

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

The Reverend Mark S. Merrill

December 24, 2007

Our Somewhere God

11 p.m. Service

Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1: 18-25

Richard Watts has written:

Have you ever, at some time in your life, been afraid of the dark? Likely not now, but maybe once upon a time? Then you will understand this story.

Once there was a little girl who was afraid of the dark. One night her mother was tucking her in bed, and she started crying. She didn't want her mother to leave; she didn't want to be alone. Her mother tried to quiet her down by saying, 'Don't be afraid. Just remember – God is everywhere.' But that didn't do any good. The little girl kept on crying, and said, 'I don't like God to be everywhere. I want God to be Somewhere.'

He continues:

I am with that little girl. When her mother said, 'God is everywhere,' it didn't help much, because the girl wanted somebody to be closer than everywhere.

She wanted someone she could see and touch and maybe hug – somebody close enough that she wouldn't need to be afraid.

Her cry is very much like the cry of people in Jesus' land before he was born. They had all heard about God. They believed in God. And they knew that God was everywhere. But they wanted God to be somewhere – somewhere close to them. Some of them were sick and needed a healing touch. Some of them were ashamed and needed someone to forgive them. Some of them were crushed down and needed somebody to set them free. They didn't want God to be everywhere; they wanted God to be somewhere, somewhere near to them.

That's why Jesus was born. God also wanted to be somewhere. It is as if God said to Godself, 'I will live close to the people who need me. I will be a neighbor to them, somebody of flesh and blood, who can touch them and talk to them and eat supper with them and challenge them to do what is right and throw arms around them. And then they won't think that I am just everywhere, lost among the stars or at the edge of the sunset. They'll know that I am very near.' Jesus was the way that God decided to be somewhere, instead of only everywhere.

And here's an amazing thing: each one of us can become like Jesus in this way; we can be part of the way God chooses to be somewhere.

There was a really old man who was very sick in the hospital. He was not going to live much longer. He was tossing and turning and very restless. Nothing seemed to help him

or quiet him down. Then a young woman walked into the room. She was his daughter, come from another city to see him. She came up to the bed and took his hand and said, 'It's all right.' And the man became quiet, and restful, and didn't toss and turn anymore. This time it was a child who helped her parent not be afraid of the dark. He also needed a God who was not just everywhere but was somewhere. And she was the way God chose to be somewhere to her father.

Rev. Watts goes on:

I think that God wants every one of us to be a way that God is somewhere to other people. We sometimes say, 'God is love' or 'God is justice.' But often they seem like empty ideas. We know that God is love when we love somebody, or somebody loves us. We know that God is just when we ourselves do what is fair and right, or stick our necks out for other people.

Robert Tabscott's story, "Treasures From the Heart," from the *Presbyterian Survey* magazine shows us this.

When I was growing up, hunting rats at the public dump, firing away at the elusive vermin with a .22, was one of my favorite pastimes. Until one day when, as I was taking aim through a telescopic mount, I thought I saw something different stir amid the sprawling piles of rubble. That's no rat,' I said, raising my head and beckoning to a friend to come take a look.

Moving cautiously toward the spot, I took careful aim, fixing the thing in my sight. Suddenly I froze. It was a woman's face.

Her instincts were like a startled deer, peering intently, then scrambling, leaping, darting among the boxes and crates, until she reached the service road and disappeared. It all happened in an instant. I snapped the safety on the gun, trembling at what I had almost done. It was rumored that there was a shack somewhere in the recesses of the dump, where 'a woman lived with an old man and a kid.' I never shot rats again.

As I came to understand, they were bag people taking what they could from bins and boxes in the alleys, behind the stores, on the streets. It was true, they lived in a cardboard shack sequestered in the mountainous rubble. They gleaned their living from that acrid place.

Every Saturday they drifted into town. The old man walked fast and always up ahead, with a burlap sack slung over his back.

He wore a felt hat pulled down to his brow, a heavy overcoat and what seemed to me an enormous pair of army boots. His face, what you could see of it, was old and gray and always several days unshaved.

The woman kept her pace, a couple of steps behind, in a faded flowered skirt. She wore a ragged blue waistcoat and a red scarf that held her dingy yellow hair in place. A little boy, perhaps 2 or 3, was always at her side – a waif with a pale full-moon face, dark

eyes, and thin expressionless lips. He kept wiping his oozing nose on the hardened sleeve of a filthy coat.

They came and went, living at the edge of a society that would not let them in – in a world that left them alone as long as they kept moving and did their scavenging out of sight.

In the winter of 1954, when I was 16, I had a part-time job at the Great Atlantic and Pacific Grocery Store (A & P for short) as a bagger and a carryout, which meant that I spent most of my time on the streets.

That was the allure of the job for me, to load a grocery cart and set out to see what I could see. In those excursions I came to know the town, its public face, its private grief. It was one of the most important phases of my life, being on the sidewalks of that mountain place, for as I came and went, something deep and essential was born and grew in me.

One Saturday afternoon a few days before Christmas, I had started out of the store with several bags of groceries when I saw a crowd at a street corner where people usually waited for the local bus. There were accusing voices, angry shouts. I moved closer and saw the woman from the dump sitting on the bench, her coat open, holding the child to her naked breast. ‘That kid’s too old to be nursed,’ I heard someone say. ‘Buy the kid a glass of milk.’ ‘... White trash, anyway.’ ‘They ought to throw you in jail, get your kind off the street.’ The woman never said a word, never pulled the child away. But there was great torment in her face.

As the commotion increased, a local cop intervened. After listening to the accusations and seeing for himself, he took the woman gruffly by the arm. ‘You’re under arrest,’ he said, ‘for being a public nuisance and for exposin’ yourself,’ and he ushered her away.

As the crowd dispersed, I looked about for the old man, but he was nowhere to be found.

That evening at dinner I recounted what had happened, how pitiful it all had been, how helpless I felt, and how alone she was. My father was a law enforcement officer for the state. He was strong and quick and smart. People often said he had a heart, and they were glad he was around. After we’d eaten, he looked at me and asked, ‘Want to take a ride? There are some things I need to do.’

He drove directly to the jail; I think I knew he would. There were three cells, as I remember it, cold and damp and smelling of disinfectant, each with an iron cot but no mattress.

As our eyes adjusted to the dim light, we saw her in the folds of the dark, sitting on the floor, holding the child in her arms. She would not look at us.

My father stood motionless for a time as if stricken by the sight. He turned, mumbling something as he went, and soon returned with the jailer’s key. ‘Come on,’ he said,

reaching to help her up. 'I'll take you home.' Outside, she stiffened and looked about. 'It's all right,' my father said, 'no one is here.'

We drove through the empty streets with their colored lights and greenery and red ribbons on the power poles, toward the public dump. We took the service road and headed down the hill. There in the cold, silver light of a December moon was the shack.

He helped the woman and the child out of the car. 'Good night,' he said as she walked away. 'Be careful where you feed the kid.' She never looked back, and disappeared.

It was for me my father's finest hour. In the contradiction of it all, they shared something, the two of them, something peaceful, conciliatory, and deep, something that only comes from the heart. We drove home in silence.

Two days before Christmas as I left the house to go to work, I found a small bag on the doorstep. Inside there was a neatly folded linen handkerchief, a tarnished silver tie clip, a Boy Scout pocketknife and a soiled piece of Christmas art depicting Mary and the Child and Joseph standing by. Inside the inscription read, 'We come to life by love.' Nothing else.

'Treasures from the dump?' I asked as my father examined the contents of the bag. 'Who knows?' he replied. He sighed and bit the corner of his lip. Later, alone, I think he cried.

Our way is endless on the earth. We carry a memory that we knew each other once. But the world forgets itself only to learn that we are what we have found in someone else.

That experience long ago burrowed into my mind, where it grew, strong and persistent, inexorably physical and true. I still have the pocketknife somewhere, and the same card arrives each year with its cryptic message of love and life. Emblems of their determination to survive? Treasures from the dump? Who knows?

We learn from being there. I bite the corner of my lip and cry.

Rev. Watts continues:

We are part of God who is somewhere to other people, when we give hugs, and pay attention, and find ways of saying, 'I like you; you are a very special and important person. I love you.' Because every time we throw our arms around somebody, it is as though God throws God's arms around them too, and becomes not only everywhere but somewhere very close and near. We become part of Christmas – the time when God decided to be somewhere, Immanuel – God With Us!