

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
December 25, 2011  
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: The Living Word of God,  
Isaiah 52:7–10, Hebrews 1:1–4, John 1:1–14

Well here we are on Christmas morning, just as God most likely wants us to be. It is the celebration day of the birth of Jesus Christ; the long promised Messiah of Israel who is God with us, our Lord and Savior. Since we usually celebrate his birth on the night before, it may seem redundant to be doing the same the day after. But, on Christmas Eve we celebrate his coming to us as a baby. Today, we will celebrate his coming to us as the adult Living Word of God. Celebrating Jesus as the adult Living Word of God becomes more complex than celebrating him as a baby; for we really are not sure how or when the adult Jesus might come to us.

We can see the complexity of Jesus coming to us as the adult Living Word of God in today's lessons. Isaiah tells us the promised Messiah will come to humanity as a messenger bringing good news of peace, comfort, salvation and the word that God is in charge of history. Hebrews tell us the Christ or the Messiah has come to us as God's Son, the heir of all things, and creator of all the worlds." He is also "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being who sustains all things by his powerful word." In John, we heard that the Messiah is God's Living Word and was God through whom "All things came into being" and "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." This my friends is one complex, powerful adult Living Word of God whose birthday we celebrate today.

Unfortunately, writes, John, Jesus' own people did not accept him. I think that this happened in part because the Living Word of God came to the people of the world in God's terms rather than our terms. The people expected the Messiah to be born to a King and Queen in a palace. Instead, he was born to two poor people in a manger. The people wanted him to grow to be a great warrior. But the Messiah grew to be a peacemaker. The people wanted vengeance upon their enemies. But the Messiah came with forgiveness. The people wanted a Messiah they could make in their own image and who would do their will. But the Messiah came in the exact likeness of God to do God's will, and love us into wanting to do God's will. It is a will that gives life on earth and everlasting life in heaven. Even when we think we have been doing God's will the Living Word of God comes to us unexpectedly in powerful and personal ways to give us grace to nourish and lead us on to do God's will more completely. You see this wonderful Messiah, the Living Word and gift from God can catch us off guard when he comes to us; and in ways we do not expect him, not just on Christmas day, but on any day.

This was true for the Rev. William Willimon, a famous United Methodist preacher who was serving a church in North Myrtle Beach, N.C. He wrote about his most unusual encounter with man who might have been the adult Living Word of God in his book, On a Wild and Windy Mountain, pgs. 51-55. "Walking across the church lawn to my

office, I could see the traffic racing bumper to bumper up the highway. Nearing the office, I saw a young man approaching me cutting across the churchyard from the highway. He carried a small canvas bag, wore tan slacks, a bright green golf shirt, tennis shoes. It was obvious that he was making his way toward me, to my chagrin.”

“This is all I need, I thought, an already long day finished off with a hitchhiker seeking money, a meal, a motel room. I decided to meet him at the front steps of the church, head him off there, find out what he wanted, give it to him and quickly send him on his way. When you serve a church in a place like North Myrtle Beach, this near the highway, you become accustomed to these hitchhikers, drifters, runaways and vagrants. They always have a sad story and always insist on telling it all even though the story is always the same. You know the punch line from beginning: money, meals or a motel. The families always insist on bringing all their children into the church office with them as illustrations of their plight. The youthful drifters always need money for a bus ticket somewhere. One man took out his eye and placed it upon my desk as incontrovertible proof that he was worthy of aid. A middle-aged woman once cursed me when I refused to do more than feed her after the local Baptist church had provided her with a free night at one of the better motels in North Myrtle Beach. ‘You’ve got your nerve calling yourself a preacher was her parting invective.’”

“I tell you this so that you might understand why here, at the end of a long day of pastoral work, on this balmy August afternoon, with plenty to be done in my office, I did not welcome the appearance of this young man off the highway with his solicitous smile and quickening stride coming to entrap me at my own church on an evening that should have been mine alone. “

“Hello, ‘he called out cheerfully. ‘You’re the pastor, right? ‘That’s your name on the sign out front.’ ‘Yes,’ I said with a tone of studied weariness and aggravation. I did not like his cute familiarity. I prefer humility in those who want things from me. Voluntary self-effacement by the recipient makes charity easier on everybody concerned.”

‘What can I do for you,’ I asked. ‘What can you do? Nothing. This is no more than you’re already doing,’ he replied, still smiling pleasantly. This really annoyed me, his smile, his failure to get right to the point. I wasn’t going to sit still tonight for some long story of woe. I had no time for that. If he hoped to get a five out of me, he had best get on with it.

“Look, what do you want? I’m rather busy now and need to.... ‘I don’t need anything. I just wanted to drop by and say, ‘Hello,’ to tell you how much I appreciate what you do,’ he said. I began looking at him more carefully. His smile. Was it merely artificial or did it betray some psychotic disposition? What if he had seen me alone here and wanted to make trouble? Could he have a weapon? What if he were some sort of kook, a reject for the Campus Crusade Beach Evangelism Team, some disturbed or even dangerous person? That seemed unlikely. Of course in North Myrtle Beach, in midsummer, one could see anything. But nothing about his surface appearance indicated I had reason to fear.”

“Well, that’s good of you, ‘ I said. ‘But who are you? I didn’t get your name.’ ‘Jesus Christ,’ he said. I made no response to this remark, but rather turned away,

looking up toward the highway and then back at him. Strangely enough, I thought, I am not surprised that he should say, 'Jesus Christ.' Why am I not surprised? Is it because in ten years of ministry, nothing anybody says about himself surprises me anymore? Or is there something this young man standing here, on this afternoon, before this church that keeps me from being surprised that he should say, I am Jesus Christ."

"Look are you trying to be funny?" I asked. 'No. Does that strike you as funny?' he asked, seeming amused that I should challenge him. 'I'm very busy,' I said. 'I've had a long day. Get to the point. What do you want?' 'I know you've had a long day,' he said, moving closer while I stepped back a bit toward the church. 'I know. All I wanted to do was stop by and tell you, face to face, how much I appreciate what you're doing here. I know it's not easy.'"

"Well, that's kind of you,' I allowed begrudgingly. 'Yes, this isn't the easiest place to serve. But the church looks good,' (he surveyed the yard as he talked), 'and you have done a good job.' I was standing there, dumbly nodding my head, mouth open, but no longer replying. 'Say do you know the Bible?' he asked. I nodded. 'Good. Are there any questions you have about it? Anything you don't understand?' 'Well, yes I read it. I mean as often as I can. I suppose everybody has questions about it. I suppose that's natural.' '*What am I doing?*' I thought. '*Why am I saying this? Why am I talking to him?*'"

"But do you *enjoy* the Bible,' he asked, moving his face close to mine, squinting his eyes. 'Oh yes, I like it, yes,' I said. 'Thank you,' he replied. 'Look, if you're Jesus, where are you going?' I asked. 'Akron, Ohio,' he responded. 'You've got to be kidding. Why Akron, Ohio,?' I asked. 'Business, you know the usual stuff,' he said. He put his hand on my shoulder. 'I know you're busy and I don't want to keep you. I just wanted to drop by and say thanks.'"

"And don't you want anything? You don't need something?' I asked, talking without expression, staring at his face. 'No. No thanks. Keep up the good work. Don't be discouraged.' Then he turned and walked toward the street, headed up Highway 17, waving to me once more before he was out of sight. I half raised my arm to return his wave. Then I stood there not moving, watching him until he faded into the darkness and the racing lights of the evening traffic. I walked back across the yard, back to the parsonage."

"Guess who I just talked to,' I said to my wife. She stood there with a cup of coffee in her hand while I told her this story just as I am telling it to you. 'I hope you didn't cooperate with him,' she said. 'You didn't encourage him, did you? You mean you just stood there talking to him?' 'So what was I supposed to do?' I asked. 'I've seen stranger people in North Myrtle Beach. Jesus himself said stranger things, let me tell you.' She shook her head and returned to the kitchen. I plopped down in a chair. A few minutes later she returned with a cup of coffee for me. 'If he was Jesus,' she said, 'then why was he going to Akron, Ohio?'"

"I said nothing. I only turned and looked out the window into the early night, out past the now illuminated sign with my name on it in front of Trinity Church with the fiberglass steeple, out to Highway 17 now full of tourist traffic, people rushing home or away from home in darkness." This man, perhaps the Living Word of God, Jesus, had caught him

off guard, and left him wondering if he was ready for the adult Living Word to personally intervene in his life with thanks and grace.

So what about us? Are we ready for the adult Living Word to personally intervene in our lives with words of thanks and grace? Recall again with me what John wrote about the living Word of God as the light that shines in the darkness, the darkness of our world and our own lives. He came in the flesh to do this so that each of us might experience him, believe in him, and be affirmed by him as children of God. Are we willing to allow such a personal experience with the powerful living Word of God in the flesh, the very grace of God, to touch our lives so deeply in God's unusual way?

On this day of all days, take time to "look out your window", so to speak and consider the many grace-filled expected and unexpected opportunities you have in your personal relationship with the adult Living Word of God. Then let us prepare to share it in word and deed with those around us.