

Sunday, December 21, 2003

A Sermon Preached by
The Reverend Dr. Thomas K. Tewell



God's Left-Handed Curve Ball

John 1:1-21

Will You Pray With Me? Gracious and loving God, we pray that you would pour through me this day the gift of preaching – that every person who has taken time out of the busy-ness of their life to come would have their attention riveted on this message. If there is anything, O God, in our hearts or minds that would preoccupy us – any hurt or anything we're dealing with, or something we're looking forward to – would You, for these next few moments, please allow us to be free of distraction so that this message might truly transform our lives. To that end may these words, literally, O God, be your Living Word to us. We know they will be for we pray with anticipation in the strong name of Jesus, the risen and the reigning Christ. Amen.

And the word became flesh and dwelt among us. If Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings or Barbara Walters had been alive in the year 1809 and television had been a reality, the evening news cameras would all have been focused on the most important event that was happening in the world: Napoleon Bonaparte and the French army were invading and sweeping across Austria like fire across a Kansas cornfield. The name Napoleon Bonaparte was a synonym for superiority, strength, and power.

There were also a lot of babies born in 1809 – but who was interested in a newborn baby when the bright lights and cameras were all on Napoleon Bonaparte? But – someone should have been noticing the babies born that year. Almost 200 years later, only those in the congregation with a Masters or Ph.D. in World History could name all of the battles that the French fought in Austria in 1809. But every one of us knows the names of those babies: William Gladstone, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Charles Darwin, Edgar Allan Poe, Oliver Wendell Holmes – and in a log cabin in Kentucky a baby was born named Abraham Lincoln.¹ Isn't it interesting how from the perspective of history what seems spectacular at first glance is not all that spectacular and what seems insignificant becomes very significant.

Isn't it interesting how from the perspective of history what seems spectacular at first glance is not all that spectacular, and what seems kind of insignificant becomes very significant.

If there had been news cameras 2000 years ago, they would all have been focused on Caesar Augustus. Everybody would have been watching; he was the emperor, the most important man at that time – all eyes would have been on the Emperor Caesar Augustus. Incidentally, my father's doctor was named Caesar Augustus Garafoli. He always joked to my father, "With a name like Cesar Augustus Garafoli, there are only two jobs I could ever have. I could have been a doctor, or I could have been emperor."

What a name it was! Like Napoleon Bonaparte it was a name that was synonymous with superiority. Notice in Luke's gospel the names that are listed first: Caesar Augustus, Quirinius; and in Matthew's gospel: Herod, the King of the Jews. These are the people of power, the ones you'd expect to get all the press. Two thousand years ago who would have even noticed a peasant couple on their way to Bethlehem? Mary, a teenager, and Joseph in his early 20s. All eyes would have been on Caesar Augustus, the one who was controlling the census for which Mary and Joseph had to journey to Bethlehem to enroll. No eye would have been on that young peasant couple and the baby born in the manger.

God's ways are not our ways. So often when the Advent of the Divine occurs in our lives, it happens in a quiet, unassuming way that we would never, ever imagine. As Dr. McCloud said so beautifully in the Call to Worship this morning, "God could have chosen to make the Divine Advent into the world with lots of lights and in a splashy way, as a military leader on a horse with a sword. Who would ever have thought God would come as a baby." I think God did it in order to come

under the world's radar screen, so we wouldn't even notice.

Do You Believe in Christmas?

Do you believe in Christmas? That's the question I want to ask this morning. Do you believe in the baby born in the manger in Bethlehem? Do you believe that baby was really God made flesh. Do you believe in the Messiah? It is so interesting that we are having our Advent services in a Synagogue, because we have a lot in common with our Jewish sisters and brothers. Rabbi Peter Rubinstein is one of my dearest friends – he and I have had many interesting theological conversations about the Messiah. Rabbi Rubinstein believes in the Messiah and I believe in the Messiah. Jews and Christians both believe in the Messiah. Are you surprised to hear that? The difference is Rabbi Rubinstein and our Jewish sisters and brothers believe the Messiah is coming. We believe the Messiah has come. As Rabbi Rubinstein has explained to us, at their festival times such as Chanukah, they light the menorah, and at Passover time they leave an empty chair – that empty chair is for Elijah. When Elijah comes, the Messiah will be coming soon after. We as Christians believe the Messiah has come.

In Texas, not far from where Suzanne and I and our family used to live, there was a wonderful, growing mega-church. Sometimes there was such a loud and boisterous worship and display of joy that the neighbors complained about the lights and the noise coming from that church. It seemed that this was happening seven days a week, so the neighbors started a petition asking that the city put a curfew time on the noise coming out of that building. The petition was circulated to a Jewish man in the neighborhood. He was asked: "Would you sign this? You don't believe in the Messiah?" The man responded, "Oh yes I do! I believe that the Messiah is coming. But I'm not going to sign your petition." "Why not," he was asked by the bewildered petitioner. "Because," the Jewish man said, "If I believe what those people believe, that the Messiah, the Savior of the world, has come, why I'd be noisier than they are."

That is the question of Advent and the question of Christmas – do you really believe in all of this? Do you believe that the God of the universe became flesh? Be careful how you answer. People down through history have wondered about it. Not everyone has believed it. The Gnostics in the early church didn't believe it. They believed that matter is evil, that spirit is good – God who is spirit cannot touch matter, which is evil. Has anybody read Dan Brown's best seller, *The DaVinci Code*? Behind *The DaVinci Code* is a Gnostic view of life. The Gnostics had a hard time believing in the humanity

and the divinity of Jesus Christ.

So a heresy developed called Docetism from the Greek word *Dokein* meaning to seem. The Docetists believed that God only seemed human. Jesus only seemed divine. But Jesus wasn't really divine, wasn't really human. Scholars have debated this down through church history. The Council of Nicea in 325 AD and the Council of Calcedon in 451 AD debated it. Their conclusion was: "There's a mystery here. God and humanity, became one in Jesus Christ." St. Anselm in the Middle Ages wrote a treatise, *Cur Deus Homo*, why did God become human, and said, "In Jesus Christ, God and humanity came together as one." So when you're trying to discuss and define this, how would you explain it? Matthew, Mark, and Luke did it in Jewish terms. John did it in Greek terms.

John said, "In the beginning was the *logos*." The *logos* was the principle of order. We translate it "word". But a literal translation doesn't quite capture it. In 560 BC, Heraclitus explained that you can't step into the same river twice because the world is in a constant state of flux. If you put your foot in the river and take it out, by the time you put it back, it's a whole new river. Life is constantly changing. What keeps the world in rhythmic order then, according to Heraclitus is the *logos*: the principle of order in a world of chaos. Now can you see why when John said "and the *logos* became flesh," it was so controversial. It is a life-changing doctrine.

I stand before you today in all honesty to tell you that I believe with all my heart that God became flesh in Jesus Christ. I don't fully understand it. It's a mystery of faith, but I believe it with all my heart. To be honest, what I am wrestling with as a Christian is that the more I read about the incarnation and study its implications the more I realize that if the incarnation is true – and I believe it is – then everything about life is different. It changes the way we live our lives. If the incarnation is true then our value system has to change – our priorities, the way we deal with power, the way we define reality. Everything is different if God became flesh in Jesus Christ.

The Power of God's Kingdom

The best way I can explain what's been going on in my own faith is to share with you what Martin Luther, the German theologian said. Martin Luther you will remember wrote "A Mighty Fortress is Our God". He had concerns about the Roman Catholic Church and he wrote them on the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg in 1517. It was Martin Luther who translated the Bible into German. Martin Luther said, "There is right-handed power, power of the world, and there's left-handed power, the power of God's kingdom."

Martin Luther thought that if you are a follower of

Jesus Christ, you are suspicious of right-handed power – you do not invest in it because right-handed power is sinister and seductive. “It seems good,” Luther said, “but God is never a part of right-handed power only. God supercedes right-handed power with left-handed power.” Right-handed power is hierarchical (top down). Left-handed power is egalitarian (everyone is of worth). Right-handed power is might, strength, money, glamour, bright lights – whatever is tallest! Left handed power is love, justice, mercy, forgiveness – the last shall be first! See the difference. Left-handed is the most powerful force in the world, according to Martin Luther.

When we say “yes” to Jesus Christ as Christians and believe in the incarnation of God, it means we’re committing ourselves to be instruments of left-handed power. This incarnation is disturbing me because, if I’m honest with myself, so much of my life is into right-handed power. The reality is that God wants us to follow and serve left-handed power. I love the story of the little girl who came home from Sunday school and her mother asked her, “What did you learn today?” And the little girl said, “Mommy, I learned that God is left-handed.” Her mother was quite surprised, and then the little girl added, “Well, God’s got to be left-handed, he’s got the Lord Jesus Christ sitting on his right-hand.” Let that sink in for just a moment!

Where in your own life are you into right handed power? Here are some numbers to help me illustrate the dilemma we all face. A big number for right-handed power, the power of the world, would be 10,000. The Dow Jones Industrial Average has finally hit 10,000 and we’ve got to keep it above 10,000 because that helps the whole economy. Subtle, sinister, seductive, right-handed power is about the Dow Jones Industrial Average, and that’s our focus.

Left-handed power deals with numbers, too, numbers like 39,000, 33 million, and 700. I think God focuses on the number 39,000. There are 39,000 homeless people in the shelters of this city, and 17,000 of them are children – and I think God worries about that. I think that God is worried that in the United States of America there are 33 million poor people and 11 million are children. And I think God worries that the mean income of half the world’s population is only \$700 a year, \$2.00 a day. I think that bothers God. When you say “yes, I believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior” and “yes, I believe God became flesh” – then you won’t be worrying so much about the Dow Jones Industrial Average. Instead you will be going to serve and reach out to the poor and the world in need. It is disturbing, this saying “yes” to Jesus!

Another illustration was in the newspaper this week – related to the Freedom Tower. The wrappings are taken off and everybody can now see what is going to be

where the World Trade Center was. 1776 feet above the New York skyline will be the Freedom Tower. By some estimates, it will be the tallest building in the world. On the news you heard Governor Pataki saying that this is going to be “a symbol of the power of freedom.” This power of New York, power of America is also a symbol of right-handed power.

I think God, who is into left-handed power, is not asking whether the building is the tallest in the world? God is asking how this building can symbolize that maybe we’ve learned some things in the last two years. How can this building symbolize that we’re not into what’s tallest – but instead how we can form a genuine bond with all the nations of the world to seek and work for peace and reconciliation. And how can we feed those 33 million poor and hungry people and care for all those with AIDS – then maybe this this building could be part of a new world order of which we will want to be a part.

A young man in our church died in the World Trade Center. Last week his father also died. Jan Ammon spoke to his wife, who has now lost all of her family. The father’s death came as a surprise and I asked Jan if the father had been ill. Jan said, “No, he wasn’t ill. I think he just died of a broken heart.” He’s another casualty of the war against terrorism. He’s another casualty of right-handed power. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could build a structure and not worry about whether it is the tallest, but only that it symbolize the comfort we want to give to these dear people who have lost loved ones, and as a model of another way to live.

We see right-handed power in the news every day. Kobe Bryant of the Los Angeles Lakers is accused, well you know what he’s accused of. You read it in the newspapers. Alex Rodriguez of the Texas Rangers will play baseball for the rest of his career for \$197 million, he’s willing to give up \$25 million of those dollars to play for the Boston Red Sox or another winning team. Alex Rodriguez is a one-man losing team, suffering from right-handed power. There are also examples in sports of left handed power, such as basketball players, Tim Duncan and David Robinson of the San Antonio Spurs. David Robinson was one of the greatest players in the NBA and when his team drafted Tim Duncan, the press said to David Robinson, “Aren’t you threatened? He might take your spot.” You see, that’s right-handed thinking. Robinson replied, “Are you kidding, threatened by him? My job is to teach him what I know. My job is to make him a better player. My job is to get him the ball.” Wonders of wonders, Tim Duncan and David Robinson passed the ball to one another and they won the NBA championship. That’s left-handed power.

There’s a man sitting over there in the third row – he’s 7’2” and his name is Dikembe Mutombo. He plays for the New York Knicks. When people come into the

lane of Knicks to shoot a lay-up, he blocks their shots and shakes his finger at them and says, "Not in my house." I have a lot of respect for Dikembe Mutombo because he talks to the NBA players about the poor and those in need. What bothers him about the NBA is that the players worry about money and cars and houses – and that's right handed power. Dikembe Mutombo is taking his money and building a hospital in The Congo. He's doing that because his mother died of a stroke in her own home because there's a war going on there and in the blackout she couldn't get to a hospital and she died. So he is building a new hospital, and 8 million children will get polio vaccines because of Dikembe Mutombo. He tries to get the other NBA players to contribute, but they are only into cars and homes and things. Right handed power. Dikembe shakes his head and says, "When is someone going to care about the people of The Congo? When are people going to care about the poor?" That's left-handed power.

A member of our staff gave us all a wonderful gift. In a letter, which I will cherish, she said, "My husband and I are giving in gratitude to all of you on the staff. Our gift is chicks and ducklings and goslings that will go to the poor of the world. These little animals that will lay eggs that will provide protein and fertilizer for the world and feed a hungry world and we're doing this in the name of the staff." You see, that's left-handed power. Right-handed power: a gift of the highest material value in worldly terms? Left-handed power: a gift that honors the staff and makes a difference for the poor in the world. Do you see the real difference between right-handed and left-handed power?

If God became flesh in a baby and I said "yes" to Jesus Christ, then I've got to follow Him. It means I've got to take this left-handed power seriously because I tell you it is what God is interested in no matter how tall we build the buildings. Some day the name of Caesar Augustus and every other great name is going to be a piece of lint on the pages of prophesy because the baby who was born in a manger is going to be the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and shall reign forever and ever. On that day if you've given your whole life to right-

handed power, you will have have missed life. If you've given your life to Jesus and left-handed power you will truly live.

I just close with a thought. Several months ago one of our deacons, a big, strong deacon, and his girl friend went to a Halloween party. They went as Little Bo Peep and one of her sheep. He was all dressed up in a 35 pound cotton ball outfit. He really looked like a sheep – it was really very cute. She was cuter, but he was okay. In this cotton ball outfit they go into the place where the party was being held – he's talking to his friends having a great time, covered in cotton. Suddenly a burst of wind comes in through the door and a candle falls over and that cotton suit goes up in flames. In his panic he grabbed the suit and tried to get it off – but his arms and legs were badly burned. His friends take him to the hospital and there they got right-handed power equipment to work – multi-million dollar equipment, and his life was saved.

All of this expensive equipment was hooked up and everyone was trying to do all they could for him. But you know what helped him the most? His burns hurt badly and he was in great pain, and his girlfriend, Little Bo Peep, was by his side. She took a little sponge that cost a few dollars, a little tiny sponge, and dipped it in water. Then drip, drip, drip, she touched the cool water to his burned skin. It was like salve. Do you know why? When she did that, the Word became flesh.

So Fifth Avenue Church, if you say "yes" to Jesus Christ you've got a decision to make. Will you spend your life trying to create a taller and bigger right-handed power or will you spend your life serving left-handed power, the One who is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. I hope you choose the left-handed power because if you don't, you'll miss what Christmas is all about. Amen.

1 Charles W. Swindoll, Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life, Zondervan, 1983

Dr. Tewell's sermons are available on CD and cassette tape.

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