

HIDDEN IN PLAIN VIEW
ROMANS 16:25-27
DECEMBER 20, 1987

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On Christmas Eve in 1642, a humble farmer's wife in England went into labor and an hour or two after midnight on Christmas morning, gave birth to a boy who possessed one of the greatest minds in modern science. Isaac Newton, whose father could neither read nor write, produced epoch-making discoveries in mathematics, physics, optics, and astronomy. At 23 he had already established the elements of differential calculus. Soon after, he created the reflecting telescope and described the properties of light. At 45 Newton published a treatise on universal gravitation that would alter forever humanity's vision of the cosmos. Remember the drawing of young Newton in knee breeches seated under an old apple tree, his eyes uplifted in ecstasy, with ripened fruit scattered at his feet--a fanciful theory that Newton discovered the law of gravity by an apple's falling on his head. Gravity, and the other monumental discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton, have always been in the universe. But, it took the brilliance of Newton to make them known in a somewhat understandable way. They were hidden in plain view until Newton revealed them.

On another Christmas eve, about 1987 years ago, another humble woman went into labor and gave birth to a son. Jesus, too, presented to the world epoch-making discoveries, new ways of looking at life; new discoveries not in mathematics but in morals, not in physics but in metaphysics, not in things of science but in things of the spirit, not in the law of gravity but in the law of God. They were always in the universe, like gravity, but it took Jesus to make them clear. God has always loved, redeemed, saved, led, guided his people, but Jesus revealed to the world what had, to many and for many years, become hidden. The Epistle lesson this morning, which is the closing words of Paul's letter to the Romans, summarizes (Romans 5:25-26), "According to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages, but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations." The mystery which was secret is now disclosed. What was hidden is now revealed. What was hidden is now in plain view, for those who have eyes to see. The secret's out. Jesus told.

Christmas is the celebration of the Incarnation. God became incarnate in a human being. "The Word was made flesh," wrote John in his gospel. God entered human history. God entered our human existence. Why? In order to save us, to redeem us, to do his will on earth as it is done in heaven. Christmas is the season of hope. God has entered our history. God enters your life. Notice, God came into the world you and I live in, not a fantasy world, not a make-believe world, but this world just as it is. We do not have to spiritualize this world in order to experience God's presence. God entered this world and is about the task of redeeming this world. The Christmas hope is not the denial of this life; God affirms the world in which we live, calls it sinful, and sets about the task of redeeming it.

Monday I attended a meeting at the Conference Headquarters in San Francisco. Bishop Kelly told us she had just come from participating in a march to the City Hall to dramatize before the newly elected city government, the presence of the poor in our midst. The service and march were in memory of the 69 people who have died on the streets of San Francisco in 1987. She said it was a very moving experience as the names of the 69 who died were read aloud. Particularly moving, she said, was the calling of names such as: John Doe #8, John Doe #9, John Doe, #37, so on. Many died with no name, no

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identity. Who could have imagined a few years ago what would be happening on our streets--not just Calcutta, India--but our streets! This is the kind of world in which we live. Christmas tells us not to deny this world, or pretend there are no problems. Christmas tells us it is to this kind of world God came in the flesh.

In the midst of the cruel King Herods who try to kill babies, in the midst of child abuse and kidnapping, in the midst of a world where there is no room in the inn for the Messiah so he must be born in a barn, in the midst of harsh nights, hunger and deprivation, in the midst of the frantic pace of trying to keep ahead, in the midst of this world in which you and I live, in the midst of your life--angels sing, shepherds leave their sheep to embark on a journey of wonder, a star shines and wise men follow its beckoning. In the midst of such a world, a young mother gives birth to a baby: a miracle of bones, muscles and skin, a baby who coos, cries, wets his pants, and sleeps. God entered human existence. Imagine the drama: the creator of the universe entering human existence; the scene, the sets, and the props of the drama were straw, animals, a manger, and a human family.

This Christmas, what's going on in your world, in your life? What are you looking for this Christmas? Rest? Are you tired of the frantic pace? Do you resonate with the preschooler who, just as the cartoon was moving to its climax, got up and turned off the TV. His friend hollered, "Hey, wha'd you do that for?" "Cause I gotta go to the bathroom, and I don't wanna miss nothing." Is life moving by so quickly you would like to turn it off for a while so you can catch your breath?

Or are you at the other extreme, and are you bored this Christmas? Are you hoping this Christmas to regain some sense of excitement and expectancy in your life? Dorothy L. Sayers, the British author of popular detective stories, had this quote in one of her mysteries: "Boredom is the sin which believes in nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for." Are you bored?

Or are you finding life difficult this Christmas, so difficult that you are looking to Christmas as a distraction, a chance to escape from reality into glitter, fantasy, and make-believe? You are not alone. Many in our society today seek to escape from life around them. John Garvey in Commonweal magazine writes, "We (meaning our society) have decided that profit, convenience, and distraction from our real daily lives matter deeply, more deeply than a common life."

What are you looking for this Christmas? Love? The good news this Christmas is that Jesus Christ God enters your world, your life, to love you, redeem you. The good news this Christmas is that you can find the love of Christ in your world, hidden in plain view. The busy Christmas shopping season was in full swing. A little boy was standing in the middle of the aisle of one of the large department stores crying, "I want my mommy!" As people would go by they would say, "There, there, little boy. Your Momma will find you." And a number of them gave him money to help relieve his tears. But he kept sobbing, with tears running down his cheeks. Finally someone from

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the department store came along and said, "I know where your mommy is, son." The little boy looked up, "So do I, just keep quiet." Evidently mommy was hidden in plain view, and the little boy had a profitable thing going!

Christ has entered our world to reveal the things that were hidden. You can find Christ not necessarily where you might expect; certainly not where our society would look. In the most unlikely of places you can find Christ. Herod didn't think of looking in a stable, only the faithful, only those who listened to the angels and watched the stars, looked in the most unlikely of places, a stable in Bethlehem. Are you looking for love, affirmation, acceptance? Try looking in an unusual place, try looking at home! Hidden in plain view. Rather than looking elsewhere for some prince charming or some sweet young thing, look in your own home. Rather than divorce, look at your spouse with fresh eyes. Change some attitudes, change some expectations, change some habits, put a little romance back in the marriage. Young people, what are you looking for? Parents who understand you? Try looking at home. Give the old folks another chance. Sit down with them when everyone is in a good mood, and share your feelings, share your dreams; try talking to your parents as if they were adults. You might be surprised.

This Christmas, are you looking for wisdom, looking for fresh insight into your problems? Hidden in plain view, try your kids. Seriously, in the most unlikely of places, you will be surprised at the wisdom, insight, and perspective of your children, even in regards to your work, to your relationships with people. Ask your kids. They know. They know all about you. Grandparents, have you discovered the wisdom, the love, appreciation and the fun you can have with your grandchildren? As I reflect on my life, I realize I had unique, special relationships with my grandparents that I never had with my parents. And my own boys have special relationships with their grandparents that I as a parent can never have with them. Don't bypass the people God has put in your life. Hidden in plain view in your life is love.

This Christmas, are you looking for hope? Get involved. Hidden in plain view in your life are opportunities to give substance to hope. Most of us want to feel useful, unlike the couple in San Jose who were visited by a social worker. The woman opened the door just a crack, put her foot against it, and said firmly, "You needn't come in here. Me and my husband don't take no interest in nothin." They are not alone. Most charitable institutions are reporting a marked drop in contributions this Christmas. The hope of Christmas is to get involved in life around you. God enters this world in which we live and calls you and me to do his work. The hope of the homeless on the street is expressed in our participation in the Urban Ministries of Palo Alto, Salvation Army, and the Concern for the Poor project in San Jose that provides shelter for families with children. Yes, it's a bleak world, but it is also a happy, hopeful world because people care.

Hidden in plain view, in life around you, is the grace of God. Lewis B. Smedes in "How Can It Be All Right When Everything is Wrong?", wrote,

Grace (meaning the love of God) does not make everything right...Grace is not a ticket to Fantasy Island...Grace is not a potion to charm life to our liking...Grace does not cure all our cancers, transform all our kids into winners, or send us all soaring into the high skies of sex and

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success. Grace is rather an amazing power to look earthy reality full in the face, see its sad and tragic edges, feel its cruel cuts, join in the primeval chorus against its outrageous unfairness, and yet feel in your deepest being that it is good and right for you to be alive on God's good earth. Grace is power, I say, to see life very clearly, admit it is sometimes all wrong, and still know that somehow, in the center of your life, "It's all right." This is one reason we call it amazing grace.

This Christmas, for whatever you are seeking, whatever your problems and concerns, whatever your needs, hidden in plain view is your salvation. Christ is present to love you, redeem you and make you a worthy servant. Christmas is the season of hope, hidden in plain view. Look around you. Reach out, and have a truly Merry Christmas.