Sunday, December 26, 1993
AFTER CHRISTMAS, WHAT?
Luke 2:22-40

On the Sunday after Christmas, much like the Sunday after Easter, there's often a certain let-down — not only in worship attendance but also in our spirits. We plan for and anticipate Christmas for so long, and then when it's over, there's an emptiness. Family celebrations come to an end, relatives return to their own homes, and all of us go back to our usual routines. The 100 neediest families are forgotten. Even the children are already tiring of their new toys.

There's something in me that wants the world to remain changed for the better after Christmas. I have this fantasy that wonderful, impossible things will carry on. I like to imagine that people will continue to be generous, fun-loving individuals, and that I will receive additional wonderful gifts that I hadn't expected. The sameness of everyday life will be a thing of the past; the slate will be wiped clean; all the errors, sins, and frustrations of the past and present will be gone forever, never to be seen again.

Yet deep down, I know that all the problems and frustrations we have had to face will still be there. People will continue to make promises and break them. Crime will go on. The pile of papers on my desk will remain.

From God's side, however, Christmas is a continuing event because God is always entering our world and our lives in new and fresh ways — sometimes hidden and at other times more revealed. But from our human side, Christmas comes and goes.

But that's okay, because whether one is a Christian or not, the holiday season surrounding Christmas is a pleasant interlude and, for many of us, a welcome change from life as we usually know it. Religious or not, we all need breaks from our usual routines.

That's why many cultures throughout the world, even before the birth of Jesus, had a holiday break around the end of the calendar year.

Remember, Jesus himself enjoyed parties and festivities. I believe there's a good possibility that if Jesus were with us today in the flesh, he would enjoy and appreciate many of the so-called "secular" aspects of our holiday season as well as the religious observances. After all, he loved receiving gifts and giving them as well.

I wonder why the Christmas spirit of goodwill doesn't last longer. On the other hand, I am not surprised that we return to our normal routines so quickly. Even the first Christmas didn't last very long. The shepherds returned to their job of keeping sheep and soon forgot the vision of that holy night. After a while, it must've seemed as if it were only a dream.

And then not long after, according to Luke's story, there was a change from the angel's singing to ominous words of warning. We are told that when the baby Jesus was taken to Jerusalem to the temple when he was eight days old, a man named Simeon, a devout Jew who had been waiting all his life to see God's Messiah, met Mary and Joseph in the Temple. When he saw the baby Jesus, he knew that here was the Messiah so long promised from God. It was then that Simeon spoke his words of warning and prophecy. Among other things, Simeon said, "This child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is spoken against."

It didn't take long for Simeon's words to become action. According to Matthew's story of Christmas, soon after the Wise Men had brought their gifts and returned home, Mary, Joseph, and the baby had to run for their lives. Joseph had been warned in a dream to leave the country and go to Egypt. Herod the King was determined to have the infant Jesus killed.

There's an old and funny Sunday School story about this trip to Egypt. A little girl brought home her Sunday School drawing to show it to her parents. She had drawn it all by herself. It was a reasonable facsimile of a large commercial airplane. There were several faces looking out the round windows. "Who are these people in the plane?" her mother asked. "That's Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus on their flight to Egypt," she replied seriously. Then her mother asked, "And who is this up front in the window of the plane?" "Mom," she answered, "You ought to know that. That's Pontius Pilot."

The beauty and charm of Christmas ended rather quickly. We should have known from the outset that Herod would not have tolerated this business; he would never allow a usurper to go unchallenged, even though, like many others, he completely misunderstood the reign of Jesus.

Something else happened after that first Christmas that happens to all human beings. Jesus didn't stay in the manger or in Egypt. He didn't remain a sweet little baby wrapped in swaddling cloths. He grew up. He became an adult.

But he did more than become an adult. He took his gospel to the people. He healed the sick, lifted the fallen, forgave the sinners, and rebuked the righteous. He comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable. He challenged our assumptions. He meddled in politics. He criticized some of the church practices. He outraged many of the so-called decent and respectable people of his time. They criticized him for spending so much time with the poor, the sick, and the outcasts of society.

He was nailed to a cross, but a tomb could not contain God's love, and so his spirit is alive and working in the world today.

The story of the days following Jesus' birth brings us back to our present world — a world where there is danger ahead and unknown developments; a world where children and others still die senselessly; a world that believes force and violence can solve our problems.

But in spite of all this, the world is different because of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Now we know that the loving care of God is passionately involved in the everyday life of this planet and that nothing can finally overcome that love. Herod has his ways, no question, but so does God. Herod is dead, but the loving Spirit of God as revealed in Jesus lives on.

A number of years ago, it was reported that someone had painted in large letters on the wall of a university building somewhere, "GOD IS DEAD, signed, Nietzsche." A few days later, another message appeared alongside it: "NIETZSCHE IS DEAD, signed, God."

The Christmas story and what happened after it affirm that our hopes for peace and for God's love to overcome all obstacles will not be prevented by the Herods of this world or by anyone else.

God's love will not be denied by our indifference to the poor and the hopeless or any of the other problems we face in the world. It will not be denied by our slipping into the mid-winter doldrums or anything else following Christmas.

The reign of God, which was revealed with the birth of Jesus, is on its way, and nothing can prevent it. In other words, the power of God's love in the world does not depend on how we feel.

That's the secret we who call ourselves Christians know. Someone once said that the main difference between Christians and non-Christians is that Christians know that God loves them and everyone else and the world. Non-Christians may not know it.

We can, however, play an important role in this reign of God, which is at work everywhere. We can spread kindness. We can be merciful and forgiving. We can love the unloved. We can visit the lonely. We can be giving people. We can work together with others in building a safe and loving community wherever we live. We can continue giving the priceless gifts of a good example, the gift of time, the gift of seeing the best in others, and the gift of fun.

We can bring the gift of joy in little places as well as big. Sir William Osler is among the most highly esteemed physicians in modern medical history. One day, he entered the pediatric ward of a London hospital and noted with delight the children who were playing at one end of the room. Then his gaze was drawn to one small girl who sat off to one side alone on her bed, a doll in her arms. She was clearly oppressed by feelings of loneliness.

A question about her to the head nurse brought the response that she was ostracized by the other children. Her mother was dead, Osler was told; her father had paid but one visit, bringing at that time the doll which she tightly clutched. Apart from that one visit, no one had ever come to see her again. As a result, the other children concluded that she was unimportant and had treated her with disdain.

Sir William was at his best in moments like that, and he immediately walked to the child's bed. "May I sit down, please?" he asked in a voice loud enough to carry to where the other children were at play. "I can't stay long on this visit, but I have wanted to see you badly." Those describing the moment say that the little girl's eyes became electric with joy.

For several minutes, the physician conversed with her, now in quiet, almost secretive tones. He inquired about her doll's health and appeared to be carefully listening to its heart with his stethoscope. And then, as he rose to leave, his voice lifted again so that everyone heard, "You won't forget our secret, will you? And mind you, don't tell anyone." As Osler left the room, he turned to see the once-ignored youngster now the center of attention of every other child in the ward.

The joy of Christmas can be spread in so many little ways to those around us. There's no end to the gifts we can continue to give and the things we can do to support and spread the love of God, which fills the creation. We are created out of that love, and it is greater than Herod's power could ever hope to be. Over and over in the Bible, we are reminded that God's ways are not our ways.

As we leave the Christmas season and enter the new year of 1994, here's a brief description of the meaning of the birth of Jesus that has been a big help to me. It first appeared in print many years ago, and no one knows its author or origin. Carry it with you into the future:

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village not rich in heroic names. He had neither formal learning nor wealth. He worked in a

carpenter's shop until he was 30, and then for about three years became an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never traveled more than 200 miles from where he was born. He led no army. He wrote no music. The historians of his time thought him unworthy of mention. He never did one of those things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but God and himself.

While he was still a young man, the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. His closest followers denied him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth, and that was his coat. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. To some, he was a fanatic; to others, a dreamer of dreams.

Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central figure of the human race and the leader of the column of progress. Is it any wonder that our calendar of years begins with his birth and that we identify world events as being before Christ or after Christ?

I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of people upon this earth as has that one solitary life. Amen.