

"THE GOD OF PEACE"
December 23, 1990

TEXT: Luke 2:14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

I would like to begin by offering this brief warning to the husbands who are here this morning. Men, today is December 23rd. It is time to begin thinking about that Christmas present for your wife.

Actually, I already have my wife's present. I even have my Christmas Eve Sermon. Well, I have started it at least. But it is still hard to believe that Christmas is only two days away. I see the decorations; I hear the old, familiar music. But something deep inside insists it is just too early for Christmas.

It was not always that way, however. When I was a child, it seemed that Christmas would never come. But the older I get, the faster it seems to get here, and the less prepared I seem to be. Not only that, but once it has gone, I sometimes wonder if it was ever really here. As we are taking down the decorations and pushing the living-room furniture back into place, sometimes I catch myself wondering how Christmas could come and go without my knowing it.

Most of you probably know the Dr. Seuss story, How the Grinch Stole Christmas. If so, you will recall how the mean old Grinch came down from his mountain-top home and stole all the trappings of Christmas. While all the Whos in Whoville were all fast asleep, he sneaked into their houses, took the trees and the presents, and the goodies, and carried them off.

He thought he was putting an end to their Christmas, but, of course, he was wrong. The next morning, even without trees, or presents, or good things to eat, the Whos celebrated Christmas just as merrily as ever. And the Grinch was so impressed that he brought back all the things he had taken and joined the Who's in their celebration.

Now, of course, that was just a story. But I sometimes think that, in real life, there is a very real Grinch, and a much more clever one at that. This real-life "Grinch" leaves the trappings, but takes the spirit of Christmas. And, because we still have the tinsel and the lights, the parties and the presents, we may not even suspect what we have lost. What we have seems so much like the real thing there are only two ways to tell the difference.

The first is that a counterfeit Christmas does not last. The real Christmas lives in our hearts all year around, changing the way we think, and feel, and act. But, too often, that just does not happen. Too often that Christmas feeling is gone before the Poinsettias. Sometimes it wilts even before the tree, and we all know how fast they go. The Christmas spirit --if it is real and not plastic-- ought to stay with us. And if it does not, then it was not really Christmas at all, just a pale imitation with no real power to change our lives.

But there is another, quicker way, to know if Christmas is real or not. For, no matter how much a counterfeit Christmas might look, and sound, and even taste, like the real thing, you can be sure it is not real if it comes all wrapped in a hectic, frantic spirit.

Like love, peace is a very basic part of Christmas. Centuries ago, Isaiah foretold the coming of Christ with these words: ". . . Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6)

And Luke reminds us that, on that first Christmas, a heavenly chorus announced Christ's coming with these words: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men" (Luke 2:14) Perhaps that is why their announcement never came to the innkeeper or to anyone else in the noise and bustle of Bethlehem. In the words of T. S. Eliot:

"Where shall the word be found, where will the word
Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence."

In later years, Jesus spoke often of peace. He said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (John 14:27) And, again, "I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace." (John 16:33) And St Paul admonishes, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called" (Colossians 3:15)

Peace is the indisputable sign of Christ, not just at Christmas, but all year around. And that peace was meant to be ours. It can be ours! It ought to be ours! But it is not ours automatically. The prophet, Jeremiah wrote, "They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." (Jeremiah 6:14) And we do the same thing.

Have you ever put a mattress pad or a blanket into an automatic washer? If so, perhaps you discovered that, during the spin cycle, the load got off balance, and the washer began to make a terrible racket. At first it was not very noticeable but the faster the drum spun, the worse the noise became until, at last, a sensor mercifully turned the machine off.

Well, sometimes life can be like that. It, too, can get out of balance. We may not notice it when things are going well and there is not any stress. But when life closes in on us, then we notice. And, too often, when we sense that something is wrong, we respond by trying to run even faster. And that just makes matters worse. The thing to do is not to become more and more active, but to slow down and get back into balance. As St. Augustine prayed, "Thou has created us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee." When our lives are centered in God, there is peace. When there is not peace, it is because our lives have gotten off center. It is as simple as that.

That does not mean you will never have problems if your life is centered in God. The late Dr. Martin Luther King once wrote, "Peace as the world commonly understands it comes when the summer sky is clear and the sun shines in scintillating beauty, when the pocketbook is full, when the mind and body are free of ache and pain But this is not true peace. The peace of which Paul spoke is a calmness of soul amid the terrors of trouble. Inner tranquility at the center of the hurricane."

A calmness of soul amid the terrors of trouble: that is the "peace which passes all understanding." It can not be described. It can not be explained. It has to be experienced. But life seems to conspire to keep us from that experience. Or rather, we and life conspire together, as we ignore the things that make for peace."

What we need to do is to slow down; to break the frantic habit of rush, rush, rush; to start each day with a time of quiet, refreshing fellowship with God. But we do not want to do that. We think we are too busy. But few of us are as busy, or have made as much of their lives, as Mother Teresa. Yet she has observed, "God rarely is found in the midst of noise and restlessness; instead, He is the friend of silence."

But it is not enough just to start the day with God. We also need to hold that sense of His presence all through the day. To experience for ourselves the promise of Isaiah, "Thou dost keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee" (Isaiah 26:3)

I know that is not easy to do. Even ministers can be tempted to rush from one project to another. After all, here it is not even Christmas, and we are already writing Lenten devotions. Under that kind of pressure it is easy to forget about God, to live as if we have to do everything by ourselves. But, when that happens, we deny ourselves the peace God offers.

We have much to learn from that night in Bethlehem so many years ago. Jesus was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn. But, this time, there may be no stable. Make room for him, and we will find that he is born anew in our hearts. But, if he is not born in us, he may not be born at all.

Then we may find, to our regret, that we are the Grinch that stole Christmas. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men" AMEN.