

A NEW CATEGORY: THE GOD/MAN

Isaiah 7:1 & 2 and 10-17
Matthew 1:18-25

Rev. Clarence L. Reaser

I've always said that my favorite theologian is Charlie Brown of "Peanuts" fame. But there is another theologian who, for me, ranks a close second. He is "Dr. Seuss", a pseudonym for the beloved author of children's books. And one of his lesser known works forms the basis for this morning's sermon. The title of the book is "On Beyond Zebra" and it takes us beyond the known, to a completely new category. I want to read a portion of it to you because it is the key to everything I want to say about the mystery of the Incarnation – the enfleshment of God in the manger at Bethlehem.

"Said Conrad Cornelius O'Donnell O'Dell, my very young friend who was learning to spell, 'The *A* is for Ape, the *B* is for Bear, the *C* is for Camel the *H* is for Hair, the *M* is for Mouse, the *R* is for Rat ... I know all twenty-six letters like that. Through to *Z* is for Zebra, I know them all well,' said Conrad Cornelius O'Donnell O'Dell. 'Now I know everything anyone knows from beginning to end, from the start to the close, because *Z* is as far as the alphabet goes.'

"Then he almost fell flat on his face on the floor when I picked up the chalk and drew one letter more. A letter he had never dreamed of before. And I said, 'You can stop if you want with the *Z*, and most people stop with the *Z*, but not me. In the places I go, there are things that I see that I never could spell if I stopped with a *Z*.'

"I'm telling you this 'cause you're one of my friends, my alphabet starts where your alphabet ends. My alphabet starts with this letter called yezz, it's the letter I use to spell yezzametezz. You'll be sort of surprised what there is to be found, once you go beyond *Z* and start poking around. So on beyond zebra explore like Columbus, discover new letters like wum, which is for wumbus, my high-spouting whale who lives high on a hill and who never comes down till it's time to refill. So on beyond *Z*, it's high time you were shown that you really don't know all there is to be known."

So ... this morning will you join me on a journey "on beyond zebra" – because that's where Advent takes us in the journey to find Christmas.

On the first Christmas, God added a new letter (a new category) to our alphabet with the Virgin Birth. Why? Because we need that letter to spell Immanuel which, as we have learned both from the Prophet Isaiah and from the Apostle Matthew, means "God with us". So let's go look for Christmas. Will you allow me to lead you on a journey on beyond zebra?

What does Dr. Seuss mean when he uses that phrase? Well, I've never had the chance to ask him, but I think he means that just as you and I have been given twenty-six letters of the alphabet with which to spell our words, we also have certain mental categories that we've developed through the years into which we fit the experiences of life. For example, we all have a category in our minds for dogs. And when we see dogs, we fit them into that category. Sometimes, however, we find that we have a category without any real instances. For example, unicorns and Big Foot and fairy tales are flights into fantasy where we have these

delightful images but no experiences. But what's really shocking is when we find an instance, a real event or experience, that just doesn't fit any category we've ever seen before. That's on beyond zebra.

A woman was driving down the street with her teen-age daughter. And as they sat at a stoplight, they looked to the curb on the right side of the car. There on the street corner was a mother hen and her baby chicks, just standing there appearing to watch the traffic light. When the light changed, the mother hen jumped off the curb and walked across the street with the green light on in the crosswalk. And those baby chicks jumped down right behind her and followed her in a single line to the other side of the street. As they watched the tableau play out before them, the girl turned to her mother and said with a certain amount of awe in her voice, "Mother ... this is not normal." And it wasn't normal; it was on beyond zebra. It was an instance without a category. It was like the mystery of Advent that leads us to the birth of the Baby of Bethlehem.

The Gospel writer tells us: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Immanuel, which means God With Us.'" (Matthew 1:22 & 23) That's the punch line – God With Us; the Incarnation; the coming of God in human flesh.

Let's let the Apostle Paul tell us about this baby in words that helped to form one of the earliest creeds of the Christian faith (Colossians 1:15-17). "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities; all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven." (Colossians 1:15-17) Don't those words remind you of the prologue to John's gospel where the evangelist tells us about the word who became flesh and lived among us?

This baby is he who, in the beginning, sent the flaming stars and suns spinning off into the limitless reaches of space in that big bang of which our solar system is but a BB in a boxcar. And you and I can no more grasp the totality of this baby with our minds than we can take the Milky Way and cram it into a milk bottle. The angel said Mary would give birth to an infinite infant. And sure enough, nine months later, in a tiny stable in a tiny corner of a tiny country something happened that was bigger than this whole vast, tragic world – God was born! In human flesh! That is the miracle of miracles. That is light years beyond the end of the alphabet. That is way beyond zebra.

And, to tell the truth, that's also further than many people are willing to go. So instead when they come to Jesus Christ, they simply subsume him into a category they already know. Then they pay him a "compliment" by saying Jesus is the very best in that category. For example, people say, "Jesus is the greatest teacher this world has ever known." Or they say, "Jesus is the greatest moral exemplar the world has ever known." But at no point do they allow Jesus to escape the human category and become a class by himself, the unique God-Man. We have no category for that; we've never seen one of those before. And that's exactly

how most people reacted when they met Jesus Christ. They ransacked the dictionary for words to describe him. To meet Jesus is like burning your hands on a star. Everywhere he went, he moved in an atmosphere of wonder and astonishment, both Fully God and Fully Man, even though most people including his own brothers would not accept him as such.

The Apostle John framed the issue this way: “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right (the authority) to become children of God.” (John 1:10-12)

Many people think of the Incarnation as sort of like the phone booth in a Superman movie. And Jesus is like Clark Kent, who is dressed like a normal man but then goes into this phone booth and emerges as Superman. Jesus was not a Superman. Jesus did not clothe himself in his humanity in order to hide his deity. Jesus was fully human. The bullets didn't bounce off Jesus Christ and he couldn't leap tall buildings at a single bound. As a boy he got stickers in his toes; he blackened his finger when the hammer slipped off the nail. (Although he didn't say what you and I say when that happens to us). He had real hurts. At the tomb of his close friend Lazarus, he cried real tears. And when they pounded the nails into his hands and feet he bled actual blood. Three hours later, he died. He was really dead! That's what some scholars think is meant by the confusing phrase in the Apostles' Creed, “He descended into Hell.” He was totally and completely dead.

Maybe no one has summed up this Incarnation idea better than, of all people, the late Harry Reasoner. Let me read to you what Harry said on one of his radio commentaries, “If Christmas is the anniversary of the appearance of the Lord of the universe in the form of a helpless babe, it is a very important day. It is a startling idea, of course. My guess is the whole story that a virgin was selected by God to bear his son is a way of showing his love and concern for mankind.”

Much earlier, Charles Wesley put it this way:
“Our God contracted to a span,
Incomprehensibly made man.”

Incomprehensible, oh yes. But Christ is available! Available to anyone who is able to step on beyond zebra. So, if you will, take a new letter for your alphabet this morning. And be assured, with that new category you can go beyond the “normal” to an experience that has no parallel in all of human history. You can actually have Christ and Christmas in your heart.

But if you don't have Christmas in your heart, there's no way you'll ever find it under any tree.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen