



## *Round Hill Community Church*

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### **Sermon: February 22, 2009**

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#### **A Number of New Beginnings, Lynne Kramer**

First let me say what a privilege it is to be preaching here in celebration of Round Hill's 25th anniversary. In 1993, after I graduated from Yale Divinity School, I was fortunate enough to receive a call to this church as its first Assistant Minister and first female minister. Prior to entering the ministry, I had spent 20 years in the media business (a world where Sunday morning is more synonymous with brunch than church), so this was a new beginning for me, filled with some moments of pure joy and many more moments of outright hilarity.

My primary responsibility was Christian Education. I quickly realized that I was working with an unusually bright and entertaining group of children, and that ministry to them could be instructive and fun for me as well as for them. Pretty soon, there were children everywhere you looked – in the flowerbeds, up the trees, and yes, in the parlor.

Easter was always raucous, when church school attendance swelled to overflowing. The cuff of my preaching robe still bears the claw marks from the live rabbit I used as a prop in an Easter children's message. One year, gazing upon the navy blue sea of little gold-buttoned blazers and unlaced topsiders, I spied a child sporting a dinosaur t-shirt that looked like it had been snatched out of the missionary barrel. Naturally, it was my son, the very picture of a rowdy preacher's kid and a casualty of his mom's Sunday morning schedule.

But my real initiation into the life of Round Hill began with the Christmas Pageant, the most elaborate production this side of Broadway. On the day of the rehearsal, Linda Seaver, the pageant creator, director and guiding light, was snow-bound, and I found myself trapped with 75 children and a script I had never read. But within minutes, the "angels" seized control of the situation and processed themselves exactly where they belonged, with dozens of "shepherds" following their lead. I watched in amazement as they directed themselves through the entire script.

On the day of the Pageant, the baby Jesus became fussy, so an enterprising eleven-year-old in the guise of Mary reached in her pocket and pulled out a bagel for the baby to munch on. Another time, two Wise Men processed down the aisle to the tune of "We Three Kings" while the third struggled with his pants zipper in the men's room. He succeeded in getting the zipper back on track and, with fierce determination, came racing up to the stable just in time to offer his gift of myrrh. Or the time one of the Wise Men offered the Baby Jesus his gift of Frankenstein.

Unlike business or academia, religious education for children is refreshingly straightforward and no-nonsense. During my tenure here, I learned that the fastest way to convince adolescents to be confirmed is to tell them that they shouldn't be. I heard the best definition of grace from one of the Sunday school teachers who explained to her sixth-grade students, "Grace is when you ask to borrow someone's dress, and they throw in the matching earrings." I learned how to pray honestly and simply as one little girl did, saying, "O God, I love you more than anyone I don't know." And I learned that the easiest way to find a church is, in the words of a six-year-old, to "look for the 'plus sign' on the top."

Through it all, I was blessed – as we all were -- to have the wisdom and guidance of Ralph Alhberg, the personification of integrity, grace, and kindness, who kept me from taking myself too seriously. Eventually, though, I began to suspect that I was a little old for youth work. This became embarrassingly clear when, at an overnight retreat at St. John the Divine, I noticed a group of teenage girls staring at me while I brushed my teeth in the communal bathroom. My mouth became inflamed and I realized that, without my glasses, I had brushed my teeth with Ben Gay.

Eight years later, the unthinkable happened. It was a catastrophe for which there was no name...no term for what had happened until months later, when it became known by its date: 9/11. It was the event that changed the way we think about ourselves, about our neighbors, and about our world. And the site of this event left us so groundless -- so insecure, lost and fearful -- that it eventually became known as Ground Zero. On the following Sunday, September 16th, having retired from ministry, I found myself drawn to what was a sanctuary in the truest sense of the word – this sanctuary -- along with hundreds of other stunned and shaken parishioners.

On that day, as I looked at the faces of everyone, I wondered, “Why are we all here?” But I knew why we were here. We all knew. We had come here for the same reason Christians have gathered together since the Resurrection: to hear God’s scriptural words of hope and salvation; to pray for God’s loving touch and assurance; to take strength and consolation from the empty cross, the greatest symbol of hope and love ever known; and to be with others in our confusion and anger. We came to one place where we might find God, and we left with the hope and support of a faithful community.

William Sloan Coffin, who was chaplain of Yale University, once said that it is here in church that “we try to think, speak, and act in God’s way, not in the way of a fear-filled world. A church is a home for love and unity, to rest and be healed, and to be free – free from worries, free from tensions, free to laugh, free to cry. God provides minimum protection and maximum support. We come to church not for protection against a cruel world but for all the support that heaven alone can provide.” Feeling safe isn’t about setting limits on the outside. Feeling safe is knowing there are unshakable beliefs that enable us to face all the “bads” of the world.”

And now, nearly eight more years have passed. Eight is the Biblical number for new beginnings. Eight people were saved from the Flood, and Thomas saw Jesus eight days after the Resurrection. Today is also Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before Lent, the time to eliminate what’s broken in our old life, and to look forward to new life. It’s the time to examine the mistakes of the past, and to look toward a brighter, more hopeful future. It is the time to begin again.

Biblical epiphanies alter our view of reality by disclosing the divine power beyond ourselves. There is Epiphany Sunday, when the Wise Men arrived to worship the Messiah, and there is the epiphany of Christ’s baptism. But it is the Transfiguration that has been called the “epiphany par excellence” of the gospels. When we, along with Peter, James and John, see Jesus of Nazareth standing on the mountain, dazzling in his radiant majesty, we see in a flash the whole gospel, that God has chosen this man to transform the world. The one who is transfigured transfigures all.

Such moments of truth comprise life’s epiphanies: fleeting moments of insight that change our perception of ourselves and of our place in the world. James Joyce, who raised epiphany to an art form, described the experience as “those times when a person’s soul, a person’s “what-ness” leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance and seems radiant.” We know the instant it happens that we are seeing truth stripped of its wrapping and exposed for one indelible and unforgettable moment. It is the outward manifestation of inward truth or, as one of my confirmands once said, “It’s when our outside matches our inside.”

We are living in a unique time and a unique place, where what we have assumed about ourselves and what we have become accustomed to having is changing dramatically and, for some, catastrophically. It is another historic crisis, this time financial, that is again leaving us stunned and shaken, wondering how it happened

and how it will all end...wondering if the institutions that undergird our communities will survive – not just the banks, but also the schools, hospitals, libraries, charities and, yes, the churches. We are wondering what our lives and those of our children will be like. So again we come to this sanctuary to hear God’s scriptural words of hope and salvation; to pray for God’s loving touch and assurance; to take strength and consolation from the empty cross, the greatest symbol of hope and love ever known; and to be with others in our confusion and anger. We come to this church to be our authentic selves, and to envision a new beginning, and a new life...a life of simplicity and honesty and compassion... the life we were born to lead.

Few if any other world religions express themselves through communities of faith and caring. Their characteristic experience is that of an individual worshipping alone at an altar or shrine. There is no continuing social group knowing a distinctive fellowship.

“Church is where there’s such a climate of acceptance that each of us can be his or her unique self.” Coffin points out (Credo) It is where we come when we have faith or when we need faith, when we are fulfilled or unfulfilled, secure or insecure; feel blessed or are in need of a blessing; are grateful for all we have or in need of what we don’t have; feel loved or feel unloved. Coffin concludes, “In joining a church you leave home and hometown to join a larger world. By joining a church you declare your individuality in the most radical way in order to affirm community on the widest possible scale.” (Credo)

John Updike, who died just three weeks ago, knew more than a thing or two about religion. In fact, he kept a copy of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans on his nightstand. He wrote, “There was a time when I wondered why more people didn’t go to church. Taken purely as a human recreation, what could be more delightful, more unexpected than to enter a venerable and lavishly scaled building kept warm and clean for us one or two hours a week, and to sit and stand in unison and sing and recite creeds and petitions that are like paths worn smooth in the war terrain of our hearts? To listen, or not listen, as a poorly paid but resplendently robed man strives to console us with scraps of ancient epistles and halting accounts...of those intimations of divine joy; to witness the windows donated by departed patrons and the altar flowers arranged by withdrawn hands and the whole considered spectacle lustrous beneath its patina of inheritance; to pay, for all this, no more than we are moved to give – surely in all democracy there is nothing like it. Indeed, it is the most available democratic experience.” (from *Pigeons and Other Stories*, 1962)

Yes, church is a bargain at twice the price. It’s a beautiful, friendly, relaxing place to spend an hour on the weekend. But for many of us, this church is so much more. It is our heart’s home. When the ground begins to shift and we begin to lose our bearings, when what was once familiar becomes strange and threatening, then we can come to this hallowed ground, beneath the plus sign, and fly on the wings of faith. Amen.