

The Rabbi's Gift

Christmas Day

Text: Luke 2: 1-14

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Merry Christmas! Joy to the world! Let heaven and nature sing! As I have been heard to say over the years, "this is the crown day of the year and the best story that we've got!" And to get to tell it on the day when the Good News is so present and fresh – and wearing slippers no less! It just doesn't get any better than this!

But our time together needs to be a tad shorter, a little closer, a measure more focused, something less formal - all so that we can sing a carol or two, hear the story, say a prayer, and then get ourselves to the celebrations that await us at home.

And so I simply want to tell you a story about the coming of Christ. Of course we all know of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. But that's not quite what I have in mind. There is another birth of Christ that happens along life's way that's just as important. As a matter of plain fact, without this second birth the first one means far, far less.

A theological pause. Great minds of varied sorts have long talked about something called the second coming of Jesus. Most all of us agree about his first coming. We may differ some on the details, but we all believe that Jesus was born and lived on this earth.

But his second coming draws far more variance of opinion. Some believe it will be a literal event that will come to pass - measurable, material, photographable. Others believe that in the blink of an eye everything will change and Christ will come to rule, a reign of sovereignty that will last for a thousand years. Some dream his return in some sort of rapture and others conjure more in terms of metaphor and transcendence. Still others yet believe that Jesus has already returned in a sense, and that in ways subtle and unnoticed, sometimes celebrated, often overlooked, he is here now. And so from measurable to metaphor, from tangible to transcendent, there is an entire spectrum of belief.¹

That's why I tell you this story today. It's called "the Rabbi's Gift"².

There once was a monastic community that had fallen on hard times. Once famous throughout the world for its spiritual vitality, it was now almost in ruins. Once filled with young aspirants of the faith, its magnificent halls resounding with the chant of its monks, now there remained only a handful of discouraged brothers. Once a center of broad and faithful thought, it was now narrow and myopic. Once the pinnacle of Christian witness and thought, now it was all but almost gone.

The Abbot was deeply saddened by this sorry state of his community. And so he secluded himself in prayer, day after day, hoping against hope that new life would return. One day in the midst of his prayers there was a knock at the door. It was his old friend, the Rabbi. "I knew in my heart that you needed me," the Rabbi said. They embraced and then the Abbot told his story to his friend.

After a time, the Rabbi said, "I think what has happened here is that you have, gradually and over time, begun to live as if the Promised One had never lived. You have begun to doubt and have let discouragement lead you. As this has happened, you have been less than your better selves. You have become petty and bitter with one another." The Abbot sadly nodded as the Rabbi continued. "The truth is that the Messiah is one of you, but you have been living the sin of ignorance and have not perceived that which is right here."

The Abbot thanked his friend for his wise observations as he departed. Now alone again he began to wonder. Is the Messiah already here? Is the Messiah one of us? Could it really be? Have we failed to recognize him? And who could it be? Brother Alfonzo? Brother Columbo? Brother Gregory? No, these all have too many flaws in them. Could it be that these flaws, these defects, are the disguises of the Messiah?

Could it be brother Leo? Not very likely! But, yes, then again, maybe it is! Or Brother Bartholomew? Or Brother Gerd? Or perhaps Brother Alexander? The more that the Abbot thought it through the less sure he seemed of any of them. Except for this. On the outside chance that one of them might be the Messiah, he vowed to begin to treat all of them as if they were the Messiah. And not only the brothers, he would treat any who visited, any he met that they were the Messiah.

Before long something deeply miraculous and mysterious happened. The monastery was transformed. As the Abbot lived and believed with such reverence and expectation extended to those around him so did all of the brothers. Faith and hopefulness poured back into their hearts. Envy, gossip, jealousy and all manner of smallness fell away. It wasn't long before word got out in the countryside. And the community that had once been so vital and nearly died was alive again. Joy and peace, love and hopefulness poured in and all was restored.

My dear friends: truth comes in such varied forms. Story, parable, myth, all can be true to the core. And this is the truth for today: Christ comes again and again when we live and believe and act as he taught. And this is true just as surely, in the words of Corrie Ten Boom, "If Jesus is born one thousand times in Bethlehem and not in me, then I will still be lost!"

I think that's gift and reminder, plenty and enough, present and real for this very Christmas Day! Amen.

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¹ Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright. The Meaning of Jesus. Harper and Row, 1999, pp. 189-196.

² This story is told in varied forms. See: M. Scott Peck. The Different Drum. Simon and Schuster, 1987, pp. 13-15; or, Anthony deMello. Taking Flight. Image Books, 1990, pp. 51-52.