

# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *The Mystical Hymns of Christmas, Part 6 How Silently, How Silently the Wondrous Gift is Given*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
December 25, 2011

Scripture Reading: I Kings 19:11-13a (*The Inclusive Bible*)

I'm so grateful to see all of you here. If you weren't here last night, we had two really full services. The first was over-brimming with little children, which was wonderful, and then, the second service was full too, and my hope is that as we look into the future as this community grows, our Youth Program will be popping out of the walls and our music program- that sort of thing. So thank you for coming this morning, which is often called "Death Valley Sunday" in my line of work.

Well, we're coming to the end of a series on what developed to have two names, which is typical of St. Andrew's – anything that can split into two different camps [usually] does. At first, it was called "Light from the Darkness", and the idea was how do we discover the sacred in the moments where we wouldn't normally look, so that was one kind of theme, but it was also in the mystical hymns of Christmas, because that's certainly what they do: "Silent Night," "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear." It's dark, it's cold, but that's where we discover the Sacred, so either of those titles are fine, but this is the last one in the series.

When I was a kid, I wanted proof of God so badly, I could taste it. I prayed...I did everything I could do. When I got to college, I fasted, I did any kind of meditation...I wanted to see God. When I heard about Eastern religion – I knew that the religion I had been taught was for children – it was a version of Christianity that had no universality, no mystery to it. It was just a story that I was supposed to believe in so I wouldn't go to Hell, but I thought if Heaven is like church, then maybe Hell would be okay. (*laughter*) *I was a kid!* (I'm so much wiser now) (*more laughter*) But think of it...if they weren't afraid of Hell, who would want to go to Heaven if it was sermons...I'm not taking this personally (*laughter*), but you know the purpose of a sermon, the purpose of a song is to wake up to life – not to have one day feel sacred, or one hour, but the whole week to feel sacred. That's what religion should do for us.

So when I got to college and started reading Eastern religions, my mind just caught on fire. I was understanding things about Christianity that I had never understood before, but I got what they call in Zen...Zen sickness. I wanted to be enlightened, but obviously, I had an unenlightened idea of what that would mean. It's like when you're depressed and you want to be happy, you have a depressed idea of what happiness would be. Or if you're very ignorant and you want to be educated, you have an uninformed idea of what that would look like, so you go off looking for happiness, enlightenment, salvation, but because you don't really know what that is until you've completed the journey, you're in a bit of a pickle on this thing. And I've known people who have spent their entire lives *using methods* to reach awareness. And I'm not today putting those down. Yoga, prayer, study, meditation...all those things are very important to get us to the threshold. But what every teacher who has ever lived,

who has been seen as a world teacher says, at some point you have to get past the threshold and see through your own eyes, hear through your own ears, and take responsibility for your life. *We can practice our whole lives*, and the years go by, the months go by, and we're praying and we're thinking, and we're meditating and we're studying, but we never get there. And we can't get there for this simple reason, and this is the punch line of the whole sermon...I wanted to imbed it deep in the sermon so you wouldn't hear it at the start and leave. (*laughter*) You're busy people, I understand that. But here's the punch line and it's one sentence – not even a sentence, but a phrase: “There is no path to here.” There is no path to awareness. There is no practice that leads to awareness. It can prepare us for awareness. It can get us primed and ready, but at some point we have to open our eyes, open our ears, and stop looking for a teacher, stop thinking a book will give it to us, and live. *There has to be that moment when our life becomes ours*, and we live that live, even with its incompleteness, and even with its uncertainty, but it's ours, and it's this marvelous, wonderful gift.

The story we're looking at today – we're going to look at several stories very quickly – but the primary story comes from the Jewish scripture, and it is the story of Elijah. Elijah was this incredible prophet, but it was back in the days when they kind of confused prophecy and magic. It was already kind of corrupt. Originally, what a prophet did was have discernment and [they would] say if you keep going this way, this is what's going to happen. Their focus was social justice, charity, mercy. But, over time, any religious figure becomes magical to people. So he had become magical and they're telling this story – it's a teaching story. If you read this story in the East, you would recognize it's an enlightenment story in a second, in a heart beat. If Buddha had said this, you'd say, “Boy, that's a smart story.” But when we see it in our own scripture, we think we're supposed to take it literally, and we think, “Gosh, what idiots these people are. Well, they're not. These are *crafted poems* to help you open up your own eyes. Listen to the story and see if that doesn't feel true to you.

Elijah has just destroyed all of his enemies with a fire show from heaven. He has all these religious enemies, and he has absolutely destroyed them by calling down fire from heaven. Right after that he has a nervous breakdown. The story is teaching you that that thing that Elijah thought he wanted didn't do it for him. That when you get that degree, when you finish that book, when you get that black belt, when you get whatever level of enlightenment you think, it's still going to feel incomplete if you believe your life is a journey to get somewhere else. Now, we can be taught that metaphor of the journey, a path...it's always going to be around the bend, and we never arrive at a happy place.

So, Elijah runs away. He's hiding on the mountain and all of a sudden, this storm happens, and it's a wind storm. Sometimes it's translated “a whirlwind.” Now, to me, I love that version of it, because when I was about 2 ½, there was a tornado in Dallas, the Tornado of '53. I have a memory of being carried on my mother's shoulder, my head bobbing like children's heads do – little neck, big head, and I'm sitting there like a bobblehead, looking over her shoulder at this humongous tornado, and it burned in my little mind. I still dream about tornados – not fearful dreams, but just fascinated dreams. I was too young to be afraid, but still that image of a tornado is very powerful for me. But when Elijah sees that incredible storm, the phrase says, “but God wasn't in the storm.”

Now in this whole story, God's going to keep asking Elijah, “Why are you here? Why are you here?” Great Zen technique, isn't it? On a map they have a place that says, “You are here.” It's called the “Ideal locator.” I saw that in a trivial book one time. Ideal locator – if you don't know where you are on a map, the map is useless. In the same way, if you don't know who you are in any religion or any philosophy, it is useless to you. It will put you on a journey that will not get anywhere. Ultimately, every teacher has to lead you to yourself, or they have betrayed you – where you know it's your life, and you're allowed to open up your own eyes – you're not being told what to think, or to believe, you're being taught how to see. That's the gift a true teacher gives us. So, he [Elijah] looks and he

sees this incredible storm, but he knows God isn't in that. And then there's this incredible earthquake and the foundations shake, and that's not enough. Did anybody see the funeral of Kim Jong Il this week? It was unbelievable. There was this plaza full of people, full of North Koreans, all of them mourning and wailing, everybody's just crying to the top of their lungs and falling over. The one thing you don't see – or I didn't see from start to finish – was a tear. It was a show. (If somebody's pointing a gun to your head, yeah, you come to the funeral and you try to act like you're crying, but if you're really crying, there's going to be a tear or two in it). So, Elijah has had this incredible storm, this earthquake happening, but he realizes God isn't in that. This isn't where I'm trying to get. Then there's a fire. God keeps asking, "Why are you here? Why are you here?"

Suddenly he hears what is sometimes translated, "a small, still voice." I like the literal Hebrew better. If you just looked at it literally in Hebrew, it would say, "a silent voice." It's easier to get the experience here...where you're in Nature, you're in life and it's speaking to you, but not really. There's a throbbing intelligence there, but you're not asking the trees to talk to you anymore, you're not wanting the animals to dance on their hind legs for you. Reality is fine – just the way it is – but you have a sense of the mystery, and the divinity underneath it, undergirding it, speaking to you through everything that happens. That is, I think, the gift of this story. But it comes with a warning label...that it doesn't matter what you know or what you do if you're a stranger to your own heart, if you don't know where you are on the map, you're lost by definition.

This idea that there is no road to awareness occurs in every religion that I know. Judaism also has that beautiful line that says, "Be still and know that I am God" and one way to translate that would be "shut up!" Stop! Like a big red stop sign. Stop what you are doing and just become aware, and you will know what you need to know. Another idea from Buddhism is "suchness." that when you look at a flower and you have a purpose for that flower, you're not seeing the flower. The only time you are seeing a flower or an animal is when you're not wanting to do something with it. It's just what it is...the *suchness*.

In our Christmas carol, an infant is there, and I think - don't bet any money on this, but I think the word "infant" means "cannot speak" in ancient French (or something like that). In the Christmas carol that says, "The Silent Word is pleading" again, you have that sense. You're not asking God to step out of reality and show you anything, but you are feeling that undergirding what you experience is this mystery, this intelligence, and it's everything, really, that you're looking for. The way Lao Tzu said it, from Taoism - and I'm just giving sort of a really quick scanning of religions that say the same thing - but this is one of my favorite verses in Taoism – *of just feeling in place*:

*Without going out of your door, you may know the entire world.  
Without looking out your window, you may see the way of Heaven.  
The farther you travel, the less you know.  
So the wise know without traveling,  
see without staring,  
act without obsessing over the consequences.*

I kind of like that!

Every symbol of every religion looks like it's positive information, looks like it's telling you what to do, but really, what it's trying to do is to stop you from being *other* than what you are. They are skillful devices to get you to stop seeing what other people have told you to see long enough for your own vision to kick in...to stop hearing those memorized songs – that are beautiful, *that are beautiful* - there's no question. Christmas represents the best and the worst. When we try to recapture any

feeling, what we've lost is the awareness, and that's where the happiness comes from – not the feeling, not the warmth, not any of those things.

So, the way Taoism says it is, it's not doing, it's *trusting life* to carry you. You *are* going to do things, you *are* going to take responsibility, but you don't expect to help your hair to grow. There's something at work in you, there's something at work in life and you don't worry about trying to help your stomach digest your food. Have you ever tried to go to sleep? That *is* insomnia.

Alan Watts used to say, "there's no point to life." After Darwin...the lessons, there's no point. You don't stand outside of life and say "this is the meaning of life." But there is the meaning within life. He said "there's no point in a song." If there was a point in a song, the best musician would be the one who played the fastest, he says – because you'd be getting to the point. No point in the dance, no point in the song, but who wants one? The reason there's no point in life is that *it is your life*. It's a gift you have been given to sing your own song, to think with your own mind. *What else would a loving God do than give you that kind of freedom?* But you need to know that the wonderful methods that religion gives you to get there, at some point, have to stop. And you have to pass the threshold with trust, with deep trust that what you're looking for is written inside you, and will not betray you.

"There is no way to here." You may learn that from a story of a prophet on a mountaintop, you may learn it from a Christmas story of an infant who can't say anything, but stirs something in our hearts to teach us who we are, or in our hymn today, that we will sing in just a bit. You may say it like this:

*How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.  
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings sent from heaven.  
No ear may hear the coming, but in this world of sin  
When souls are truly humble, the dear Christ enters in.*

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*



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