

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

**The Reverend Mark S. Merrill**

December 24, 2006

11:00 p.m.

**ENCOUNTER WITH ETERNAL REALITY**

Isaiah 9:6-7; John 3:16-17; Luke 2:1-20

As you sit in this quiet and darkened space at the end of this day, why have you come? What is it about your Christmas that you wanted to be here? What do you think will happen during this time? Whom or what do you expect to encounter in this service?

One of the things I cherish about this time of year is being able to listen on the radio or the internet to some of the holiday concerts from around the country. I make a special effort to listen to the concert from St. Olaf College. This year I was struck by some of the words of the conductor, Dr. Anton Armstrong. And as I was thinking about what I had heard on the radio I happened to notice a video copy of the movie, E.T.

In his book, "The Gospel from Outer Space" Robert Short reminds us of the words of St. Augustine:

O Lord, You have created us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.

Though Mr. Short paraphrases them this way:

Our hearts are formed for Thee, O Lord, and are empty until they find their fulfillment in Thee.

Mr. Short goes on to write:

Originally and at heart we are all like hungry forms that can only be completely and satisfactorily fulfilled by one thing – God. We are freed from our emptiness and restlessness by the only key that can fit and fulfill and free our hearts – Christ himself.

Dr. Armstrong's comments from the concert are most insightful:

What do people need in their lives? What can make this concert meaningful for them? People are, of course, concerned with events in the world. Some parts of the Christian community believe that the activities in the world are an indication of God's wrath. That is not how I see it, it is not how all people of faith see it. God has not abandoned the world, abandoned God's people.

God not only loved the world, God still loves the world. God so loves the world, not just our church, our town, our kind, but the whole world. Christ's birth in Bethlehem isn't just a single event that took place 2000 years ago, but like the ripples of a pebble dropped in a pond, this event still unfolds, still grows, and is still evidence of a divine loving presence.

We can reflect on an ongoing and active love of the Creator. So often this love comes in a form we don't expect. It doesn't come as a mighty force, but comes in the form of a child.

Another pastor wrote:

There was stillness in that cold night. The world slumbered and as the world slumbered, there was a cry, the cry of a baby,

Jesus...Emmanuel...God with us. Jesus was born! It was through holy birth that God brought hope to a despairing world – a world so like our world today, a world filled with fear, pain, violence, and poverty. A gift was given to us.

But how do we respond to that gift of such amazing, overwhelming love?

In his book, Robert Short would have us look at the character, *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, in many ways as a Christ figure who lives out an inclusive love, who demonstrates the quality of God's mercy. He writes that the movie, "speaks to us of a love eternal, universal, and finally victoriously overwhelming all enemies. It's also a fair description of the message of God's love for all humankind as his message has been 'carried' to us by Christ."

When I had seen the copy of the movie, *E.T.*, at home, what came to mind was the scene close to the end of the movie as *E.T.* and the boy he came to, Elliott, had to say good-bye, "E.T. touched Elliott's heart, and made the intricate wave-sign over it with his fingertips.... 'I'll be right here,' he said, fingertip glowing over Elliott's chest."

Hopefully what you encounter in this service is the message that Christmas brings - that God is touching your heart with the gift of God's son, Jesus the Christ, - who says, "I will be with you always, to the end of time," loving you always. And from this encounter you will again want to invite Christ into your heart and you will want to give your heart to Christ.

In an e-mail Pastor Heidi McGinness wrote:

Soon it will be Christmas. Worldwide, Christians will celebrate the Lord's Nativity. It is a tender, nostalgic, vulnerable and hope-filled time of year. Mystically, miraculously, momentarily all of our sorrows and fears are stilled when we are visited by the Christ Child. In that instant it is Christmas in our heart and we become like children once again. When the last carol is sung whether we worship in the desert or in a sanctuary of straw or stone, when we leave worship, that Holy Night, we will bask in the after-glow of having been in the presence of God's total peace, security and love.

As we come to the table we are also reminded of Jesus on the cross – arms outstretched indicating the most extensive embrace possible, an embrace in which we see the expanse of the love of God, an embrace that holds the whole world in it, even you and me. Do not doubt that God so loves the world, loves you, for it that love that we encounter in the manger and at the table.