

Christmas Eve Sermon
December 24, 2006
3:00 and 8:00

Prayer:

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
 Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in,
 Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
 The great glad tidings tell;
Oh, come to us, abide with us,
 Our Lord Immanuel!

Grandma Ruby was now in her 90's,
 and she was finding that buying presents
 for her family and friends
 was getting to be a bit much.
So this year,
 she decided to write out checks
 for all of them
 to put in their Christmas cards.
In each card,
 she carefully wrote,
 “Buy your own present”
 And then she sent them off.

After the Christmas festivities were over,
 she was cleaning off her desk,
 and there she found all the checks.
So everyone on her gift list had received
 a beautiful card from her
 with no check—
 —just her note: “Buy your own present”.

It's a season of surprises.

Surprises.

Like the little boy in the church Christmas play.
And when it came time for him to say his line,
he went blank.
Could not remember a thing.

His Mom was in the front row,
and she tried to prompt.
She said: "I am the light of the world."
He leaned closer to hear.
She said again: "I am the light of the world."

So, always trusting his mother,
he spoke out with confidence,
and in a clear, strong voice said:
"My mother is the light of the world."

Surprises.

But no surprise is so amazing
as the wonderful news we celebrate tonight—
—that God came to live with us,
to dwell with us,
to be born a baby,
the baby Jesus.
Immanuel.
God with us.

The prayer at the beginning of the sermon
was the last verse of
"O Little Town of Bethlehem".
And it ends with these words:
**Oh, come to us,
abide with us,
Our Lord Immanuel!**

Oh, come to us,
abide with us,
Our Lord Immanuel!

What an amazing and wonderful gift
that God would come to us—

—come to us as a baby.
Humbly as a baby.

The King of kings
and Lord of lords
born in a manger in Bethlehem.

It's not what you'd expect.
It's a wonderful, amazing,
miraculous surprise.

I read this past week
that when Queen Elizabeth visited the United States,
she brought with her a few things.
She brought:
—4000 pounds of luggage
—4 outfits for every day of her trip
—40 pints of plasma
—her own hairdresser,
two valets,
a photographer,
and two personal secretaries.

That's what you'd expect from royalty,
I suppose.

But when Jesus came to us,
he gave it all up.

As Paul wrote to the Philippians:

Christ Jesus,

**who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself,
and became obedient to the point of death—
—even death on the cross.**

Oh come to us,
abide with us,
Our Lord, Immanuel.

Why would Jesus do that?
Is it possible he loves you and me that much?

There's a classic story by Louis Cassels
about a man
who was having real doubts about his faith.
Why would God become human
and come to live with us?
He couldn't understand it.
He found it too much to believe.

And so, this Christmas,
he stayed home
while the rest of the family went to church.

Shortly after the family drove away,
snow began to fall.
He sat down by the fire and began to read.
Minutes later,

he was startled by a thudding sound.
 Then another.
 And again—another.
At first he thought someone
 might be throwing snowballs against his living room window.

But when we went to the front door to check it out,
 he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow.
They'd been caught in the storm and,
 in desperate search for shelter,
 had tried to fly through his large picture window.
What could he do to help these birds?
 He had an idea.
 He remembered the barn.
 That would provide a warm shelter for the birds.
 If he could just direct the birds to it.

Quickly,
 he put on his coat and boots,
 tramped out to the barn,
 threw the doors open wide
 and turned on a light.
But the birds didn't come in.

So he hurried back to the house,
 fetched bread crumbs,
 sprinkled them on the snow,
 making a trail to the wide-open door of the barn.
But the birds ignored the bread crumbs.

He tried catching them.
 He tried shoing them.
 He ran around them, waving his arms.
Nothing.
 He couldn't get them to the safety of the barn.

He figured they were scared of him.
 If only he could think of a way he could get them to trust him.
 But how?
 How?

“If only I could be a bird,”
he thought to himself,
“and mingle with them
and speak their language.
Then I could show them the way.
But I would have to be one of them
so they could see, and hear and understand.”

At that moment,
the church bells began to ring.
The sound reached his ears
above the sounds of the wind.
And he stood there listening to the bells,
listening to the bells chiming the glad tidings of Christmas.

Christmas.
When Jesus came to be one of us.
Oh come to us,
abide with us,
Our Lord Immanuel.

And all of a sudden,
he saw it.
How Jesus came to be one of us—
—because he loved us.
Immanuel.
God with us.

And he sank to his knees in the snow.

Oh come to us.
Abide with us.
Our Lord, Immanuel!
That’s how much God loves you.
To come for you this Christmas.
To come for you.
To abide with you.
As Lord.
Immanuel—

–God with us.
God with you.
Tonight.
Tomorrow.
Forever.

In 1994,
two Americans accepted an invitation
from the Russian Department of Education
to teach in the public schools–
–based on Biblical principles.

As it neared Christmas,
they had the opportunity to teach at an orphanage.
And they told the story (through an interpreter)
of Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem.
They told about the Inn where there was no room.
They told about the stable and the animals.
They told about Mary giving birth to a baby,
and placing Jesus in the manger.

And then the children
had craft time.
And they each made a manger
out of cardboard,
and yellow paper for straw.

As they were working on the project,
the teachers moved around the room.
And they came to 6-year-old Misha.
He appeared to have finished his project.
But in the manger,
instead of one baby–
–there were two.

They called the interpreter over
to check with Misha,
because they figured he must have misunderstood the story.

But he knew it well,

he had just added a new ending.
He said:

**When Mary laid the baby in the manger,
Jesus looked at me
and asked me if I had a place to stay.
I told him that I don't have a momma or a poppa,
so I don't have any place to stay.
Then Jesus told me I could stay with him.
But I told him I couldn't,
because I didn't have a gift for him
like everybody else.**

**I wanted to stay with Jesus so much,
so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift.
So I asked Jesus,
if I kept him warm,
would that be a good gift?
And Jesus told me,
If you keep me warm,
that would be the best gift ever.**

**So, I got in the manger,
and then Jesus looked at me
and told me I could stay with him for always—
—forever.**

As Misha finished,
his eyes brimmed with tears
that fell down his cheeks.
This little one with nothing,
had found someone who never abandon him,
someone who loved him,
someone who would stay with him forever,
for always.

Oh come to us,
abide with us,
Our Lord Immanuel!

Jesus comes tonight
for you.
So you might know God's love.

So you might follow.

Immanuel.

God with us—

—always and forever.

In Jesus' name,

Amen