

"DO SOMETHING OUTLANDISH"

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
December 18, 1983

Isaiah 40:9

Luke 2:8-14

Christmas is outlandish! Preposterous! Ebenezer Scrooge called Christmas, "Bah, humbug!" And to us practical, realistic, business-like, middle-of-the-roads, Christmas, when you analyze it, is outlandish. Yes, it is outlandish, and to really experience Christmas, I challenge you to do something outlandish!

Look at the shepherds. After the angels appeared to them, they went with haste to Bethlehem. They dropped everything. They left the sheep untended. Perhaps they left a skeleton crew of shepherds to watch the sheep; but could a skeleton crew have protected the sheep if a pack of wild animals had attacked? What if the sheep began falling into a crevice? Who would tend the injured and who would mind the rest? Were the shepherds wealthy enough to risk the loss of some sheep? Outlandish. Running off to Bethlehem because of some songs in the sky. Preposterous. But, look at what the shepherds experienced because they did something outlandish. They found Mary, Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. The experience was so moving, the shepherds returned home glorifying and praising God.

Look at the wise men. Is there anything more outlandish than to leave your home, walk, travel for miles through unfriendly country (remember the robbers on Jericho Road who ambushed travelers), following a star? Imagine the scene in some inn where the wise men have stopped to spend the night. "Oh, hello, where are you guys from?" "Persia, a land far to the east." "Oh, yes, I know Persia. That's where we get our rugs. Where are you headed?" "Well, we don't know." "You don't know? You are wandering through Roman occupied Judah and you don't know where you are going?" "Well, it isn't exactly that we don't know where we are going. You see, there's this particularly bright star..." "Yes, there is this star..." "Well, there is this star and we are following it." "You are following a star? ...Are you putting me on? Are you guys for real?" Outlandish, isn't it? Preposterous. But, look at what the wise men experienced because they did something outlandish. They found the child with Mary his mother. They bowed themselves, worshipped, gave their gifts, and rejoiced exceedingly.

Look at Amahl, the opera so professionally presented by our people the past two evenings. Amahl gave his crutch to the wise men to take with them to give to the baby. He had made the crutch himself; it not only was a prized possession, it was a necessity, for Amahl was crippled. He offered his crutch because "the baby might need it." Outlandish! For Amahl was crippled. Without a crutch, how would he hobble around? Would he have then to crawl? But, look at what Amahl experienced because he risked and did something outlandish. He was healed. He walked.

Look at the Christmas event itself, God's act. God's act in Jesus Christ is outlandish! What a way to save a world. It was and is God's intention to save the world, to redeem it, to bring us back to what we were created to be. For centuries, the Jews hoped for a messiah, a Saviour, to restore their nation, drive out the Romans, and make Judah a nation again. They anticipated a conquering hero. They wanted a messiah to come on a white horse, followed by armies, with trumpets blowing, and conquer the enemies. Many in the Bible believed in that kind of Messiah. You can read the passages of violence and destruction. But, God did not act in that manner. What God did was outlandish.

God called a young woman, probably 14 years old, to bear a child, sent them to Bethlehem where the child was born in poverty conditions. Outlandish! God sent

a child. God, you don't understand. This is a world with missiles poised; this is a world where 40 some wars are being fought currently; this is a world where the forces of evil are extremely powerful and wealthy; and you send a baby. A baby to fight the Devil? A baby to subdue evil? A baby to save the world?

On Christmas Eve, the choir will be singing Benjamin Britten's A Ceremony of Carols. One of the carols is "This Little Babe," which expresses beautifully the outlandish act of God. Remember, this is in old English.

This little Babe so few days old,
Is come to rifle Satan's fold;
All hell doth at his presence quake;
Though he himself for cold do shake;
For in this weak unarmed wise
The gates of hell he will surprise.
With tears he fights and wins the field,
His naked breast stands for a shield,
His battering shot are babish cries,
His arrows look of weeping eyes,
His martial ensigns Cold and Need,
and feeble Flesh his warrior's steed.
His campe is pitched in a stall,
His bulwark but a broken wall
The crib his trench, haystalks his stakes;

Outlandish! God chose weapons that are outlandish, ridiculous in the opinion of the world, and probably our eyes as well. But, the world is not doing too well with its methods. We've had enough of the world's way. Let's try God's way.

Let's do something outlandish this Christmas. Take a risk, take a chance, do something outlandish and experience Christmas in a new refreshing, stimulating, exciting way. By outlandish, I don't mean standing in the long lines, or fighting fellow customers for a cabbage patch doll! That's the world's idea of outlandish.

But, do something outlandish for God, for the Christ-child. Here are four suggestions:

First, do something outlandish for someone else. Respond to a situation by doing something outlandish. An American columnist described a Christmas Eve that he and his family spent in Paris. They were tired from the trip. It was cold and raining when they went out to eat. They found a drab, little restaurant, shoddily decorated for the holiday. Only five tables were occupied. There were two German couples, two French families, and an American sailor by himself. In the corner a piano player listlessly played Christmas music. The evening was dismal. Everyone ate in stony silence. A father at a nearby table slapped his boy. Then, with an unpleasant blast of cold air, through the front door came an old woman selling flowers. She wore a dripping, battered overcoat, and shuffled in on wet, rundown shoes. She went from one table to the other. "Flowers, monsieur? Only one franc." No one bought any. Warily she sat down at a table and ordered a bowl of soup. She said to the piano player, "I haven't sold a flower all afternoon. Can you imagine, soup on Christmas Eve." The piano player pointed to his empty tipping plate. Then, the American sailor finished his meal and a letter he was writing. Putting on his coat, he walked over to the flower woman, picked up two corsages, and asked, "How much are they?" "Two francs," she replied. He handed her a twenty-franc note, kissed her on the cheek, said, "Merry Christmas. Keep the change; it is my present to you." Then he pressed one corsage flat, put it in the letter he was writing, and brought the other one to the table at which the columnist and his family were sitting. "May I have permission to present these flowers to your beautiful daughter?"

In one quick motion he gave the columnist's wife the corsage, wished them a Merry Christmas, and left. The columnist wrote, "Everyone had stopped eating. Everyone had been watching the sailor. Everyone was silent. A few seconds later Christmas exploded throughout the restaurant like a bomb."

Do something outlandish for someone, and Christmas may explode like a bomb. Invite someone to Christmas Day dinner after worship next Sunday who would otherwise be alone.

Secondly, do something outlandish by coming to church both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and participate in the glorious services. Then, celebrate Christmas for 12 days, as the ancients did. Do something celebrative for you, your family, the neighbors, every day for 12 days. Have coffee parties, invite the neighbors. Take cookies to shut-ins. Call us in the office tomorrow and we'll give you names of the shut-ins of our church. Kiss your wife every day for 12 days! Take the kids to a movie. Invite your son out to lunch. Every day do one thing and culminate the celebration by coming to the Epiphany International Dinner which we are having here on January 6.

Third, another suggestion. Do something outlandish; make an extravagant offering. Dig down, do something crazy. Make a sizeable offering towards your church's \$60,000 goal in December. We will all feel so warm if we can end the year in the black and do something sizeable towards our apportionments. Our apportionments educate persons for the ministry, support mission schools and hospitals, build new churches for ethnic minority persons, etc. Give to the Food Closet. Look at the Joy of Giving items. Give to one month's rent for the latest Vietnamese refugee. Do something extravagant, that you think you can't afford; so extravagant, your wife says, "Have you lost your marbles?" Or your husband says, "Not again!" Let the sheep take care of themselves, go to the stable and rejoice. Give your crutch, give your security, and experience the joy of healing.

Fourth, I have one further suggestion. Of course, you can make your own list, and probably have been thinking of what would be outlandish for you, but I have one more. I'm concerned about the relationships that are strained within our church family; the people who don't talk to each other anymore; the hurt. One told me when I visited with her, "I just can't go to church and look at so and so." Do something outlandish. Pray for the one who has hurt you or hurt the church in your opinion. If you are bitter, bitterness only hurts you and the relationship. It eats away inside you. You lose zest, cheer. Lines deepen on your face. Like the fellow said, "I'm so righteous, I make myself sick!" Being so "right" does that to people. Bitterness does that to people. Get the bitterness out. Get the anger out. Lay it on the table, out in the open. Take a step to that person. Do something outlandish. Approach the person. Say "I'm sorry". Say, "What can I do to rebuild our relationship?" Risk. Take a chance. The shepherds risked. The wise men risked. God risked. God risked his church with people like you and me.

This Christmas, do something outlandish!

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