

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
Christmas Eve 2008
by the Reverend Alan Neale
“Only Connect - If Only!”**

In her recently published book, *Desire*, Susan Cheever quotes E.M. Forster's Margaret Schlegel in his novel *Howard's End* “Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect”. Ms. Cheever comments, “These two words, ‘Only Connect’ are perhaps Forster's most famous”.

Sadly, for some (if not many) this is the time of the year when the promise “only connect” is fraught with tension, disappointment and general angst.

Such stuff, of course, is often the material for comic writers and urbane wits.

The film “Four Christmases” was described by one reviewer as “one of the most joyless Christmas movies ever” but, as of December 22, the film has grossed slightly over \$100 million domestically and \$115.5 million worldwide - so much for reviews! And one line repeated often, “you can't spell families... without lies”... ouch! So much for “only connect”. If only poor reviews of my sermons grossed similar income for the church!

And Quentin Crisp, English actor and raconteur, comments “living en famille provides the strongest motives for rudeness combined with the maximum opportunity for displaying it”... ouch! So much for “only connect”.

At the first Christmas there was an abundance, a cornucopia of connection... wise men and shepherds, the ruler of the universe and a smelly stable, the intuitiveness of dreamers and the logic of expositors, beasts of the field and angelic beings and, above all, the very stuff of our humanity and the very essence of the divine. As the fantasy writer George MacDonald was quoted recently in the *Wall Street Journal*, “With his divine alchemy [God] turns not only water into wine, but common things into radiant mysteries. [The obfuscating spirit] of the commonplace [meanwhile] is ever covering the deep and clouding the high”.

Friends, you and I (in the words of E.M. Forster) yearn to “live in fragments no longer”. In fact we can call the whole work of salvation, the work of defragmentation... the work of “only connect”.

My son asked me, years ago, “Dad, have you defragmented your pc recently?”. “Have I what?” I responded. And with due patience, Ben explained that this has to be done in order for the pc to work at top speed and full efficiency. And, friends, we too need be defragmented in order to live and work well and healthily.

Listen to the prophet Isaiah, “The wolf shall lie down with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid... and a little child shall lead them”. Here are two incredible extremes in the animal kingdom but they will be connected... how? “A little child shall lead them”. And the little child we celebrate tonight, he can only connect!

Now the cynic and not too well-known Biblical scholar Woody Allen may well comment, “the wolf shall lie down with the lamb... but the lamb will not get much sleep”... but Isaiah, the people of God, those of us who know what it is to journey towards integration, congruence, wholeness... we know that “with his divine alchemy” God can only connect... for such is his nature and such is his purpose.

I am sure there are some in church tonight who have parts of their lives to which they would much prefer not to go; aspects of emotions and past experiences with which we would rather not connect. And yet, to be whole, we must connect... but thank God (here is the great news) we need not go to those places alone for God goes with us.

Today, at Morning Prayer, a young woman came and sat in the church. I thought she might be at a loss with the order of service so I left the sanctuary and approached her. She said, “I don’t know what to do” - I said, simply, “Move over”... sat beside her and led the way through the intricacies of our Prayer Book.

And then it struck me... so God does to us. He leaves the holy place, the sanctuary, the heavens above and comes to us. We say, in many ways, “I don’t know what to do”. And then we hear the joyful Christmas message, “Move over” and he comes, sits beside us and “leads the way”. Leads the way to wholeness, to integration, to the bringing together of erstwhile and chronic warring factions deep within our psyche.

“And a little child shall lead them”. This Christmas “only connect” and if this seems to you an awful task... let this child of beauty, the Christ-child, lead you. And “only connect” with the God who loves you and has for you a beautiful future.

“Only connect”!

AMEN