

THE CHOSEN ONE

MARK 1:4-11

JANUARY 8, 2006 – ORDINATION/INSTALLATION OF OFFICERS THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

I am amazed each year how Christmas Eve works its magic on us. Somehow through all the pre-holiday stress, that evening, in this sanctuary – as in sanctuaries large or small around the globe – the spiritual longing of the world meets the gift of God's grace.

It is a brief window, when we let down our guard, open our hearts, and let the Holy Spirit into our lives; and it seems that all may indeed be well in the world.

But then the New Year begins. More bad news: escalating bombings in Iraq; the tragedy of the West Virginia miners; thirteen days of gray and whatever happened on Christmas Eve seems long ago and perhaps unreal.

We leave behind too quickly the miracle that God came to us in a peasant baby. Back in our January world it's business as usual and Jesus as we've always known him.

But on this day when we ordain and install new elders and deacons and celebrate the baptism of our Lord I'd like to reclaim some of that Christmas miracle.

Bob Meneilly, founding pastor of The Village Presbyterian Church, 8,000 members strong outside of Kansas City argued that every three years, we should forget everything we ever learned about Jesus and meet him all over again.

Familiarity with Jesus doesn't breed contempt, it drains expectation and excitement. We get some *Cliff Notes* version of Jesus, think we've got him pegged and miss what is deep, unsettling and demanding about him.

Barbara Wheeler, long-time friend of this congregation and president of Auburn Theological Seminary in New York met Jesus again not long ago. She was taking a flight to California and used precious upgrade coupons to get a seat in first class so she could work on a speech she was to give at Fuller Seminary.

As take off neared she was pleased to see that no one occupied the seat next to her and started spreading out papers and laptop. But just before the doors closed a woman with a baby, small enough to be carried and big enough to resist being restrained, took the seat. The baby batted Barbara's papers then kicked and screamed when she put her materials away. By this time Wheeler and her first class colleagues glared imploringly and impatiently at the flight attendant.

Finally the child and his mother were banished to an empty seat in coach. "We all went happily back to work," Barbara said, "they no doubt to projects related to mammon, I to writing about God."

Once at Fuller, her meeting began with a reflection on the story of Jesus' birth from the Gospel of Luke. The preacher referred to the carol "Away in a Manger" attributed to Martin Luther. "A great hymn," he said, "but one line is just wrong: 'little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.' That's not so. He cried. He cried for us, all of us, and died for us too."

Barbara Wheeler says in that moment she was cut to the quick. She knew the Holy Spirit arranged for her to be rebuked for her self-importance and intolerance.

What ever it means to forget everything you ever learned about Jesus and meet him all over again means something like that experience Barbara Wheeler had. We don't arrange moments like that but we can be open to them when they happen. We can put ourselves in situations where Jesus is likely to be—like taking a mission trip to Mississippi.

The miracle of God in a peasant baby becomes in Jesus, the man, a bundle of contradictions: sensitive and compassionate but hard as nails; he said the worst things you could say about sin but the most loving things to sinners. St. Paul was right: the Risen Christ is no weak person outside you but a tremendous power within you. The spiritual journey is about not getting too complacent or jaded or comfortable with this incredible power of life.

So reading the Bible, going on mission trips, placing ourselves in the presence of the Living God can be dangerous acts with the high likelihood of propelling us out of our comfort zones, as Wheeler was hers.

The problem is we enter the New Year and reduce the stakes. I was talking with a young man who moved from New York to Buffalo recently. He is here to reshape his life. Working for a large corporation in the rat race depleted him and his family. "Some of our departments," he said "carefully arranged their sales results to exceed last year's goals by only a dollar—even in a bad year—to give the appearance of onward and upward."

I wonder if we don't do that with much of life. Imprison ourselves to old formulas for success and consequently lower our expectations for what our lives can be.

Rev. Meneilly used to also say we have to find a fixed point. And the only fixed point that gives life abundance, purpose, joy, hope and vigor is Jesus. Meneilly encouraged his congregations to anchor their lives in Jesus. Either you build your life around him or what you have is a life of massaged results that looks marginally better than last year.

So why not raise the stakes? Why not say anything can happen for those who love God? Why not take him at his word and ask for transformation, new life, rebirth?

This is the core work of spiritual leaders of congregations—elders and deacons—letting Jesus dismantle our tired formulas for success and unsettle our carefully manicured images of acceptability and demand the best of our lives.

In fact, letting Jesus unsettle you then place some holy demand upon your life is the job of every Christian.

The story from the Gospel of Mark tells us today that in his baptism God placed an unequivocal and holy demand upon Jesus' life.

What I am saying to us this morning is that those who follow him are placed under the same expectations—whether you are a church officer, a Mississippi mission worker, or just here today wondering what direction your life will take in this New Year.

God sets before us opportunities to reclaim the miracle of Christmas—Emmanuel, God with us—every day. Even in the long, dark days of January or the long sunny days of July when our hearts are desperate to meet him again as if for the first time. Amen.