

**“Little Lilly Randolph, the Baby Jesus in His  
Manger and a Christmas Message for Us All”**

**Text: Luke 2:1-20**

**Rev. Richard M. Cromie  
Bethlehem Presbyterian Church  
Monroe, NC  
Christmas Eve, 2005**

Let me give you the origin of this sermon. We were gathered in the historic Royal Poinciana Chapel in Palm Beach, Florida, where I had spent the last decade or so of my active ministry. I retired just one week later, as the New Year of 2004 came rushing in. It was also the last Christmas Eve service I would conduct with friends and family there, so you might guess that I was feeling more than a trifle sentimental. But God provides for us in times of need.

That night he gave me the marvelous gift of little Lilly Randolph. Lilly had come to the crowded Candlelight Service with her parents, her paternal grandparents, and with her Aunt and Uncle. She was a darling two year old then, pretty as a picture in her bright red dress, blondish hair and a fetching little smile. She and her family were favorites of mine. My eyes glanced over to the right side of the Chapel where the Randolphs always sat, watching her watching me. She seemed interested, even at two. She sang along in the Carol Sing, particularly as I recall when we sang “Away in a Manger”. Her parents had told her at supper that they were taking her to Church so that she could see the

**Baby Jesus. That was nice on Christmas Eve. She knew why she was there.**

**But, how little did they know what would transpire with Lily before they returned back home that night. She was an especially well behaved child, but following the Benediction as I stood at the back door, I noticed some commotion amongst the Randolphs. Curiously, it was Lilly who was at the center of it. She was obviously agitated by something that had happened. I went over. She had that determined look about her, which only the female members of the human species can summon up when they decide to have their own way. Having had a lovely wife for 46 years, three grown daughters, and an eight year old grand-daughter, I had seen that look before.**

**Anyway, I asked if there was something in the service that upset her. No. Was she ill? No. Was there anything I could do? No....Well, maybe. Lilly had a problem. She had been promised that she was going to the Chapel so that she could see the Baby Jesus, and she had not seen him. They were seated far enough away she could not see the Baby doll Jesus asleep on the hay. What to do now.**

**Her family were standing there looking like they were going on to some gathering or another; or maybe it was just that it was past Lilly's bedtime and everyone wants children have to have their rest on Christmas Eve, for Christmas is a long and excitable day. I don't know.**

**Anyway, I knelt down and asked her what was wrong. She sort of stomped her foot and said in tears: "I didn't get to see the Baby Jesus!" (Are you listening?) "I Am Not Going to Leave This Church Until I See The Baby Jesus !"**

**So we walked her down the aisle, up into the Chancel. I knelt down beside her and let her look into the Manger. When she saw the baby, she said "Happy Birthday Jesus"; and she was satisfied. After a photograph, a copy of which I cherish, Lilly skipped on down the aisle. Her parents said they found the real meaning of Christmas that night.**

**I hope you heard her message. I would not want anyone of you to leave this Church tonight unless and until you too have seen and welcomed the Christ child into your life once more. If ever there was an example**

of how “a little child shall lead them”, it took place that night in the Chapel.

By the way, those words come from the prophecy of Isaiah. In the Eleventh Chapter of the Old Testament book which bears his name, the prophet reached the zenith of his search for the Messiah. He wrote of the day when “A branch would grow out of the roots of Jesse.” When that time comes, the grown-up “little child” will rule with justice and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, crowning Him with “knowledge and fear of the Lord.”

When He arrives, all the people and all of nature will be at peace, in harmony. Everything wrong and confusing will become as plain to see as the Natal star in the clear night sky. He will wear “the belt of righteousness around his waist”; and He will speak for the poor people of the earth. In that wonderful day, no little child will be lost; and no couples will fight; and no robbers will break in and steal; and no drunken accidents will snuff a life away; and war will be no more. Even the ferocious fury of the wild animals will cease. “Nature red in tooth

**and claw” will be over and gone: “The wolf shall lie down with the lamb; the cow and the bear shall graze together, and no one will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain”. What a great happy day that will be !**

**Then Isaiah adds in verse 6, the precious words, “And, a little child shall lead them,” How nice; he must have been a grandfather to elevate a little child to such a prominent position. I am not sure why he envisioned a little child in charge; but he did. Perhaps he was thinking of a daughter who needed a little boost of confidence. Perhaps he marveled at the grand innocence and wonder of a child. It could have been that he had a son who liked to be in charge, and he wanted to get his attention. It could have been as simple as that he was continually amazed at how much a little child can know, how everything that will ever be there is already present in a two year old.**

**Or sadly, it could be that he was envisioning the revenant return of some little child who had fallen prey to the vicissitudes of nature around him, illness or accident. Maybe he was likening the eventual coming of the Messiah to the return of a child who was lost. How awful that would be. Life can be unfair. No road is as long as the road home from the**

**funeral of a child. Nothing impinges quite so much on our memories and hopes as the thought of a little one whom life has cheated. Who knows? But, of this we can be sure: he wanted us to know that a little child would be the leader, and we can find Him in the Manger, at Bethlehem.**

**I can understand that. What children can do and be sees beyond the bounds of probability, and most adults do not. Most grown people I know already seem to have given up hope for a brave new tomorrow. They have settled in with the weariness of old Koheleth, “There is nothing new under the sun.” They expect nothing new to happen; and it doesn’t. A certain sameness follows them around.**

**Not so with children. The whole wide open future is theirs for the asking. They live in present tense. They round each corner hoping to find some new and wondrous joy. They go to bed each night expecting some grand new day to greet them when tomorrow comes, their favorite day. They live in the trust that their parents and grandparents will never let them down, far less their heavenly Father. They believe that**

**God watches over them through thick and thin, and protects them, whatever comes marching down the pike.**

**Grown-ups assume there will always be wars and rumors of war; that man's inhumanity to man will continue to circle the globe with increasing regularity. If someone forces them to think about it, grown-ups would confess that they expect a never ending cycle of wolves and leopards and wild bears and bombs and terrorists and reckless drivers winning out over everyone and everything. If you expect nothing to happen, it always will.**

**It has always been that way and will be, until Jesus comes again. Even in the name of the Lord, some resign themselves to calumny and penury and woe. I used to know a first grade teacher in Scotland, who was encouraged by the galloping turmoil of crime and pestilence and warfare and natural disasters. "Encouraged", I said; she said "Yes." She thought it meant that Christ was coming back soon, for which she had been waiting all her life. Oh dear; in subtler ways we all hop on her wagon, time to time**

**But not children, not children ! Isaiah envisioned the day when a little child would take over and turn it all into a parade. With baton in hand, the children will become the Grand Marshals of the festivities, marching around the living room and out into the yard and all around the world. A friend of mine has a daughter who is out in the Sudan this Christmas, tending to the beleaguered children whom everyone else forgot.**

**“Wild beasts take your places. Hey you animals, get in line. Follow me”, just as the precious little shepherds and sheep and kings were told to follow along behind the baby Jesus and his parents in last year’s Christmas Pageant at our daughter’s Church. “Everybody now, listen to your leader !”**

**Spontaneous applause followed the Children’s Nativity Pageant. The lambs shed their white wool toppings; the cows took off their black and white hats with ears; the kings doffed their crowns and colorful robes; the angels with their tilted halos smiled gracefully; everybody took a bow. Some were good at it, some a little shy, even puzzled, gazing up into the lights. One of the lambs this year was so startled when the spot**

**lights came on, he broke character and shouted, "Hey, who turned on those lights?"**

**But when all the groups had taken bows, finally, the Directress shouted above the din of the clapping throng of parents and grandparents and siblings in Fellowship Hall: "Alright now, everybody, let's hear the most applause for the BABY JESUS; and they did. They clapped with all their might for the Christ child asleep on the hay. Those on stage took spontaneous bows or curtsies to the Manger. Hurrah for the baby Jesus. It was deafening ! I think the real angels in heaven paused to listen, and enjoy the cheers.**

**Perhaps you read in the local paper the other day the story of what happened to the Nativity display at a Church on the other side of Charlotte: Someone stole the baby Jesus, lifted him right out of his manger and carried him away. How strange and sad to see a nativity display without the Baby Jesus. Even if it was just a harmless prank, it was not funny.**

**It reminded me of a short story by Morey Callaghan, one of my favorite Canadian authors. He wrote about a scene outside St. Patrick's Church in Toronto early one Christmas morning. The police were already there, talking with the Parish priest about how disgusting it was that someone had stolen their Baby Jesus from his cradle on the lawn, sometime through the night. "What's this world coming to, one policeman asked the Priest? Even the Infant Jesus is no longer safe. Today's young people are going to the dogs."**

**But just about that moment, they spied a little boy coming down the sidewalk with a bright new red wagon trailing behind him. He was loping through the cold, happy as a lark. When he came closer, the good Father noticed that the Church's baby doll Jesus was propped up in his wagon. He shouted at the boy, "What kind of scoundrel are you, that you would steal the Baby Jesus? You'll pay for this!"**

**The lad was amazed. He broke into tears, crestfallen, and scared almost to death. "I-I-I didn't steal the baby Jesus", he blurted out, "I-I-I only took him for a ride. I came by yesterday and asked Jesus to help me get a new wagon for Christmas. I promised Him that if I got my wagon, I**

would come over to St. Patrick's on Christmas morning and give him the first ride. That's what I was doing. I wanted Jesus to have the first ride in my little red wagon."

**The first ride: whatever you have, whoever you are, whatever you get for this or any other Christmas, make sure the first ride goes to the Lord and Savior of us all. Martin Luther once warned that if Jesus Christ is not born in you and me, as he was in a Bethlehem Stable Two Thousand years ago, then it really does not matter much what else you get for Christmas. Keep Jesus Christ first in your life.**

And, that brings us back to little Lilly Randolph. She said that she wanted to see the Baby in His Manger. What she was really saying was: "No Dad, it does not matter that our family has somewhere else to go". "No Mom, I know I have to get my proper rest tonight or Christmas day will seem all the longer". "No Baba and Papa, I know the Chapel aisle is crowded and if you go back down there with me you will have to talk to a hundred people, and we will never get out of here." "No my dear Reverend friend, I know the service is over and it was nice and good, if a little too long for two year olds, but I'm not leaving, not yet "!

**Are you listening? Will you wrap up Lilly's little message as a Christmas present to yourself and take it home with you tonight, and live with and for it on all the nights to come. I hope so. That's what Christmas is all about: a little child to lead us to the Savior, to meet and follow him for all the days and decades yet to be. Lilly got it right. And, I rather think that she will never change her message, nor ever fail to look for the Lord and Savior of us all.**

**I want you to get it right tonight, my friend. I want a little child to lead us all. I do not want anyone of us to leave this place this evening until we have seen the Christ Child with our own eyes; until we have invited Him once more into our hearts and hopes. "Come into my heart, Lord Jesus; Come in today; Come in to stay; Come into my heart Lord Jesus. Be sure you take the time to do it. For now and forever more. Amen**