

# **Brenda Seat: Celebrating Christmas: Telling the Great Stories of God's Presence Among Us**

Seekers Church

Sermon for December 28, 2003

Brenda Seat

## **Celebrating Christmas: Telling the Great Stories of God's Presence Among Us**

We are moving this Sunday from Advent into Christmas tide: From waiting for God's presence to be fully revealed among us, to celebrating God's presence here with us.

I didn't grow up in a church that celebrated Advent and it has taken me some time to get used to going through a cycle in the year where we are reminded again that we are waiting. I am much more a "Joy to the World," every Sunday kind of person. And yet the waiting of Advent has its own rhythm that I have found helpful; waiting for God's presence to be manifested among us. This is not to say that God is not among us while we wait, but it is about acknowledging that God's presence is not fully present yet...that there is still much more that needs to be fully revealed.

Our Gospel lesson today is about Jesus at age twelve. Actually, this chapter in Luke is the only place in the Gospels that tell us anything about Jesus as he was growing up. It seems strange to think about Jesus as a teenager

doesn't it? And isn't it interesting what a typical teenage/parent conversation Jesus and his parents have after they have been looking for him after 4 days! Notice that it is Mary, not Joseph who says, "What were you thinking! We have been worried sick about you, and looking for you everywhere!" And Jesus says, "Why were you worried? I was here in the temple the whole time! You know it's my favorite place to be!" This seems like very familiar territory for any parent, and really for anyone who was once a teenager with seemingly overprotective parents!

Luke does go on to say that Jesus went home with his parents and was obedient to them, and although it doesn't say if he got punished for this stunt, I suspect that Jesus probably got grounded for at least a month!

What I find so interesting in this chapter in Luke is that we have glimpse of Jesus before he began his ministry; a period of time where he was learning and asking questions. We don't know exactly what questions Jesus was asking of the priests in the temple while his parents were looking for him, but I bet many of them are the same questions that we ask ourselves: Who is God? Or like the question we were asking ourselves during Advent "What are we waiting for?" What we are told however is that everyone was amazed at his understanding and his answers.

And this is where I often get stuck...Jesus was just so amazing...he was smart, he was kind and gentle and loving, told great stories (even though you weren't always sure what the point was) and he could heal people and was great to have at parties because you would never run out of wine! Most of all, we are told in the very next chapter of Luke that Jesus was God's son, in whom God was well pleased.

As a Christian I am supposed to be following in Jesus' footsteps, but sometimes it feels like Jesus' footsteps aren't ever really touching the ground, that somehow in all of this "amazingness" he is far beyond my reach.

It is very easy for me to distance myself from that kind of Jesus- the Jesus who is supernatural, the Jesus who does miracles, the Jesus who is more godlike than human. Because as long as that is the Jesus I am trying to follow it is very easy to let myself off the hook...I obviously can't be expected to do everything that Jesus did. He was God's son, and I am just me. As long as Jesus is "extra special," the less I am capable of following in his steps or even drawn to try and follow in his steps.

I don't think I am alone in getting stuck. Our creeds, our hymns and often the way we talk about Jesus in ways that deify him are all a part of what makes it hard to cross over that hump and really feel like there is even a remote possibility of ever really being a serious disciple of Jesus.

Let me be clear here... I am not trying to counter 2000 years of Christian theology, the creeds or the doctrine of the trinity...I am just saying that from my own experience it can sometimes be hard to follow in the footsteps of someone who seems more godlike than human.

Earlier this year I read Stephen Patterson's book entitled *The God of Jesus*. Paterson says, "What people experienced in Jesus was a word of love, acceptance, belonging and value; Jesus spoke about God in just these terms. So when people heard his words and believed them to be true, their experience became not just that of a remarkable teacher. **They experienced his words as the Word of God.** This was the beginning of Christian understanding of who God is. It began with the theology of Jesus himself."

This gave me a different way to understand Jesus and his life. What I began to understand was that Jesus was different not because of **who** he was, but rather because of what he had come to know. It was Jesus' understandings about God and how he expressed that understanding that led people to believe that they had experienced through him something of the presence of

God.

This shifted things for me and got me to thinking...How well do I know the God of Jesus? How much have I really internalized about God and made my own? How much of God has become incarnated in me? Who is the God of Brenda? And what is the vision I have about who God is that people experience when they are with me?

These questions have been the focus of much of my thinking this year...and will be for the rest of my life. I have just begun to see glimmers of a vision of who God is that I want to share with others in the way that I live and in the way that I interact with people.

What I am learning is that often my glimmers come in unexpected ways...they are indeed visions, glimpses of the borderlands that are between me and the Holy, a start of a conversation, and not precise directions.

As you know I have been in West Virginia on business over the past several months. A borderland place. It has been rather stressful as most trials are but this one seemed a bit more than most. The trial began and none of the translation issues that we had with the other sides 300 + translations were resolved. Everyday some new issue would arise and we would scramble to put out that fire before the next one erupted. My job is to make sure that the translations are accurate and that the other side is held to the standard of being completely accurate and correct in its translations. The response I got in talking with the other side was that they didn't want to change anything unless it was "substantive" to their case, even if it was unquestionably wrong. Things quickly deteriorated between us after that. I was working 12-15 hour days coming home on weekends when I could.

Midway through this time I was able to leave around 3:00 on a Friday afternoon to come home. I had not been home the week

before so I was anxious to get home. I set the cruise control and drove straight through; going through some bad patches of wind, snow and sleet and fog through the mountains. It was a rather grim and stressful 3 1/2 hours.

When I arrived at home, I walked up to the front door and opened it. There were back packs and coats all over the front hall and spilling on into the living room. There were fancy party clothes lying on the couch and all of a sudden I remembered that Lauren was having all her friends over that night to celebrate one of their birthdays. I could hear them laughing from downstairs...they were watching a movie and laughing and giggling. It was an amazing, life giving sound!

And suddenly something in me shattered. I could feel it just breaking up. All those hard edges that I thought I needed at work, all that toughness, all that "us" and "them" mind set, all of that energy in making sure that nothing was overlooked, all the intensity, all of that focused energy...suddenly it shattered and I could breathe more deeply once again.

I am paying attention to that glimpse of the borderland...I am not sure what it all means, but I know that there is something that I need to learn from that moment. Something about how I need to learn how to carry the sense of God's presence into the work that I do in a new way so that I don't become so hard; so tied to seeing an "us" and a "them," and so that I can still hear the laughter of others.

This Advent our theme was "What are we waiting for?" and various people spoke about what they were waiting for; sharing their hope and their sense of God's presence in the world and in their lives.

In many ways, this year with the war in Iraq, the unrelenting terrorist attacks that have occurred in many places around the world, the many natural disasters that have devastated many countries and here in the US where new laws are dismantling

programs that help the poor and the elderly, it has been easier to see that God's presence is **not** fully revealed yet. In fact this year has been a hard time for many of us to see where God is working at all!

In many ways it seems as if a dark cloud has covered the world...Not too unlike the dark cloud of evil that covered Middle Earth in the Tolkein trilogy The Lord of the Rings. Although, this seems like an unlikely place to find a word that will carry us through Advent into Christmas and beyond. And then again, maybe it's not so unlikely.

Many of you know the story of a small hobbit named Frodo who is given the task of caring the ring of power to the very gates of evil. To throw it into the Mountain of Doom where it can be destroyed, before the evil Sauron who created the ring in the first place can get a hold of it and destroy all that is good in the Middle Earth.

As Frodo carries the ring it begins to become more and more of a burden. And at one point the ring so overpowers Frodo that he tries to kill his stalwart companion Sam. When Frodo comes to his senses, and he removes his sword from Sam's neck, he slides to the ground and says, "I can't do this anymore, Sam." And Sam responds with one of the most powerful monologues in the trilogy.

He says, "I know, it's all wrong. By rights we shouldn't even be here. But we are. It's like in the Great Stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were, and sometime you didn't want to know the end because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end it is only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come and when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I

know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going because they were holding on to something. That there is some good in this world, Mr. Frodo and it's worth fighting for."

Jesus also heard the great stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, he heard the stories of his people, and he must have listened to the stories of the village that he lived in. I am sure that much of his understandings about who God is came from those stories...Stories that later he mined as he tried to describe his vision of who God is in his parables.

As we move from Advent into Christmas tide maybe we too can remind ourselves of the great stories that tell of God's presence among us. Stories that we have told each other before; like Marjory and Peter's clowning story on Christmas Day in Germany or the stories of the young people from Tumelong. Or the [story of Mrs. M.](#), a Christian in Japan who adopted a young man who had killed a woman during a burglary, to spare his family the humiliation of having such a son. She then later apologized on his behalf to the daughter of the woman who was killed and tried to make amends to her.

We also need to hear the stories of Trish and her journey into the peace movement, or Erica and her work with children in Virginia who need extra help and support, or from Susanna who has just graduated from a program which focuses on therapies in helping young children and babies who are ill and in the hospital. And there are so many more...

We each have stories to tell each other about how God is working, in us, and among us, and through us and through others all over the world that we need to hear.

Especially now.

Amen