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REV. DR. WILLIAM AUGUSTUS JONES, JR: Hear the reading of the scripture lesson as contained in the gospel according to Luke, chapter 2 verses 1 through 7. "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; because he was of the house and lineage of David: To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn." God bless the reading of his holy word. The hymn of consecration is selection 62, "Silent Night, Holy Night."

(organ music begins and choir and congregation sing "Silent Night, Holy Night")

JONES: Today I called your attentions to the seventh verse in the second chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. "And she brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn." I want to talk about back door divinity—back door divinity. He didn't have to do it, but he did. Christ Jesus, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God but made himself of no reputation and took upon him the form of a servant and was made in the likeness of men. He didn't have to do it, but he did. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. God became man. The sovereign elected to become a servant. The eternal showed up in time and space. He didn't have to do it, but he did. For him to simply come this way would be enough, one would think. Just to visit this planet and give mortals a glimpse of God, should be sufficient, one would think. To simply let us know that the Lord, God almighty was not detached nor disinterested would suffice, one would think. But quite to the contrary, in his own mind that alone was not enough. More than a passing view of himself was necessary. Something other than a sudden entry and a quick exit was needed. The strategy called for a sojourn, a tabernacling, a flesh and blood involvement. Not for a little while and not for a long, long time but for thirty and three years. Long enough to move from helpless infancy to mature manhood and long enough to make an indelible imprint as to who and what God is really like. That he came in flesh is enough to warm youthful hearts, encourage mature spirits and send the elderly to their graves in peace. That he elected to clothe himself in our mortality ought be enough to turn every eye and every heart Godward but he went far beyond incarnation or enfleshment. He did more than that, much more than remove his royal robe and replace it with the garb of our humanity. He came our way by way of the back door. The God who created all that is, heaven and earth, sky and sea, sun, moon, and stars, every living thing—there is. Omnipotent,

omniscient, omnipresent divinity. God came to see us through a back door. As I've said on other occasions, while certain Greeks were delving in philosophy and while certain romans were trying to conquer the world and while certain Jews were corrupting religion, God was on his way to a stable in Bethlehem. His arrival, his appearing, however you view or measure it—was purely and plainly and pronouncedly, a backdoor entry. In terms of place: Nazareth and Bethlehem; in terms of time: when not expected, in terms of people: Joseph and Mary; in terms of environment: a little barn, some swaddling clothes and an ox crate. I cannot help describing him as back door divinity, and I do it with righteous respect and reverence. He didn't have to do it, but he did. Of course, that's the appraisal from where we sit with our limited vision and finite understanding. Yhe faithful out of gratitude declare, "he didn't have to do it, but he did."

*pause in recording as cassette tape 1, side 1 ends*

*recording of cassette tape 1, side 2 begins.*

JONES: That in a real sense, is our canticle of praise. That's the way all recipients of grace must talk. To be a beneficiary of love not deserved and favor not earned, calls forth perpetual gratitude. When I consider his marvelous grace made available to me without money and without price, I have to tell him, "God, you didn't have to do it, but you did." But from his perspective of totality, where from everlasting to everlasting he is—I have the impression that he declares, "I had to do it and I did." "With me," says God, "I came to the world by way of the back door by both choice and constraint. I willed it that way and my will involves no contradiction between desire and determination. I wanted to and I had to. I wanted to because I had to, and I had to because I wanted to. I willed it that way. My backdoor arrival was consonant with my will." "All right Lord, who am I and who are we to argue with you? That aspect of your arrival is final. I accept it—the case is closed. You wanted to because you had to, and you had to because you wanted to. Thank you, Lord, but now Lord let me look for a little while at the happening from where I sit. Let me use this capacity to think and to reason that you've given me to ponder and reflect on your backdoor arrival." I hear him say, "go right ahead, that's one reason I gave it to you. I want you to use your capacity to reason." Backdoor divinity, yes, that's what he was when he came our way—but why? With all the front doors available, why the back door entry? That's the approach of a thief in the night. Oh yes, Jesus did say that's how his return would be but that was much later than Bethlehem and our focus is on Bethlehem. Why would he come via the back door? Why Nazareth and Bethlehem when there's Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem? Why Joseph and Mary when people of prominence dwell in every chief city? Why a barn, swaddling clothes, and an ox crib when creature comforts are available? Why this backdoor entry to the place of our abode? Well, we feel our way through the deep darkness of the Bethlehem night and as we move towards the manger, he gives us light. We seek answer and in seeking we find. He came by way of the back door to avoid and to assault the arrogance of power. What an alluring thing is this thing called power. A little of it seems to wet the appetite for more and more and even more. I've seen it clearly at every level of life. It is conspicuous in corporate boardrooms, at command levels in the military, in the great halls of academia, in the chambers of government, and among the so-called princes of the church. This almost insatiable craving for power is also present at lower levels. I've witnessed it in factory foreman, supervisors in offices, people in all kinds of uniforms, the churchmen with various and sundry titles, and even in receptionists who are anxious to show their little authority. Power is an

awesome and awful allurements. Lord Acton wisely said, “power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely.” A man wiser than he has written, “he that standeth had better take heed, lest he fall.” The ultimate of obscenity of power is that they who possess it have a tendency to try and play God. Raw and raucous was the prevailing power when God came by way of the backdoor. Athens, the acme of mine power. Rome, the acme of military and political power. Jerusalem, the citadel of religious power—and each one of them perverted to the core. In coming through the back door, he avoided them and thereby assaulted them. He refused to let evil even mildly participate in his plan. By avoiding those perverted centers of power, he shook them from center to circumference. Herod trembled, Jerusalem shook, Rome quaked, and the signal was sent all the way to Athens that she too was under judgment—and ever since the word has been out that the wicked people of greed and lust and devoid of conscience, —the wicked shall not stand for the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ and of his kingdom there shall be no end. The almighty who is all power, came by way of the back door to avoid and thereby assault the arrogance of power. He came that way for another reason, that was the only door that would bid him welcome. A soul in beggar's apparel although a king, would elicit no warm response at the front doors of sinful humanity. Herod you remember, was a member of the front door crowd and as soon as he heard of that baby's arrival, he sought to kill it. How vivid is my own memory of the absence of front door hospitality in this land? That shameful period when certain of us on account of color were considered fit only for backdoor entry. As a sociology student, I once read of a black man in Mississippi who owned certain properties that he rented to whites but in order to collect his rent he had to go to the back door and in those places where cast and class reigns supreme, even poor whites had to suffer backdoor stingers. Whenever and wherever one's personhood is ignored or demeaned, the front door-back door syndrome is alive and active. Interesting it is, is it not that those who are relegated to backdoor status are in most instances the people who work just inside the back door? Cooks, maids, janitors service people, errand boys and the like—and I've discovered over the years that these in the main are the people most given to warmth and hospitality. In the days when hobos were common in America, those of you who were born in New York probably never saw a hobo, a hobo was one who traveled without paying on freight trains—but when hobos were plentiful in this land, they'd get something to eat not by knocking on front doors of nice homes but by going to the back door. They knew that at the back door they most likely would receive sympathy and empathy and consideration and compassion. They were not welcome at the front door—and say what you will, those who are powerless and weak are on the whole more given to a hospitable spirit than those who are powerful and wicked. God knew that Joseph and Mary wouldn't be received by that inn keeper. They weren't welcome at the front door, but out back a dirty barn was anxious to receive them. That was the only door that would bid him welcome. Now lastly, he came by way of the back door because that's the location of most of his children. It is not my purpose at all today to deal with that thorny issue of social disparity, my only concern is to lift up the truth about God's concern for the whole of humanity and the unalterable, undeniable reality is that most of his children are backdoor dwellers. I know whereof I speak; I've been blessed to touch down on every continent under heaven. I felt the bitter winds of the arctic the chill of a Russian winter and the warm zephyrs that blow on the shores of West Africa. I've sailed Victoria Harbor in the crown colony of Hong Kong, and I've gone by steamer up the Rhine through the lush vineyards of West Germany. I've walked the streets of London and viewed the White Cliffs of Dover. I've seen South America and rested beneath Caribbean sky. I've been caught in the rush hour in both Tokyo and Barcelona, and I've traversed some of the great open spaces of the land down under. I've traveled America from top

to bottom and from coast to coast and everywhere I've gone throughout my father's world, I've discovered that most of his children are backdoor dwellers. Many of them are hungry and dying of malnutrition. Many are forced to beg in order to eke out an existence. Many are crying for a little taste of freedom. Some are living well, fairly well as most of you are but still struggling to hold on to what they have and nearly all of them saying that terrible lament, "I'm rolling through an unfriendly world." But God, thank God, God told me to tell you that he's backdoor divinity. He came to befriend the friendless; he came to cheer the cheerless; he came to be a father to the father and a mother to the motherless; he came to save the lost; he came to give light to our darkness; he came to puncture pride; he came to assault arrogance; he came our way that we might have life. Don't you hear him speaking? The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He had sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised; to preach the acceptable year of the Lord—that's what he did and that's what he said. From Bethlehem to Jerusalem, from Capernaum to Calgary, from the back door to the front door and now he speaks from heaven saying, "behold I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice, if any man—rich man, poor man, if any man, back door dweller or front door dweller—if any man hear my voice, if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come into him and will sup with him and he with me." He's knocking at all doors now, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. All we like sheep have gone astray. In God's eye, everybody's on the same level. All of us are backdoor dwellers and if you open up and let him come in, he'll give you eternal salvation; he'll give you peace that flows like a river; he'll give you joy everlasting; he'll even give you a song to sing and the story to tell. You might start singing, "blessed assurance, Jesus is mine; oh, what a foretaste of glory divine! The heir of salvation, purchase of God. Born of his spirit, washed in his blood. This is my story; this is my song. Praising my savior all the day long. (Jones is quoting the hymn "Blessed Assurance" here and the congregation is responding "yes!" to each line) I have to praise him for you see I belong to the backdoor crowd. That's where he found me, that's where he met me, that's where he lifted me that's where the burden of my heart rolled away. Yes! Oh yes, and I'm grateful, so glad, so happy, so delighted that he came by way of the back door. So, Lord, I want to thank you for bypassing Athens, for bypassing Rome and bypassing Jerusalem and coming through the still of the night through a little manger in a barn in Bethlehem. Thank you, Lord, thank you Lord, thank you! For coming low enough so that everybody could touch you. Thank you for coming our way so that anybody could get on board the old ship of Zion. Thank you, Lord. Yes! Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Lord. From where you sit, you had to do it but from where I sit, a backdoor dweller, saved by grace—you didn't have to do it, but you did and I'm glad, so glad you did. Ain't you glad that he came your way? ain't you glad? Glad! (congregation is responding "yes!") Sure, enough glad! Oh, yes! Hallelujah yes! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Thank you, Lord. Thank you for being gracious enough to come low enough so that anybody could touch the hem of your garments and be made whole again. Thank you, Lord! You didn't have to do it, but you did and I'm glad, so glad you did. Hallelujah! Hallelujah. The doors of the church are open. Is anybody here today who wants to lay claim on that inheritance he left for poor pilgrims of sorrow? Only believe and thou shalt be saved. If you believe, we bid you come while we sing to hymn of invitation and perhaps there are believers present who live in this metropolitan area but who have no permanent relationship within a congregation of believers. If that's the case with you, we warmly invite you to come and unite with us here at Bethany. The doors of the church open as we sing the hymn of invitation, selection 264, "No not one, 'There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus,' no not one. No not one, none else could

heal all our souls' diseases. No not one, no not one." Let us stand and sing it to the glory of God. The doors of the church are open unto you. God help you to come if you're here.

(music plays and choir and congregation sings)

JONES: (while the music is playing) God bless you, young man. God bless you. Is there another who will come today? Jesus is calling. God bless you Sir. God bless. Oh, Jesus is calling, why don't you answer? Why don't you respond? Is there another? Jesus knows all about our struggles he will guide us. Jesus.

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