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HOMILETICS

DECEMBER 25 — CHRISTMAS DAY

THE SAVIOR IS BORN

LUKE 2:1-14

Introduction

Et incarnatus est! The Christmas worshiper confesses: "I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God . . . Being of one substance with the Father, By whom all things were made; Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary And was made man." The mystery of Bethlehem is that God became man and remained God (1 John 4: 2-3). Echoes of the Incarnation permeate our liturgy (Gloria in excelsis, Nunc Dimittis, the Christmas and Epiphany prefaces, and the second Post-Communion prayer). We appropriate the Incarnation through the Holy Communion. The Sacrament is also the confession that Jesus is Mary's Son and God's Son.

Mary's Own Son

The Incarnation underscores Christ's true humanity, an article of faith often neglected in our worship of Him as God. Scripture refers to Him as the Son of Abraham, the Rod of Jesse, the Son of Mary. The theme "Christ as Our Brother" demands reaffirmation. Christmas is an occasion to bring an otherworldly Christ back to earth. He is born in a stable, surrounded by animals and dirt; He becomes a wandering teacher and a victim of the evils in society. Thus His blessed humanity carries with it a number of themes: (a) God's approval of His creation, of matter, and of humanity. (This involves the affirmation of the secular and the material as being good in the sight of God.); (b) the identification of Christ's concerns for humanity with our own responsibilities toward our neighbor (Jesus' incarnation was for the

purpose of serving mankind. Christmas reminds the church of its mission, as Christ's body within the world, to proclaim the Gospel in word and act.); (c) our assurance of the reality of Christ's Person, His death, and His ongoing identification with us in His humanity. (It is in His sheer humanity that Christians take delight on this day.) But Christ remained God. The Father did not choose to work through a devout man. Instead, He let His Word become man. His own Son entered the world as a man so that men could grasp Him. "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see."

God's Own Glory

"The glory of the Lord shone around them" (v.9). The glory of God was reflected in blazing light, to be sure, just as the cloud on Sinai (Ex.24:15-17) testified to His presence. But God's glory was also lying in the manger, and in this sense God reverses the judgments of men. God's glory can still be seen in the foolishness of preaching, the mystery of the sacraments, and the election to grace of a small remnant. God's glory is on a different scale of values from man's glory. From manger to Moriah God's glory shone in Christ, but it was rejected by man because of man's distorted values, warped through sin.

Recognizing God's glory leads man to fear. The shepherds are a type of humanity, which grovels prostrate when God passes by. God's glory includes His judgment; from His indictment Jesus, our Brother, has come to deliver us.

God's glory can also be seen in Christ and in His work. The Collect for Christmas Night points to Christ as "the True Light." Christmas is a feast of Light, the celebration of God's glory, which has dispelled the darkness of man's sin and alienation.

God's Own Song

Man's reaction to this religion is one of song (Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis, Benedictus, the Laudamus Te of the Gloria in Excelsis). God's deliverances have always called forth song (Cantemus Domino, or the Song of Moses and Miriam, the Benedicite, or the Song of the Three Young Men, and many Psalms). But even these songs are initiated by God through the faith created in the hearts of His children. The impulse for song is no less real than it was for Mary, Simeon, Moses and Miriam. God's deliverance has come through Christ's life, death, and resurrection. It still comes today in the forgiveness of sin, the sacraments, His continuing intercession, and His promises. God's song includes more than words and music. The Christian continues to sing His song as he follows the shepherds in adoration and then proclamation. The disciple of Christ responds to the Incarnation by involving himself in the miseries of man's existence, and through such joyous words and work he points man to the true Incarnate One.

Man's Christmas joy lies in recognizing Christ as his true Brother who became like him. He reflects God's glory. In loving response to Christ's glorious work, the Christian sings a new song. This song includes loving service to his fellowmen, who in turn may be led to follow the shepherds to the manger, because they have seen God's glory shining through Christ's disciples.

St. Louis, Mo. KENNETH FISCHER

JANUARY 1—THE CIRCUMCISION AND NAME OF JESUS

MATT. 16:24-26

IF ANY MAN WILL COME AFTER ME

Introduction

Clustered about the Feast of the Incarnation of our Lord are several other celebrations, all of which emphasize the submission

of the individual Christian to the will of God. Christmas itself is a prime example of subjection by Him who humbled Himself. St. Stephen, protomartyr, serves as a witness of the limit of obedience demanded of the believer. St. John the Apostle serves as an example of commitment with less lethal consequences. The Holy Innocents who shed their blood are types of martyrs in deed though not in will. Standing at the end of the Incarnation cycle is our Lord's own act of submission and obedience as enacted in the Circumcision. The festival underscores the seriousness of being a follower of the Father and of Christ. It serves as a healthful corrective to inflated Christmas joy, for the disciple on this day hears the sobering news that Christ came to be obedient. In like manner His followers are encouraged to shoulder their cross and follow Him.

Commitment

On this day our Lord was committed to a task even as He was named Jesus. From the first His life was dedicated to a purpose. The first two Collects for this day stress His subjection to the Law, with the wider implications of His obedience to the Father. His purpose in becoming incarnate is reflected in the name given this day. Both the Introit ("at the name of Jesus") and the Gradual echo the joy of the church at this remarkable example of loving obedience. In short, the name "Jesus" committed Him to the task of submission, which culminated in His death and resurrection.

The text outlines a similar vocation for the followers of Christ. The Epistle (Gal. 3:23-29) connects the circumcision of Christ with the Christian's baptism ("as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ," v. 27). The Christian's name, given at baptism, commits him to a vocation. The outlines of this vocation are given in the text at hand. In Baptism we have entered into a relationship with Christ, a rela-

tionship of personal obedience, submission, assent, and commitment. The Christian's name has been first given (hospital and birth-certificate technicalities notwithstanding) at baptism, within the bosom of the church, and in conjunction with the creedal confession. Christ has said, "Come," and the disciple's response is one of commitment to His will, without regard for all other probabilities. The occasion of our Lord's circumcision and name-giving thus offer us an opportunity to review the parallel circumstance in our own life and its attendant responsibilities. Commitment stems from our baptism. Discipleship flows from its waters. Crossbearing attends confession.

Confession

Confession in its wider sense includes suffering. Today the church commemorates the beginning of our Lord's Passion. His cross was the result of bearing the name Jesus, in obedience to the Father. His cross was not the result of His mistakes, lack of judgment, or tact. It was thrust upon Him by others, who resented His message and person.

Jesus' invitation to His disciples is clear. Confession involves crossbearing. Biblical crossbearing is usually not associated with the manifold vicissitudes of life that come upon all men indiscriminately. The cross is here identified specifically with the burdens that come as a result of living a Christian faith. Shouldering such a cross, the disciple is invited to "follow Me." It is a happy coincidence that this text comes on Jan. 1, for the disciple enters the New Year uncertain of the future. Christ's invitation carries with it the assurance of His support and strength. "Follow Me" offers the pastor an opportunity to elaborate on the vicissitudes possible in the coming year, for people and parish. At the same time he can offer the promises of Christ that the crossbearer will be sustained, because he is a follower, and he will walk where Christ walked. The ultimate

victory is assured, for at the end of the walk lies resurrection, approval, the wedding garment, the Father's kiss.

Modern disciples may be reminded, however, that crossbearing involves suffering "for Christ," because we are His followers. This definition carries with it a challenge. The hearer may be led to examine his life to see whether such crosses actually exist. He may need to be invited once more to take up a Christian cross by a life of witness which may bring about suffering.

Commission

Jesus' task was clear. Not only was it implied in His very name, but it had been predetermined in the centuries during which God was unfolding His redemptive plan. In the verses preceding the text (v. 17) Peter witnessed to Christ's Messianic mission, a mission of obedience that included the circumcision.

The disciple's mission is no less clear. First, our Lord encourages self-denial. The most important denial involves the disciple's will. It means surrendering all attempts at mastering God and Christ. In the context, Christ had sharply rebuked Peter for trying to dictate terms to Him. Thus we repeat the theme of the message, subjection to the will of God. But self-denial carries with it a positive aspect as well. It means complete communion with the will of God, being "on God's side" and saying Yes to Him and No to self. Indeed, this may be one of the more painful aspects of crossbearing. It means praying the Third Petition with understanding.

The surrender of will also carries with it a change in values. ("Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.") A Christian's sense of values may often be out of harmony with that of society, and herein lies another potential cross. The disciple is expected to follow after the Christ who resisted

the temptation of success. Here the pastor can find ample application from his own environment and congregation. The hearer can again be challenged, on this New Year's Day, to evaluate his life in terms of Christian discipleship as the Lord grants another year in His service.

But commitment to Christ involves more than passive acquiescence. The Christian's life is also one of action, of doing. Here the pastor may choose to point to specific congregation and community needs that require Christian action. The action must be responsible to a Lord who will come again to judge. In the context we read, "and then He will repay every man for what he has done." (V. 27)

Conclusion

Looking to our Lord's committed life, the disciple is challenged to take seriously his own baptismal commitment. This commitment carries with it the burden of a cross, the comfort of Christ's support, and the challenge to action. The hearer should be left with the conviction that his discipleship makes clear and specific demands on him.

St. Louis, Mo.

CARL VOLZ

JANUARY 6—EPIPHANY

THY LIGHT HAS COME **JOHN 1:3-5**

1. That which has been made was life in Him.
2. This life was the light of men.
3. The light shines on in the darkness.
4. The darkness does not overcome it.

God's Creative Act

The original condition of the world was darkness. The first creative act of God was sending light. The Word of God was the source of this light and life. Jesus Christ is here identified as the agent in creation who brought life to it. It was He who trans-

formed the unshaped darkness into beautiful order and harmony. This same Light, who created the cosmos, is now associated with the Christian's life, bringing harmony and order into an otherwise chaotic and irrelevant existence. Just as Adam was created and given life-breath, so the New Adam has come to recreate man in God's image. The first phrase of the text, therefore, associates man's new life with God's creative action. A parallel thought in this connection is man's complete dependence on God for his faith life. It is God's gift. Luther speaks of faith as being "enlightened with His gifts." The life of faith continues to rely on the heavenly light. (Rom. 13:12; Eph. 1:18)

Christ Is the Light

The life supplied by this Word is man's light, the light given by God (Is. 9:2). The life and light of the world is God's Logos, the uncreated Word, who dwells with God "in unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16). This Word became flesh in the Person of Christ. Christ is more than mere example or reflection. He Himself is the Light and the Power for faith and godly living. He is also the exclusive means of approach to the Father.

Practically, what does it mean to say, "Christ is the Light of the world"? Just as in the beginning He functioned to bring order from chaos, meaning from irrelevance, and harmony from disorder, so today He promises to effect the same in the world order and in the lives of His followers. It also implies His function as Teacher, bringing the light of divine wisdom to dispel human ignorance. In order to allow Him to teach today, the disciples are compelled to turn to the written account of His person, words, and work. The Scriptures "bear witness to Me." Christ therefore continues to lighten every man through the pages of the Word of God, "a lamp to my feet and

a light to my path." Christ also shines in the witness of Christians. Third, Christ functions to make visible the mysteries of God. He discloses the hidden mind of God, and through His own sacrifice makes known the love of the Father.

The Light Shines

The light cannot be extinguished, though it may be rejected. Its function is to be seen and followed. Here the triple Epiphany emphasis on Christ's manifestations may serve as an example—His baptism, His temple experience at the age of 12, and His first miracle—all of which indicate that He came to "shine."

The practical application of this for the modern Christian lies in the imperative of Is. 60:1-2 ("Arise. Shine."). Christ continues to shine today through His body, the church, and its individual members. The most persistent criticism non-Christians address to Christians is that they do not live like Christians. The famous Mahatma Ghandi is reported to have said, "I might be tempted to become a Christian if I could actually see one." But the text does not imply an improved morality for its own sake. Rather, the thrust is on the theological truth, "Become what you are." "Walk as children of the light."

This day has come to be associated with Christian missions. The Light has come for the world, just as the Light in the beginning created the world. But the pastor may well choose to begin with community and neighborhood missions, for the Gospel light will first begin to shine "all around the neighborhood." The specific suggestions as to method and means will be dictated by local circumstances. At the same time the text offers an opportunity to elaborate on the worldwide mission responsibilities of the church. Indeed, the danger may be that a congregation becomes so parochially oriented that it loses sight of the task of the universal church.

Light and Darkness

The text motif implies tension, a struggle. The original condition of the world was darkness, a condition still shared by man without God (Is. 9). Darkness includes ignorance of God's saving will and the rejection of His love when it is made known. Light was the first gift of creation overcoming the original darkness, and the gift of Christ is light that overcomes darkness. This light has freed man from the darkness of sin. Man is enlightened as to the nature of God's love as manifested in Christ. By this light we also know God's demanding will, and we receive power to walk in His light. As the light of the star led the Magi to Christ, so Christ has led us to the Father and a knowledge of His saving and demanding will.

But the tension will remain. Light and darkness are not only descriptions of Christian and non-Christian, but together they remain characteristics of every Christian. Every believer contains within himself both attributes, light and darkness, which result in the struggles of life, conduct, and conscience. Thus the text is not only a call for Christians to witness to pagans, but it is a warning against the latent paganism within every Christian. The light of faith seeks to dispel the darkness of error, evil, and doubt.

Further, the theme of light reminds us that the world is not our true home. We are small pinpoints of light surrounded by a sea of darkness. The Christian's source of light comes "from above," whither he is tending. For the present, the Christian's function is to "shine," but the time is coming when he will be gathered to the Father's house of light. Thus the Christian, an alien in a foreign land, lives in tension with darkness. Still he carries with him St. John's triumphant observation, "the darkness has not overcome it." Perhaps this was a reference to the attempts of darkness made on the Person of Christ at Calvary, over which

Christ emerged triumphant. It is a promise to the Christian today that, as he is joined to Christ, he can be certain of ultimate victory over darkness. Indeed, that victory is already a present reality, as we receive light and life into ourselves through the Word of God and the sacraments.

St. Louis, Mo.

ROBERT WILSON

THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER
THE EPIPHANY

GEN. 28:10-17

Introduction

"But the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him" (Hab. 2:20).—On the First Sunday After the Epiphany the traditional Gospel presents the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple. The Lord was at that moment indeed "in His holy temple," but His presence was "hidden." Those who heard Him in the temple were "amazed at His understanding and His answers." His mother Mary kept the question, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" in her heart. Apparently this epiphany had not yet completely reached its goal.

The great epiphany of Christ did not occur merely as a flash on the screen of history and then disappear; it was anticipated in the Old Testament and is continued in the church of the New Testament. To find ourselves participating in this history of epiphanies is our privilege today.

The story of God's epiphany to Jacob at Bethel can help us experience:

God's Epiphany

I. *To Whom Does God Grant an Epiphany?*

A. God's epiphany to Jacob at Bethel occurred, according to the sequence of events recorded in Genesis, after Jacob's unworthy deception of Isaac to obtain the blessing. It occurred while Jacob was fleeing a supplanter's wrath. Our sinful nature

would not expect God to confront Jacob with an epiphany of grace at such a time. But our thoughts are not God's thoughts, and so it is that the God of grace does not look upon Jacob's worthiness or unworthiness—rather, He acts out of pure grace to confront him with an epiphany of mercy.

B. Deception was not a sin peculiar to Jacob. Each of us plays the "phony" in his own way. But God is gracious. Though He sees through our phoniness, He does not withhold His epiphany of mercy.

II. *How Does God Grant an Epiphany?*

A. God manifests Himself in word and deed. In His vision Jacob was confronted by God in His Word of promise. Later he experienced the fulfillment of this promise as God confronted him in His deeds of blessing (e. g., Jacob's dealings with Laban). God's Word is an active word, and God's saving activity is bound to His Word.

B. The 20th century after Christ differs in no way from the 20th century before Christ in respect to the mode of God's epiphany. It is still through word and deed (the acted word and the worded act). Christ is the pivotal Word-Deed of God. The epiphany of God to Jacob at Bethel anticipated Christ and the epiphany of God to us in Word and sacraments continues to set Christ present before us. God's Word of promise is constantly becoming God's act of fulfillment. God's action of grace does not become an epiphany of God apart from His Word. But, God be praised, the church has both. May she avail herself of both!

III. *What Is to Follow an Epiphany of God?*

A. Jacob's reaction to God's epiphany was a confession—a confession of faith ("Surely the Lord is in this place.")—of sin ("How awesome is this place.")—of praise ("And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house, and of all that Thou givest me I will give the tenth to Thee").

The epiphany of God calls forth a response of man in this threefold confession.

B. The church can react to God's epiphany in no other way than did Jacob—with the threefold confession of faith, sin, and praise (see the traditional epistle, Romans 12:1-5). However, the church dare never forget that this response is never independent of God's epiphany—it comes only in reaction to God's action. So the church will set its confidence not on its own reaction but on God's action—God's epiphany.

Conclusion

The story of God's epiphany to Jacob at Bethel is not just another story *about* an epiphany of God. It is today again to *become* an epiphany of God to us. May the Holy Spirit make it that. And when it does become an epiphany to us, we cannot merely point to Jacob's reaction to God's epiphany—but we will ourselves react in an epiphany of confession. May the Holy Spirit grant this too.

TRANSFIGURATION 1 SAM. 12:20-25

Introduction

Fear is something we have in common. We fear that the communists will take over the world, that our planet will be invaded by weird creatures from outer space, that a particular political crisis will trigger a global nuclear war, that man's intellectual progress will spell his doom. We are afraid of our world, our life, our people, ourselves, our church, even God.

Transfiguration Sunday speaks pointedly to the problem of fear. On the "holy mountain" Peter, James, and John witnessed the majesty of Jesus (cf. epistle, 2 Pet. 1:16-21) in this climax of the epiphanies. Here Jesus "received honor and glory from God the Father." In the presence of God's majestic glory in Christ, the disciples "fell on their faces and were filled with awe." The Gospel

account (Matt. 17:1-9) then quickly adds: "But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Rise and have no fear!'"

The text also speaks to the problem of fear. Israel feared for her life in the face of the Philistine menace. She abandoned the tribal confederacy for the monarchy in an attempt to deal with the Philistines. Samuel felt that Israel was turning from the Lord and placing her trust in man. He therefore spoke critically of the monarchy and warned Israel to "fear the Lord, and serve him faithfully" within the new system of government.

In the text the Hebrew word for "fear" occurs twice. Likewise the Greek word for "fear" occurs twice in the Gospel for Transfiguration. Both words mean "to be afraid" and "to reverence." Hence the emphasis for this Sunday:

Don't Be Afraid but Fear the Lord

I. *Don't Be Afraid*

A. This is easy to say. We tell our children not to fear things like dogs and death. "It's silly to be afraid." Yet we are filled with many uncanny fears. "Don't be afraid" is good but not very realistic advice. *We are* afraid.

B. Psychologists tell us that our fears often stem from an unwillingness to expose ourselves. We want to hide our real selves from people and especially from God. If the "mask" or the "veil" is removed, disclosing what we really are, our fellowmen will reject us—*God will reject us*. The possibility is frightening.

C. Transfiguration tells of man in the presence of God's glory. Here man stands exposed for what he is—a creature in rebellion against the Creator—"a lost and condemned sinner." Peter's words, "Lord, it is well that we are here," were probably spoken with fear and trembling. Small wonder that the disciples "fell on their faces." Cf. the prophet Isaiah's "woe" (Is. 6:5) after he had "seen the King, the Lord of hosts."

D. Samuel exposes the Israelites in the text. They had "seen the King" in the events of their history. God's majesty had been revealed especially in the Exodus and at the Red Sea (cf. Ex. 15). Now the Israelites faced the frightening possibility of rebelling against their majestic Deliverer. Samuel deliberately creates an anxiety-producing situation lest Israel "be swept away" (rejected) and not serve God through the kingship.

E. The majesty of God confronts us—in the incarnate Word—in Word and sacrament—in our own history. Responding with a sense of unworthiness, we are inclined to turn aside "after vain things which cannot profit or save." Into our situation (creature-sinner) are spoken the impossible words, "Don't be afraid."

II. *Fear the Lord*

A. This is the antedote for "being afraid." Fear of the Lord is not trembling adoration (cf. the "awe" of the disciples at the Transfiguration). It is the kind of reverence a son has for his father. Fear is relationship—warm and meaningful.

B. Fear of the Lord is called into existence by what God is and by what God does. Samuel told Israel that they were evil but that the Lord would "not cast away His people." He asked the Israelites to "consider what great things He has done for you." In the events of their history God had made Himself known and had made them "a peo-

ple for Himself." Only within the context of God's self-revelation as deliverer and redeemer can they be told to "fear the Lord and serve Him faithfully."

C. Transfiguration reminds us that the Lord is active in our history, confronting us with both His majesty and His love. Through the incarnation and suffering of the Son of Man "He has visited and redeemed His people." Through the forgiveness of our sin and guilt (fear) in Baptism, God makes us His own. This is relationship. Fear of the Lord and faithful service to Him come from the Spirit through this relationship. God shows us how to fear Him by giving Himself to us in Jesus Christ. "Don't be afraid" is a possibility when one truly fears the Lord.

Conclusion

To witness the terrible majesty of God is a frightening experience. It exposes us as creature-sinners. It forces us to shrink from God rather than come to Him in the confidence of forgiveness. But in Jesus Christ the "hidden God" becomes the "revealed God." Judgment and deliverance are reconciled in Christ—"by His stripes we are healed." Therefore don't be afraid, but "fear the Lord and serve Him faithfully with all your heart."

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