CHRISTMAS 1967

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
Christmas Eve
December 24, 1967

"Behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you; you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."(Luke 2:10-12)

One of the college Houses nearby sponsored a Christmas Party last week, and with considerable success. Scores of students ate a special dinner together, the yule log was lighted, and afterwards most of them stayed for hot cider and Christmas Carols. Here were some 150 students, most of whom haven't been seen in Church for years, some of them Jews, standing around singing hymns about the birth of Christ.

I suppose if you wanted to be strict, you could call that kind of thing hypocrisy. But fortunately for the people at the party, and fortunately for you and for me who also find ourselves at such parties from time to time, the whole point of the Christmas story is that God isn't strict. Quite apart from what Church people may or may not think, God wills to share the joy of His life with all the people. So St. Luke depicts the call of the angel as coming to three common shepherds. God isn't partial to pious people when it comes to sharing the joy of his own life.

On the other hand, it's true that those people at the party were receiving more than they knew, at least most of them were. Most of them, it seemed, knew only the genuine joy of that moment, and they weren't too cognizant of how it came to be. Where you and I differ from them, then, is not that as Church-goers God gives us more than he gives to them in the birth of Christ, but that we are more aware of how the joy of Christmas comes to be. Which is good, for it helps the joy to endure beyond the season of Christmas. And that's why we tell the story now.

It's a story which, in broad outline, we all have heard before and know well. It begins with a God who in himself is life. He is the living God, who in himself is full of the joy of life. From eternity to eternity he is a fountain of vitality. He is being, and he takes delight in his being. But he also is more than being. He is giving. He is the One who delights to give of himself.

So the story of this world begins. So God wills to share his being and his life with a vast universe, -- at one point of which and in one place of which he brings into being the creature man. It's quite fitting that one of our mass-circulation magazines should at Christmas time highlight the evolution of mankind from nature. For the story of the birth of Christ is intimately bound up with the process of evolution. For, as the story goes on to say, the eternal God who is being and vitality has willed specifically to share his life with mankind and to do so faithfully, without ceasing.

Somewhere along the line, however, this mankind, in one way or another, has refused and continues to refuse to acknowledge in word and deed that God is its source, that to this day it has its life from God, who creates all things. It's rather as if a child should deny that his parents brought him into this world, -- as if the child should

claim that he gave himself life.

And this gets us men into a rut. The reality of our life is that we come from God and are meant for a life with God. Over against this reality we try to convince ourselves that everything depends on us. And as a result, it does. But, very often, not for the good. We get into the rut of man-worship. Around here, it seems to me, the most prevalent form of that man-worship is the fixation on science and technology. Which enterprises, surely, no one wants to do without. But it's something else when we depend on them as gods. "It's just a matter of time," a prominent professor remarked not too long ago, "before we solve all our problems." Here one is compelled to make the commonplace observation that with every advance in technology there is a corresponding advance in the potential for evil. With bows and arrows you could kill just so many people; with missles you can do a much more efficient job. So, the professor to the contrary notwithstanding, even calm and taciturn people are today wondering whether we are getting ourselves inextricably stuck in the rut which leads to self-destruction.

It's at this point that the story takes an amazing twist. The Father Almighty, who makes heaven and earth, doesn't wash his hands of the whole mess. He doesn't say to mankind, "Well, after all I've given to you, you've so distorted your life that you'll just have to pay the consequences." No, he doesn't say that, although he might have with considerable justice. Instead, he turns to us, -- with all the more of his being and vitality and self-giving. He comes after us, to set things right for us. In Christ he establishes a new place for us to be, with the vision of a new land, a new neighborhood, a new family, a new self. He invites us just to be human for a change and to rejoice in our new humanity.

Here we are in our automobile, stuck in a rut, frantically spinning our wheels, and someone taps on the window, and shows us a group of people down the street who are singing and dancing. And he invites us to sing and dance with them, to forget about the rut.

That means, in other words, that we can sanctify the ordinary. The Christmas Party. The family chatter at the dinner table. The smile of the newsboy when you give him that little extra for Christmas. Even the endless line of sticky sentiments and burly football players on TV. We can just enjoy it all. For God has come into our world to set things right. For this moment we can relax and let Him care for the world, as he has power to do. For this moment we can just be, and in so being, be full of joy. We can enter again into the being of God, into the life of God, into the joy of God. Under the aegis of His Christmas work, we can sanctify the ordinary once again. So an English Carol rightly ties the ordinariness of the birth of Christ and the moment of simple joy. Christ sings:

"In manger laid and wrapped I was
So very poor, this was my chance
Between an ox and a silly poor ass
To call my true love to my dance."

Christmas time is the time when we are called to the dance of Christ, to rejoice in the ordinary. In this little child, the God who is full of joy in his own eternal life, has supremely given of his own life and his own joy, so that we common shepherds might once again have life and joy in this mundane world. So we can sing and dance to our hearts' content. "For behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you; you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."