

A Sermon Delivered by
The Reverend E. F. Michael Morgan, Ph.D.
Saint Peter's Episcopal Church
Glenside, Pennsylvania

Christmas II
January 4, 2009

Good morning, and Merry Christmas. While that may sound strange to the ear since it is January 4th, 2009, and we are well past the time of Christmas lights and music, and more than likely we have removed the trees from their respective places of honor in our homes, having taken down the ornaments and stored them in a special carton or box in the basement or attic; yet even so, it is still appropriate to wish you these timely Christmas greetings because we remain within the 12 day portion of the church calendar called the Christmas Season. During this time our focus is not so much on moving ahead to the future as fast as we can, but instead, looking at the babe in the manger, and reflecting on what that birth means to us even though it occurred over 2000 years ago.

January is a peculiar month in some ways, Like the God Janus who is depicted with two faces, one looking forward and the other looking backward, this is a time of year when we inevitably try to assess what last year was all about, and what we have to look forward to in the coming year 2009. That may be part of the reason we take time to make New Year's resolutions, in the hopes that we will stick to them, and accomplish things in the days ahead that will not only make our lives better, but improve the human condition to some degree as well.

So what are we to make of these strange and unusual times we live in? I am perplexed in many ways at what is happening nationally in both the religious and political communities of America as we begin the year 2009, and I suspect you may be as well. To illustrate this perplexity, I'd like to share a news-wire report that speaks for itself. It has to do with the forthcoming invocation that will be given at President Barak Obama's inauguration.

Dateline: Christmas Day, December 25th, 2008
President-elect Barack Obama caused an uproar this month when he [picked evangelical mega-church pastor Rick Warren](#) to give the invocation

at his Jan. 20 inauguration.

Both men defended the invitation as a way to build bridges even as gay-rights activists and some of Warren's fellow evangelicals condemned the decision.

On Wednesday, as Warren ushered in Christmas Eve at his sprawling Saddleback Church in Orange County, CA, he joked briefly about the inauguration fallout in a sermon devoted mostly to another pressing issue: the importance of faith when plans are upended.

Warren told the 3,100 people who packed the church's cavernous worship center about some plans that had not turned out as anticipated. "President-elect Obama's plans for a noncontroversial inauguration -- right out the door," he said, drawing a round of applause from the congregation.

The prominent minister also delivered a sobering message for Christmas.

"You may be going through a change in plans right now," he said. "You hadn't expected to be laid off or to be financially tight right now. And when that happens, you're asking, 'Why me, why now?'"

"Jesus said you don't understand now what I am doing, but you will understand later. That's the . . . thing you have to learn when God changes your plan. You have to learn to trust him."

Saddleback Church attracted about 21,000 people to six services on Christmas Eve and an estimated 50,000 total attendance since the previous Saturday at its four Southern California campuses.

Warren preached at several of Wednesday's services from a pulpit surrounded by a band, a string ensemble, six Christmas trees and a giant wreath with a sign that declared: "The Christmas Connection." At times, the service had the feel of a concert.

Well fine. That's a very impressive set of Christmas statistics compiled by Saddleback Church. By contrast here at Saint Peter's, we had 67 people attending our Advent Lessons and Carols service the Fourth Sunday of Advent (down because of the ice storm that day). At the 8 o'clock that morning we had only 2 people show up. Then on Christmas Eve we held the Annual Pageant with an array of shepherds, cows, donkeys and angels,

including a live baby Jesus, and with cameras flashing and proud parents and grandparents adoringly watching their progeny perform, we amassed 167 communicants for the Eucharist that followed. Then at the later Christmas Eve service, we entered a beautifully decorated sanctuary, listened to some glorious music by the choir, vocalists, organist and harpist; and then celebrated the mass of Christ – Christmas – at the altar with 119 people who shared the body and blood of our Savior. These were certainly respectable numbers for the significant amount of time and effort put in to the preparations required, yet they paled in comparison, I suppose, to the more exciting Christmas celebrations of the TV evangelists, and the mega-church superstars.

Well so what? St. Peter's has nothing to be ashamed of. We did our religious obligations as an Episcopal Church with dignity, decency and good order; and I would even go so far as to say we did it with integrity. We offered up services of praise and thanksgiving to God, and I trust those offerings were pleasing in God's eyes. Yet there is always the lingering suspicion that others are doing it better. The center of gravity in the Christian faith – particularly at Christmas time – has shifted from the traditional parish church to the larger, splashier productions of religious extravaganzas, most of them occurring during the Advent season and stopping abruptly after December 25th: while those of us in the Episcopal Church are just beginning to celebrate the 12 Days of Christmas. Yet giving those elaborate mega-church events the credit they deserve, we recognize that they communicate powerfully to huge numbers of people through state-of-the-art digital technology the Gospel message of Christ.

This is a tension and strategic debate that will likely go on for some time. It is usually framed as the local community-of-faith embodied by a parish or congregation versus the wider spectacle of religion-for-the-masses, or perhaps better said, the vast proportion of seekers who are hungry for God's presence in their lives. Unfortunately, this is a debate that the Episcopal Church will lose if we look only at the numbers and statistics.

Recent information based on Parochial Reports submitted by parishes across the country, and now released by the national Church show that during the last five years from 2003 to 2008 not one domestic diocese in the Episcopal Church had an increase in average Sunday attendance. Not one! Overall, dioceses lost 12 percent of their average Sunday attendance during that period. In fact eight dioceses lost at least 20 percent of average Sunday

attendance, and Florida during that same time lost virtually 30 percent of its church-goers. These are sobering numbers.

So it is with some envy, and admittedly even some jealousy, that my first impulse is to pull down the mega-church wunderkinds from their lofty pedestals, and strip them of their high-profile invitations to speak at inaugurations, or be interviewed incessantly on the cable TV talk-shows. And yet, for those of us who have the audacity to think we may actually be the faithful remnant, even though we are besieged and dispirited by declining attendance and shrinking participation; we still have something to learn from our successful big-brothers in the mega-church (mind you, there are not too many big-sisters who are in leadership roles). It may be time to stop, hold on, wait a second, and re-think our theology.

As I contemplated the news wire I read earlier about the Christmas message at Saddleback Church, I had to admit quite honestly, that Rick Warren had it right when he said –

"You may be going through a change in plans right now," "You hadn't expected to be laid off or to be financially tight right now. And when that happens, you're asking, 'Why me, why now?'"

"Jesus said you don't understand now what I am doing, but you will understand later. That's the . . . thing you have to learn when God changes your plan. You have to learn to trust him."

Well more power to you Rick Warren for speaking the truth in love. That is the part of the Gospel we both agree upon, and proclaim. The good news is that there are manifold promises of God's blessings in abundance, yet we must learn to trust God first before we can benefit from God's grace.

And that may be a good point on which to end, because it puts the ball squarely back in our court. This Christmas season (and we're still in it for two more days) we have work to do in the world in order to make God's spirit come alive in our hearts. And we have deeds to perform this coming year that will facilitate the arrival of the Kingdom of God whereby Kingdom values will be affirmed and hopefully prevail. All this happens when we commit ourselves to the mission of Christ, when we strive for justice and

peace among all people, and when we resolve to respect the dignity of every human being.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her King.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

CREDITS:

By Duke Helfand and Raja Abdulrahim
December 25, 2008