

The Manger Won't Be Empty

I Thessalonians 3:9-13 and Luke 21:25-36 | First Sunday of Advent |
December 1, 2024 | Pastor John Klawiter , preaching

Grace and peace to you my siblings in Christ,

A young man wrote a letter to his fiancé before Christmas from prison.

“Be brave for my sake, dearest Maria, even if this letter is your only token of my love this Christmas-tide. We shall both experience a few dark hours—why should we disguise that from each other? We shall ponder ... [why we] should be subjected to the bitter anguish of a separation whose purpose we fail to understand. . . .

And then, just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong, and that what we take to be evil and dark is really good and light because it comes from God. Our eyes are at fault, that is all.

God is in the manger, wealth in poverty, light in darkness. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives.

He was a political prisoner. An enemy to the state in the 1940's.

It's a letter written by German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer to his fiancé, Maria (**SLIDE of couple**), while in prison. It was in 1943—two years before the end of World War II. Bonhoeffer spent much time writing—including a series of reflections that were compiled into a devotional called “God is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas.”

We begin Advent today. Watching and waiting for what's to come.

We find ourselves in a whirlwind of expectations—from the gratitude of Thanksgiving to the commercial reminders of Black Friday, small business Saturday, and Cyber Monday.

Sunday is our day of silence. Worship is a reminder of simplicity. It's about Jesus. It's about the manger.

On Christmas, the manger won't be empty. Jesus enters our world—and with it, the salvation of our world. This is the gift. This is the best present that we'll get.

Sermon Transcript

Yet, we hear a story today towards the end of the earthly life of Jesus. The very next verses as we move into chapter 22 will be about the plot to kill Jesus.

Why do we hear this stuff when we should be excited for the birth of baby Jesus?

The gospel of Luke, which today might appear terrifying and not optimistic, might benefit from a different lens.

In a podcast this week, Luther Seminary professor Matt Skinner helped place a context on this apocalyptic passage.

He noted that everything Luke sees in Jesus is about salvation. So, yes, the son of God enters the world humbly in a manger.

It's the same God whose deliverance of salvation will come at great cost. We SHOULD fear and be in awe of what God does when he enters into this broken world.

We SHOULD expect all these signs and the fear and foreboding of what's to come.

The generation of the early Christians passed away—in fact, the writing from Luke appears AFTER the destruction of the temple. Those signs came true.

**Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.
(SCRIPTURE)**

These words live on. It's the cycle of life that each generation of Christians has witnessed.

What do we make of this? How do we understand the season of waiting, of Advent, in our lives?

What is important to us? How do we show others that they are important to us?

In 1905, the short story "The gift of the Magi" (**SLIDE of book cover**) was published in the New York Sunday World by O Henry.

It's about two newlyweds who are trying to find the perfect gift for their partner on Christmas Eve. As O Henry sets the scene, he describes how poor this couple is.

Della has saved her money and only has \$1.87. Even with inflation, that's not much.

Sermon Transcript

Yet Della wants to show Jim how much he means to her and she's found the perfect gift—a platinum fob chain to complement the beautiful gold watch that Jim inherited from his father and grandfather.

Della doesn't have a credit card. She has to pay in cash. This gift costs significantly more than \$1.87.

The only asset she has is her beautiful knee-length brown hair.

She convinces herself that her hair will grow back and decides to sell it to a wig-maker for \$20. She then buys the watch chain and heads home.

When Jim walks through the door, he's shocked to see his wife's new appearance.

She assures him that her hair will grow back and says, "don't you like me just as well, I'm me without me hair, aren't I?"

He's also a bit glum as he hands her the Christmas present he picked out for her. He assures her that there's nothing that could be done that would cause him to love her any less, but if she would open this, she might understand why she had him going when he first got home.

As she nervously opens the package, she lets a scream of joy... and then quickly into a wail of tears.

He's given her the most beautiful set of combs that she had been gazing at longingly in a Broadway window. It's what she'd always wanted.

And now, with her hair gone, they'd have to wait. Jim, she said, my hair grows back so fast!

Now, it was Della's turn. As Jim opened his present, Della excitedly told him that he'd have to check his watch 100 times a day. She asked him to give him his watch so she could attach it to the fob chain.

Jim, however, didn't give her the watch.

Della, he said, I sold the watch to buy the combs. They've both given up their only material assets to buy something special for the one they love... and neither gift is usable.

At the end of the story, O Henry writes about the magi. The wise men who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents.

Sermon Transcript

Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, yet, in the case of Jim and Della, who may appear foolish for each sacrificing the greatest treasures that they had, O Henry has an unexpected assessment of them.

Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they, they are the wise ones.

It's a story about love. They are willing to sacrifice all their material possessions out of love for another. Isn't it interesting that O Henry compares this couple to the magi, the wise men that visit Jesus 12 days AFTER Christmas?

You see, we might spend the next month focused on presents. Possessions. Getting the perfect gifts and hoping for the best gifts in return.

Why?

Because sharing gifts is an act of love.

We can't neglect the significance of the gift of Christ. There is no possession, no gift wrapped under the tree, or present that we can give that is more important than the gift of Christ.

When the signs and fears are in front of him, Jesus keeps walking into Jerusalem.

When it's clear that the only asset worth enough for our salvation is his life, Jesus embraces the cross.

When he walks out of the grave, is he going to the disciples waiting to see what they gave up in return?

No... Jesus' gift, known as grace, isn't given because of anything we've done to deserve it.

What do we give in return? From that manger, Bonhoeffer saw light in darkness (**LIGHT of a candle**). It's a darkness that Bonhoeffer never emerged from. He died before experiencing freedom. It didn't stop him from living in hope. He continued to share the light.

We hold the light... through darkness of wars, and fears of the unknown. We hold the light for neighbors in need of food, shelter, and clothing. We bring the light to those who are lonely or battling addiction or dwelling fear. We give the light. The light of Christ that will shine forth from that manger 25 days from now.



Sermon Transcript

What are we waiting for? We must be the light of Christ today. That's our selfless gift of love to give. Amen.