

PAYING THE CHRISTMAS BILL --- SERMON, DEC. 30, 2007

LET US PRAY – EVERPRESENT GOD, WITHOUT YOUR WORD, WE HAVE NOTHING TO SAY; WITHOUT YOUR SPIRIT WE ARE HELPLESS. MAY THIS MESSAGE BE A REFLECTION OF WHAT YOU WOULD HAVE US DO AS WE PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS AND GO FORTH WITH THAT NEWS AS FAITHFUL DISCIPLES, AMEN.

ADVENT WREATHS, PAGEANT REHEARSALS, LINES AT THE MALL, COOKIES BAKING, TREE TRIMMING, GIFTS TO WRAP, CHOIR PRACTICE, VISITING FRIENDS, VISITING RELATIVES, CARDS TO WRITE, CALLS TO MAKE, CASH OR CREDIT. LOTS OF THINGS TO BUY, LOTS OF THINGS TO DO – CHRISTMAS EVE, CHRISTMAS DAY, CHRISTMAS DINNER - WHEWWW!

ANY OF THIS SOUND FAMILIAR? OR , HOW ABOUT THIS – “NEXT YEAR WE’RE GOING TO SHOP AND WRAP EARLIER, AND YOU KNOW WHAT, WE ARE DEFINETLY GOING TO SCALE BACK.

FEW OF US, DESPITE LAST YEAR’S RESOLUTIONS SLOWED DOWN DURING THIS HOLIDAY, AT LEAST IN THE AREAS THAT MAY NOT BE AS IMPORTANT – A POLL IN USA TODAY A WEEK BEFORE CHRISTMAS STATED THAT IN COMPARISON TO 10 YEARS AGO, AMERICANS DID CUT BACK IN GIVING TO CHARITIES, IN CHRISTMAS CAROLING, IN DONATING TO THE POOR AND DRAMATICALLY IN SERIOUS RELIGIOUS REFLECTION. ONLY 22% OF AMERICANS INDICATED THEY HAD ENGAGED IN SUCH REFLECTION DURING THIS SEASON. THE ONLY AREA WHICH SHOWED A SLIGHT INCREASE OF TIME WAS IN GIFT GIVING.

DESPITE OUR BEST INTENTIONS, AND I DO STRONGLY FEEL THAT WE REALIZE THE TRUE REASON FOR THE SEASON, THE 12 DAYS OF

CHRISTMAS HAS EXPANDED TO BE CLOSER TO 30 DAYS; AND DESPITE THE JOY, FELLOWSHIP, GIVING TO WORTHWHILE MISSIONS AND TIME SPENT IN DEVOTIONS OR PRAYER; WE ARE BY NEW YEAR'S DAY, TIRED -- SOME MIGHT UPGRADE OR MAYBE I SHOULD SAY DOWNGRADE, THIS CONDITION TO EXHAUSTED. WE HAVE OVERINDULGED AND A HANGOVER OF SORTS SEEMS IMMINENT.

MANY OF US MAY ALSO REALIZE THAT BECAUSE OF THE NATURE OF OUR ECONOMY, THERE ARE STILL BILLS TO PAY – FOR OUR FESTIVITIES, CELEBRATIONS AND GIVING; AND THAT THE “HANGOVER” HAS NOW SPAWNED A MIGRAINE AS WELL. THE ENERGY, WARMTH, JOY AND LOVE GENERATED BY CHRISTMAS SEEMS TO HAVE VANISHED AND WE ARE LEFT TO TRY TO MOTIVATE OURSELVES TO GET GOING AGAIN.

THERE IS A CURE FOR THAT HANGOVER AND FOR THAT MIGRAINE – AND IF TAKEN PROPERLY CAN GUARANTEE WE WILL NEVER EXPERIENCE THEM AGAIN.

A FEW WEEKS BEFORE CHRISTMAS ROSE AND I TOOK HER SISTER, OR BROTHER IN LAW AND OUR 2 NIECES TO NY CITY. WE SAW THE TREE AT ROCKEFELLER CENTER, THE SKATING RINK, ALL THE GREAT STORES ON 5TH AVE. WITH THEIR BEAUTIFUL WINDOWS AND DISPLAYS. NEEDLESS TO SAY, WE WEREN'T ALONE THAT SATURDAY, AS WE HAD BEEN JOINED BY AT LEAST 100,000 OF OUR CLOSEST FRIENDS. DESPITE THE CROWDS AND TURMOIL WE HAD A WONDERFUL TIME, BEING TOGETHER AS A FAMILY. ON THE WAY HOME WE DISCUSSED, OTHER THAN BEING TOGETHER, WHAT WAS THE HIGHLIGHT OF THE DAY. TWO THINGS CAME TO EVERYONE'S MIND (1) A STREET PERFORMANCE BY 3 ENTERTAINERS NEAR CENTRAL PARK, AND (2) AN OUT OF THE WAY LITTLE PIZZA PLACE THAT HAD GREAT FOOD AND A VERY WELCOMING AND FRIENDLY OWNER. AMIDST ALL THE MAJESTY OF ROCKEFELLER CENTER, TRUMP PLAZA, SACHS, FAO SCHWARZ – THE BEST CHRISTMAS EXPERIENCE OF

THAT DAY CAME FROM BEING TOGETHER AS A FAMILY AND GIFTS FROM THE LEAST EXPECTED PLACE. DOES THIS SOUND FAMILIAR AS WELL?

SO IT CAME TO BE SOME 2000 YEARS AGO. WE RECEIVED THE GREATEST GIFT OF ALL AND HE WOULD BE FOUND LYING IN A LOWLY MANGER GUARDED BY SHEPHERDS. NOW SHEPHERDS WERE NOT CONSIDERED ANYWHERE NEAR THE UPPER ECHELONS OF THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE. OFTEN THEY WERE THE YOUNGEST IN THE FAMILY – THOSE DESTINED NOT TO INHERIT ANY LAND - HOW IRONIC, YET FITTING, THAT THEY ARE THE FIRST WITNESS TO THE GREATEST INHERITANCE IN HISTORY – AND THAT GOD HAD CHOSEN THEM TO RECEIVE THE NEWS - FROM LUKE 2:8 “AND THERE WERE SHEPHERDS LIVING OUT IN THE FIELDS NEARBY, KEEPING WATCH OVER THEIR FLOCKS AT NIGHT. AN ANGEL OF THE LORD APPEARED TO THEM, AND THE GLORY OF THE LORD SHONE AROUND THEM, AND THEY WERE TERRIFIED. BUT THE ANGEL SAID TO THEM, DO NOT BE AFRAID. I BRING TO YOU GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY THAT WILL BE FOR ALL THE PEOPLE. TODAY IN THE TOWN OF DAVID, A SAVIOR HAS BEEN BORN TO YOU; HE IS CHRIST, THE LORD.”

THE NEWS REVEALED TO THESE SHEPHERDS WAS THE BIRTH OF HE WHO WOULD BE THE GOOD SHEPHERD TO ALL MANKIND. FORMER PRESIDENT AND SUNDAY SCHOOL TEACHER, JIMMY CARTER WRITES OF THIS ANALOGY IN HIS BOOK SOURCES OF STRENGTH, “THE VULNERABILITY AND FOOLISHNESS OF A SHEEP MAY NOT BE CHARACTERISTICS WE’RE EAGER TO CONFESS WE HAVE. WE MAY PREFER TO IMAGINE THAT WE ARE STRONG AND ABLE TO TAKE CARE OF OURSELVES. BUT, THAT BELIEF IS AN ILLUSION, AS THE TROUBLES AND FAILURES OF OUR LIVES SHOW US. FORTUNATELY, IN JESUS WE HAVE A SHEPHERD WHOM WE CAN TRUST WITH OUR WEAKNESS AND HELPLESSNESS. HE TOOK OUR VULNERABILITY UPON HIMSELF AND LAID DOWN HIS LIFE FOR US, ONLY TO RISE AGAIN IN TRIUMPH. NOW HE

OFFERS US HOPE, REASSURANCE AND SECURITY AS PART OF HIS WANDERING, BUT EVER LOVED FLOCK.

JESUS' BIRTH WAS A GIFT, HIS LIFE WAS A GIFT. THE WONDERMENT AND EMOTION WHICH POURED OUT IN THE WAKE OF HIS TRAVELS, HIS TEACHINGS AND MIRACLES MUST HAVE SEEMED BEYOND COMPREHENSION. HOWEVER, IN AN AGE OF STORYTELLING AS THE MEANS OF COMMUNICATION, THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT WORD OF ALL OF THIS MUST HAVE SPREAD ACROSS TRADE AND TRAVEL ROUTES TO CITIES AND VILLAGES EVERYWHERE. IT BEGAN IN DIFFICULTY AND DANGER AS JOSEPH WAS WARNED IN A DREAM TO TAKE HIS FAMILY AND FLEE TO EGYPT TO ESCAPE THE WRATH OF HEROD. AFTER 3 DECADES OF A LIFE OF FILLING THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF ALL, AND FULFILLING THE SCRIPTURES, JESUS CAME TO THAT FATEFUL WEEK.

THE MESSIAH WOULD BE WELCOMED IN JERUSALEM; BUT WITHIN A WEEK HE WOULD BETRAYED BY ONE DISCIPLE, DENIED BY ANOTHER, ABANDONED BY THOSE WHO HAD WAVED PALM BRANCHES IN HIS PATH JUST DAYS EARLIER AND HANDED OVER --- TO BE CONVICTED AND CRUCIFIED.

THE MAGIC OF THAT CHRISTMAS HAD ENDED – EXCEPT FOR JESUS - WHO BECAUSE OF HIS LOVE FOR US, GAVE US THROUGH HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION ANOTHER GIFT – THE PROMISE OF EVERLASTING LIFE.

ALL OUR DEBTS, OUR CHARGES, OUR BILLS HAD BEEN PAID.

FINALLY, THE DISCIPLES REALIZED THAT THE WONDER AND GLORY OF CHRISTMAS IS NOT FOUND IN ONE TIME OR ONE SEASON. THEY WOULD RECALL THE PROPHET ISAIAH AND HIS WORDS WE HAVE AS TODAY'S SCRIPTURE – “BEHOLD, I WILL CREATE NEW HEAVENS AND A NEW EARTH. THE FORMER THINGS WILL NOT BE REMEMBERED, NOR WILL THEY COME TO MIND. BUT BE GLAD AND REJOICE FOREVER IN WHAT I WILL CREATE,

FOR I WILL CREATE JERUSALEM TO BE A DELIGHT AND ITS PEOPLE A JOY. I WILL REJOICE OVER JERUSALEM AND TAKE DELIGHT IN MY PEOPLE; THE SOUND OF WEEPING AND OF CRYING WILL BE HEARD IN IT NO MORE.”

EVEN AS THE DISCIPLES WENT TO GALILEE, AS JESUS HAD COMMANDED, SOME WERE STILL IN DOUBT, THE JESUS SAID TO THEM,” ALL AUTHORITY IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH HAS BEEN GIVEN TO ME. THEREFORE, GO AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS, BAPTIZING THEM IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, AND TEACHING THEM TO OBEY EVERYTHING I HAVE COMMANDED YOU. AND SURELY I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS, TO THE VERY END OF THE AGE.” THIS ASSURANCE OF OUR LORD’S PRESENCE WITH US IN ALL WE DO REAFFIRMED THAT HE IS THE GOOD SHEPHERD TO US ALWAYS.

WHILE JESUS PAID THE ULTIMATE BILL, THE DISCIPLES KNEW THAT THEY HAD NOW AN OBLIGATION TO PAY FOR THE GIFT OF HIS LIFE, HIS TEACHINGS, HIS DEATH AND HIS RESURRECTION. THEY WOULD TRAVEL THOUSANDS OF MILES TO PAY THIS BILL, PREACHING IN TEMPLES, HOMES, CAVES, TO CROWDS IN CITIES AND TO INDIVIDUALS IN THE WILDERNESS – OFTEN COURTING DANGER AND SUFFERING PERSECUTION, IMPRISONMENT, ABUSE AND FOR MANY DEATH.

ONE MIGHT THINK THAT AFTER THE RELATIVELY SHORT LIFE OF JESUS, THEN THE DEATH OF MOST OF HIS DISCIPLES WITHIN A PERIOD OF SOME 50 YEARS – THAT THE GLORY AND WONDER AND MAGIC OF CHRISTMAS WOULD FADE. THE CHRISTMAS CAROLS SUNG TO THE SHEPHERDS BY THE ANGELS WOULD BE HEARD NO MORE. THAT THIS CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE WOULD BE A “MOMENTARY EVENT” AND THAT IT COULD NEVER STAND THE TEST OF TIME. BUT, IT DID.

ONE OF MY LECTURES AS A PSYCHOLOGY TEACHER WAS THE PRINCIPLES BEHIND THE 4 STAGES OF CREATIVE THINKING. PREPARATION (YOUR EDUCATION AND BACKGROUND), INCUBATION (THE PERIOD WHEN IDEAS ARE NURTURED), ILLUMINATION –(THE TIME WHEN THE IDEA FIRST SURFACES), AND VERIFICATION (THE PROOF IT WILL STAND THE TEST OF TIME)

SOMETIMES, AS CHRISTIANS, WE GET CAUGHT UP IN THE ILLUMINATION STAGE – OUR STAR IN THE EAST OR OUR ROAD TO DAMASCUS EXPERIENCE. WHILE THESE MAY INDEED BE LIFE CHANGING MOMENTS FOR US -- IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO JUST “HEAR THE GOOD NEWS”

WE ARE TO LIVE THE GOOD NEWS, WE ARE TO SPREAD THE GOOD NEWS AND WE ARE TO USE THE GOOD NEWS IN ALL THAT WE DO. WE DO THIS BECAUSE WE, LIKE THE DISCIPLES HAVE BEEN COMMISSIONED TO DO THIS. IT IS HOW WE PAY OUR BILL AND IT IS A VERY SMALL PRICE TO PAY FOR THE INCOMPARABLE GIFT OF CHRIST IN OUR LIVES.

ONE OF THE GREATEST WAYS TO PAY IS TO USE THE MANY GIFTS GOD AS BESTOWED UPON US . LIKE THE DISCIPLES, WHO WERE AVERAGE PEOPLE , WHO THROUGH GOD’S GUIDANCE AND GRACE, CAME TO DO EXTRAORDINARY THINGS. SO, TOO ARE WE CALLED TO USE OUR ENERGY, OUR TIME, OUR MONEY AND RESOURCES, OUR TALENTS AND OUR FAITH. WE ARE TO USE THEM EACH DAY --- WITHOUT RESERVATION AND WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT TRULY WHAT WE DO FOR OTHERS WITH THOSE GIFTS – WE DO IN GOD’S NAME.

OUR TIME HERE IS FINITE, IT IS LIMITED – THERE ARE NO GUARANTEES OF HOW LONG WE HAVE TO FULLY EMBRACE WHAT WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN AND TO USE IT FOR GOD’S PURPOSES. IF SOMEONE YOU LOVED AND WHO LOVED YOU GAVE YOU A BEAUTIFUL COAT OR SWEATER FOR CHRISTMAS, ONLY TO DISCOVER A YEAR LATER, THAT NOT ONLY HAD

YOU NOT WORN IT, YOU NEVER EVEN TOOK IT OUT OF THE BOX, DON'T YOU IMAGINE THAT THEY WOULD BE HURT AND SADDENED? IMAGINE HOW GOD MUST FEEL WHEN WE FAIL TO USE THAT WHICH HE HAS GIVEN US?

SO, YOU HAVE ALL YOU NEED AND MORE TO PAY THE CHRISTMAS BILL, AND THERE WILL BE NO HANGOVER TO START THE NEW YEAR, BECAUSE THE PROMISE OF CHRISTMAS EQUIPS US YEAR ROUND AS WE TAKE ON NEW DISCIPLESHIPS AND NEW MISSIONS IN OUR LIVES. PAUL TELLS US IN 2ND CORINTHIANS, 5:17 "THEREFORE, IF ANYONE IS IN CHRIST, HE IS A NEW CREATION; THE OLD HAS GONE, THE NEW HAS COME."

SO GO TO YOUR CLOSETS, OPEN THOSE BOXES AND TAKE OUT THOSE UNWORN JACKETS ----- AND CLOAK YOURSELF IN THE LOVE OF CHRIST, AMEN