

## WAITING AND WATCHING

Two old men bring us the story and close the Christmas loop for us tonight. I like that very much, don't you? Simeon is the old man in the second chapter of Luke. He has been promised by the Holy Spirit that he will not die until he has seen God's Messiah. You are picking it up, right? There is the Holy Spirit, thirty years before Jesus' baptism. No speaking in tongues; just the Holy Spirit reassuring old Simeon that his faith is not in vain. And Simeon is rejoicing: *"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation."* That's how we read it when I was a boy. And now Simeon can die happy, even though he will not get to see any of Jesus' story as it unfolds in the real world. That's what our Sunday School teacher explained to us.

Our Sunday School teacher had no idea how many questions he was raising for me. I had learned better than to ask him for any further explanations of anything; he had about as much curiosity as a brick wall. But it got me started on a lifelong quest. He did not care, but it mattered to *me*. If I was going to bet my whole life on Jesus, I wanted to know: Was Jesus real, or was this just more Easter Bunny and Santa Claus and Tooth Fairy stuff?

The other old man is in the third chapter of John. Good old "St. Nick." Only this time it's St. Nicodemus, not St. Nicolaos, though St. Nicolaos was pretty impressive in his own right. Anyway, Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, and in this encounter we learn that *"No one can see the kingdom of God unless they have been born anew."* I am not making this up. This is what Jesus tells Nicodemus. *"No one can see the kingdom of God unless they have been born anew."*

So, do you celebrate a Christmas where nobody ever gets to see the Kingdom of God?

That's pretty much the American Christmas, is it not? A Christmas with a baby, but without the Kingdom of God. We like to give and receive presents at Christmastime, but are we also receiving the Holy Spirit? *"No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of ... the Spirit."* A virgin birth, whatever we think about it, is irrelevant. *"Flesh can give birth only to flesh; it is spirit that gives birth to spirit.... You must all be born again."* That's what Jesus tells Nicodemus in this third chapter of John.

So St. Nicodemus closes the loop. Without being born again – without encountering the Holy Spirit – Christmas is a dud: a nice story for two thousand years ago, but what has it got to do with us? Talk about worshipping from afar! Christmas never forces its way into our lives. We have to want it – open ourselves to it. But it is the Holy Spirit that connects us to the real Christmas, to the real Savior, to the real drama of humans being connected to God in ways that really matter – in ways that transform our lives.

It's Christmas Eve, but we need to be reminded that it's easy to miss the real story. There are plenty of substitutes all around us, and they are happy to masquerade as what Christmas is for and about. Christmas is not just the celebration of Jesus' birth; it is the celebration of His COMING. Christmas is more than a birthday party – cake and ice cream and presents, all very pleasant to be sure. That may be a good place to start with children when they are four or five or six. But hopefully we do not leave them at that level, never mind ourselves.

I am not trying to start any controversy with what happens “out there” in the world around us. I know Christmas is a grand national and international festival. It's fine for it to be as meaningful and as much fun as possible, for as many people as possible. But in here – that is, inside the church itself, inside the community of believers – we are supposed to know more than that.

His COMING is more than Happy Birthday. It's His COMING as God's Messiah, God's Christ – Incarnation: God's true nature and purpose being revealed by the truest “man of God” – the most profound incarnation of God – that our world has ever known. And in this mystery, all the terror of how that is possible and how much that is possible comes with it. All our definitions, expectations, hopes, and dreams are imploded or exploded. We can never look into the mirror again and see “mere human,” because the Christ of God is calling us brother or sister. We can never think it will all one day be over, because He is resurrected – and that means we will be too. We can never be content that we have done all things well or right, because He has such strange and awesome loyalties and values. And we can never count ourselves down and out, because *this One* keeps healing the most terrible wounds and giving us brand-new chances out of the blackest pits we can dig ourselves into.

No, it is not some neat little kindergarten package, all cut-and-dried, with Christmas at one end and Easter at the other, as if we could find a beginning or an end to such things. Easter is not the end; it is a fantastic new beginning – *endless* new beginnings. And Christmas is shot-through with Easter, and with the full impact of all that His COMING has meant and done and continues to mean. Christmas carries it all: fulfillment, fullness of time, Incarnation. “*Mine eyes have seen thy salvation,*” says old Simeon, and that’s in Luke chapter two, right at the beginning of the story. (Luke 2:30) Of course, the secular world keeps trying to reduce it down to something safe and manageable – like a birthday party. Just think about the baby and the birth; never mind who He really is, what He does, why He came, how He changes life, or how much He is calling to you. After all, if we let some of the meaning in, we can no longer stay secular – not even close!

The dichotomy is always with us. Christmas is very different depending on whether you see it from “out there” or from “in here.” That is, whether you celebrate it as part of a faith family, as a member of the body of Christ – something you are part of, an integral part of your destiny – or whether you celebrate it as just a custom and tradition of the culture around you, a pleasant holiday that happens this time of year.

In some ways, Christmas Day is a wonderful parable, and we act it out every year. The question is: Will we catch on to the message of the parable some year and turn our world around? The answer, of course, is no; that would be impractical and impossible. But then, Christmas Day itself is, in many ways, impractical and impossible. Maybe someday that truth will dawn, and we will stretch Christmas from a day into a WAY of Life. Is that not what some of us poignantly say every December 26th? “What do you do for a living?” “Oh, I make Christmas presents. I take the gifts and the resources I have and turn them into deeds and services and creations of love. I do it for and in honor of the Christ.”

You see, we are not really very far from it already, in many situations. It lacks only the vision, the consistency, the faith. Oh yes, and it lacks the true Messiah. Come to think of it, that is quite a lot of lack! It misses the core of it – the meaning and the power. We always want to substitute bootstraps and muscle for the Christ, so we can stay in control – so we can do it ourselves. But that misses the Christ, who changes us from within. It misses our being born anew. A new world requires new people. So does the Kingdom of God. Toys and

lights and tinsel and music and friendliness are never quite enough, no matter how hard we try. It requires, in the old language, a Savior.

There is no way to escape it, is there? Christmas is the most insulting day of the year. That is exactly why it is so full of hope. The message of Christmas is that things are not right and we are not whole. The message is that normal days and normal people are not good enough. We are not going to make it this way. We, together with our brothers and sisters everywhere, make the world what it is, and the world is not right yet. It needs to be changed. And that's what Christmas shouts from every decoration and carol and gift. Only, it is not just the usual call to buck-up, or try harder, or blame somebody else, or hang our heads in shame. The Savior, in love, has come to help us with the changing. And that hope is so huge that, once we get it, we do not much mind the insult.

Well, we *do* mind the insult. At first we do everything we can to rework Christmas into something less offensive. It is a universal human trait that we do not like to admit our need. That's precisely the problem we have with Christmas: admitting our need. "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" Who put that into the very core of all our Advent stories?

We do not mind *wanting* something, but we hate to *need* something – even God. God's Christmas present to us is hard to take. The greater the gift, the greater the insult – and the larger the hope. God's present to us is very great and very costly. "*Unto us a child is born ....*" (Isaiah 9:6) "*For unto you is born this day ... a Savior ....*" (Luke 2:11) Stop the presses, hold the phone, turn off all the computers! A WHAT? A SAVIOR? That changes everything we think we know about Christmas.

Can you picture someone opening this true Christmas present, expectancy and hope on their face – until the wrapping is off? And then: "I give up. What is it? A Savior? Hmmm ... How does it work? What's it good for? What do you do with it? Can you exchange it for something you really want?"

I ask you: Is this what you want for Christmas? Is this what you think you really need – a Savior? Even after all these generations, the central meaning of Christmas still sounds a little strange, does it not? When we already have so much, how can we find the humility to admit that our need is still so great?

If Christmas means anything at all, it means that we and our world are in great need. It does not primarily have anything to do with wealth or position. Too many people live without meaning, without purpose, without goals worth having. Too many lives are joyless, without self, without soul. Too many people fear the loss of every tiny outward possession because the emptiness within is still so vast and painful. Too many people have killed their dreams and gone adventureless into the ruts and dead ends that we call “security.” And yes, I put it exceedingly mildly, as every day’s newspaper makes clear. And onto this bleak scene comes the great gift: Merry Christmas ... Merry LIFE. *“I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.”*

A Savior to save us from what? “Sin, Death, and the Devil” was the old formula. SIN, which, of course, is alienation, loneliness, emptiness – the *distance* between us and God. DEATH, which comes in many forms, none of which we have power over all by ourselves; all who really die, die before death takes them. The DEVIL: the great Adversary; the One who tempts us with false values and who lies to us about life and what it is about; Satan, though many of you only dimly believe he actually exists – do you really think you are competent to deal with him all by yourself? Evidence does not seem to bear that out.

Christmas is an invitation – from God, who made us – to live according to the integrity and eternity that God has put within us: joy; creativity; a value on your life; a purpose you will not stray from; a talent you will not defile. But the world considered it a terrible insult to be told that it needed a Savior. Savior indeed! Oh yes, the world was very polite about it on the surface, just as it still is every Christmastime to this day – for that’s the way of the world. It acted pleased and honored and humbled and all. But from the very beginning, you could tell there was deep resentment underneath.

\* \* \*

Dear World,

I have been watching your progress with avid interest for lo these many generations. While much that I see is reminiscent of the true design, it has become increasingly obvious that there is much confusion about the real purpose of life, and a nearly total blank-out regarding the method and availability of love. It is harder for you than ONE would expect, considering the evidence I keep making available. I have had to conclude that you need dramatic and conclusive help.

Please accept this gift as an expression of my continued, deep, and abiding love. It will give you what you now lack.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Signed, God

Dear God,

Thank you for your thoughtful concern. While recognizing the expense you have gone to, we are a little surprised and, if we may say so, a little hurt to learn that your evaluation of our progress is so negative.

From our point of view, we are doing quite well and consider your gift unnecessary and inappropriate. Your latest expert, while he may be well-trained and highly qualified, has done nothing but upset our procedures, disturb time-honored truth and patterns of behavior, and get everybody all in a lather.

Consequently, we are returning your gift, postage-paid, and we sincerely hope that, in the future, you will allow us to handle our problems in our own way.

HAVE A GOOD FRIDAY.

Signed, Earth

Dear World,

I had, of course, suspected this would be your reaction, though I was hoping all along that it would not come to this. No doubt it was inevitable. The greater the gift, the more likely its rejection. So be it. Your insolence has mounted, as the resources I give you have been discovered and developed. More and more, you destroy and corrupt my world and the souls I plant there.

All right. If it is war you want, it is war you shall have. The Spirit of Him you slew shall be my army. He will strike your friends and steal your children. Without mark or sound, He shall come and conquer, and those He touches will be filled with a LIFE you cannot fathom. They will break your systems and storm your structures, and you will find no defense against them. You yourselves will never be safe, for He will ever be among you – to convert and to redeem.

You have killed MY SON, and you think it's all over? *Don't you know who I AM?* I send Him back. *Now stop Him.* The tomb you sealed is empty.

HAPPY EASTER.

Signed, God

\* \* \*

There is an old Persian proverb: "God's club makes no noise. When it strikes, there is no cure for the blow." So it is with God's love.

That is the drama and the reality of the true Christmas. The world is beguiled by the humility and meekness and beauty of it. So it celebrates the coming of Him who will change it forever. The lights and the trees and the presents are only a "front." Behind Christmas is the most powerful force for change and transformation in the universe. Kicking and screaming and fighting all the way, we are being dragged inexorably into joy and love and eternal life. "Ain't it awful?" Strangely enough, much of the time we really think so.

Either that, or we receive – with the humility of famished souls, with heartfelt praise and gratitude – the LIFE of Him whom no cross could frighten and no death could hold. That’s the story that unfolds endlessly from the birth of this baby. Yet for many people in our time, there is still a connection missing. We still wait and watch every Advent, even though Jesus has already come. Symbolically it is still Advent, and we pretend to be waiting breathlessly for Christmas to come in only a few more hours, because symbolically He still needs to be born for us again.

Only, His birth and our birth are always connected. He needs to be born each Christmas until He comes alive *in us* and for us. And we need to be born again – born of His Spirit. One without the other means we are still left out of Christmas. Tomorrow many will say that it is His birthday. And if it is *His* birthday, it is also *our* birthday. If it is His birthday, “*Behold, all things are made new*” – and tomorrow *we also* walk into New Life. Christmas is a far greater celebration than our world has ever understood. “*The wind blows where it wills ....*” And it blows also for you. Where will it take you? If we think we know, we are faking it.

The real Scrooge does not just disbelieve in the outer Christmas. The real Scrooge tries not to believe in the reality or power of the Holy Spirit. “*No one can see the kingdom of God unless they have been born anew ... born of the Spirit.*”