the winter. I can see now in my mind's eye the choir processing in to O Come All Ye Faithful, the

expressions on their faces, and to this day I can name them all. The women in the choir all wore dorky little white head coverings. Of course nearly all women wore hats in church then. Our mind's eye is where we find those scenes today, and isn't it nice that Shakespeare put that descriptive term in the mouth of Hamlet.

In that same church in the mountains almost 50 years later, I experienced something of this, again in the snow and just after Christmas. I had been a priest maybe ten days and was filling in on that Sunday for the rector of Grace Church, my family church home since it was built in 1845. My uncle had arranged to be the acolyte at the early service, a nice touch, as he had taught me to be an acolyte. Our early service was at 8, by the way, as it is here at St. Luke's. I answered the church phone here once and spoke with a woman who asked, "What time is your 8 o'clock service?" I told her we would have it at 8. All was ready, we walked out into the church and I stood where I was supposed to be, and waited, and waited, until my uncle, in a stage whisper audible in the back of the church, said "Showtime." I then realized what I had been waiting for. I had been waiting for the priest to begin the service.

So a lot of childhood comes back to us at this time of year. We are so very fortunate though, in that for the most part our childhood memories of Christmas are good ones. A fire in the fireplace, stockings hung, lots of good <sup>food</sup> folks and presents to open, and all that. Not so for everyone. Not everyone has a fire, a fireplace. Not everyone has a home. Unemployment is high, between 9 and 10 percent, higher still for some demographic groups. For some there is

enough to pay the rent, but maybe not the car payment, and certainly not Christmas presents. A woman who got home from prison in July just got a job, not a great job, but it's a start. For folks who have done time, this is not the land of the second chance. There are unemployed today who do not yet know if there will be a benefits check in January or not. And rarely are those in prison and those without jobs alone, for families share that misery with them. For small children it must be devastating at this time of year. Domestic violence, social workers tell us, is up at Christmas. Substance abuse too.

And all that is right here in this country. Imagine what children are going through today in Haiti, the Darfur area of the Sudan, North Korea, Afghanistan, or closer to home, in the border cities of northern Mexico. Two years ago I was in El Paso, took a wrong turn and the next thing I knew I was in downtown Juarez, murder capital of the hemisphere. In for a penny, in for a pound, I stayed long enough to see the 17th century Spanish mission church and promptly crossed the Rio Grande again. Of course I breezed right through the border crossing, being an obvious non-Mexican. There are American families here in North Carolina that are not intact, because the father has been deported, leaving his U.S. citizen wife and children to fend for themselves. Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

It is said that our check stubs reveal a lot about our priorities. This is true on a personal and an institutional basis. Duke University, with which my family has had close ties for 172 years now, lays off employees here in Durham as it expands into a second campus in China and purchases medical practices

five counties away. Some church bodies expend so much energy on issues of human sexuality that there is little if any left for issues Jesus did have something to say about. We imprison more folks than any country on earth, at an extraordinarily high cost to taxpayers. We fund weapons systems the armed forces don't even want. We go to war in Iraq while scarcely noticing the genocide in Rwanda. In other words, we make choices, free will creatures that we are. A great law teacher said to me once that in his view of things, both the Pope in Rome and the Supreme Court in Washington were incapable of error. He hastened to add though that both are often the recipients of miserable advice.

Just as revealing as our check stubs are children's annual letters to Santa. The Postal Service, which processes Santa's mail for him, tells us that toys are not always at the top of the list this year. Children are asking for winter coats, clothes for school, a coat for my mom, a job for my dad, a place to live, medicine for my little brother. Or, I want my mom home from prison, I want my dad home safe and alive from Afghanistan, I don't want my big sister to be deported. ABC news tell us that parents themselves are writing more letters to Santa, asking for help in getting something, anything, for a child for Christmas, or help paying the rent this month, or what am I going to do in January if I am still without a job and maybe no employment benefits either. And we think we have problems.

And yet, I am optimistic. Never in my life have I seen a glass half empty, not even this year, and I hear these problems from real live folks every day.

Age and perspective help. My grandfather, who baptized me just as I baptized my own grandchildren 60 odd years later, was born in 1876 when occupation troops were still here in North Carolina. I have known men and women born into slavery, and men who fought in every war we have been in from the Civil War on. I remember when baseball was played as God intended it, in the sunshine and with wooden bats. I don't remember the Alamo or the Maine, contrary to what Sara and my children will tell you, but I do remember when you picked up the phone to make a call and the operator said "Number please," when it cost a dime to get into the only movie in town. This too will pass, it always does. I know this in my heart and my bones, because I believe and hope that, as Isaiah put it:

The wolf shall dwell with  
The lamb, and the leopard  
Shall lie down with the kid,  
And the calf and the lion  
Together, and a little child  
Shall lead them.

That little child whose birth Matthew narrates in the Gospel today.

Peace on Earth, in the Gospel, is not so much a prediction as a prayer, and with it goes another prayer "Goodwill toward men." It is hard to have one without the other.

A good understanding of all of this, of the hopes and fears of all the years, was found on a blackboard in a bombed out school in Belgium after the Battle of the Bulge 66 years ago:

May the world never again live through such a  
Christmas night. Nothing is more horrible than  
meeting one's fate, far from mother, wife and

children. Is it worthy of man's destiny to bereave a mother of her son, a wife of her husband, or children of their father? Life was bequeathed us in order that we might love and be considerate to one another. From the ruins, out of blood and death shall come forth a brotherly world.  
(signed) a German officer.

Amen.

St. Luke's  
19 December 2010.