

What is it about the message of Christmas that has the power to transform us? Each day, we hear of suffering whether it be from illness, addiction, and various forms of oppression. We witness political squabbling and polarization. More and more, we witness the increased suffering of the whole planet due to climate change and our failure to address it. And, still, the message of Christmas calls us beyond despair or cynicism. We are encouraged to take off our armor and renew our commitment to serve life together, no matter what challenges we face.

Tonight, we are reminded through ancient song and story that we are living in a blessed and Christ soaked world. All of this creation is and has always been the outpouring of God into being as the reading from John 1 reminded us. From the big bang on, we have been living in a Christ-soaked world. There is nothing that is not of God though it is not the same as God. We are forgetful of this blessing. On Christmas Eve, we celebrate God's coming in this child to say again that all of creation is blessed. God is coming to be with us to restore us and bring us together as we remember who and whose we truly are. What better way to unleash in us this desire to serve than to first come to us as vulnerable as an infant, completely dependent on the courage and care of those around him.

We have heard the story of how seemingly unknown and unimportant Mary, the simple carpenter Joseph, and a host of smelly shepherds accepted the invitation to care. The child born tonight is also the Christ who tells us that we serve the living Christ when we serve each other in our own time, our own day. We live in a Christ-soaked world. Christ is still present in all places and circumstances, meeting us in human and creaturely form. According to the mystery of faith, when we serve each other, we are serving the ever-present Christ (Matthew 25:31-46). Whenever another cares for us, they are caring for the living Christ alive in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. The story of Christmas contains and unleashes all of this.

Tolstoy told a beautiful story about one shoemaker's discovery of the truth of this divine in-breaking in his own life. Let me share (an adapted version) of this story tonight:

Martin the shoemaker had lived a long life and was well respected. He was a kind man and diligent with his work. There was hardly anyone in the town who had not had Martin touch their shoes at some point. As a result, Martin could recognize people just by looking at their shoes and boots which is usually all he could see of the street from his souterrain shop unless he came really close to the window. As Martin was getting older, he was asking a lot of questions about his life. He had lost his wife and son and found himself lonely and concerned about the future. There were days when Martin despaired. One day, a wise old man came to see Martin again after a long absence from the town. Martin shared his sorrows and even said that he sometimes just wished his life was over. He sometimes saw no reason to hope.

After listening intently, the wise man said, "Martin, you don't just live for yourself. You live for God who gifted you with life. Go back to the teachings of Jesus and you will know the hope God has for you." Martin took this advice to heart and would often reread stories at night by the fire. He was touched by how often Jesus reached out to people who were judged, dismissed, or neglected. He was struck by how Jesus would eat with everyone and discern what they needed and not worry about what the critics said.

One night, when Martin was exhausted from work, he fell asleep by the fire and had a dream. "Martin," he suddenly heard a voice calling him. Martin woke up startled and looked around. "Who is there?" he called out. "Who is there?" Then he heard a distant voice saying, "Martin, Martin! Look out into the street tomorrow for I shall come." The next day was Christmas Eve and Martin woke up early. He said his prayers, started a pot of soup and a pot of tea on his stove. He tried to sit down to work on some shoes but couldn't concentrate. He felt a strange excitement but also wondered if he had made all this up in his mind. Could it be that Christ would really come to him, a simple shoemaker in a small town?

Martin was also looking through his window more often than usual. Fresh snow had fallen. People were hurrying by. The rich merchant walked by in his fancy leather boots. A house servant rushed by in simple peasant boots. Martin found himself wondering what shoes Christ would wear? Would they be simple and humble? Then he saw someone coming along in shabby old felt boots and thought for a moment that this could be Christ. It was old Stepanitch, a veteran of several wars, who did not have enough money to afford a roof over his head. A wealthy man let him stay in the basement of the building next door in exchange for labor. Martin could see that Stepanitch was struggling to clear the snow and kept pausing to catch his breath and warm his hands.

Martin decided that if his special guest wasn't coming, he could at least share his tea and soup with Stepanitch. So he went outside, gave Stepanitch a hand and then invited him in to warm himself. As one cup of tea turned into three, the two men shared stories. Stepanitch was struggling more and more with his health. He felt that people mostly ignored him and worried about managing all by himself as he was getting more forgetful. Stepanitch asked if Martin was expecting visitors given the food he had prepared. Martin laughed and shared that he had this notion from a dream that Christ would come to be his guest. Now he felt silly about believing it. Still, he began to tell Stepanitch stories about Christ's care for all who were struggling, how he was always right there with them. Old Stepanitch found himself getting a bit teary. After a while and more tea and soup, Stepanitch rose and said, "Thank you friend, you have fed me body and soul today." "Please come visit me again," Martin replied.

Martin returned to his work and managed to finish one boot. When he paused and looked up, he saw that someone was huddling by the corner of his shop out in the cold. It was a young woman who was dressed in thin clothes and was clutching something to her chest. She was obviously shivering. Martin wasted no time and went out to greet her. She was holding an infant. "Please, come in," Martin said. She was a bit weary but followed him. He directed her to the fire and urged her to nurse the baby while he would get some soup ready for her. She told him that her husband was a soldier and had not been heard from for eight months. She had

worked but lost her job when the baby was born. She was allowed to stay a few more days but had been too exhausted to walk all the way. Martin noticed her thin clothes again and decided to look for clothing his wife had worn when she was alive. He found a good coat for his guest and a warmer blanket for the baby. After a little while, the young woman felt strengthened. As she was about to leave, Martin snuck a little money into her new coat.

By now, the day was coming to a close and Martin had to light a lamp to see his work. Just then, he saw an old woman outside who was carrying a basket of apples and was struggling with another bag on her shoulder. As she tried to adjust her load, a boy snuck by and stole an apple. Enraged, the woman dropped everything and grabbed the boy by the arm. She was about to hit him, when Martin intervened. "I'll teach him a lesson he won't forget," she shouted while the boy was trying to get away from her. "Grandmother, he is a boy who is hungry. Look at his clothes. Let him go. I will pay for the apple." "No, he is a bad boy and needs to be punished," she replied while the boy listened. "Grandmother, where would we all be if God made us pay for all we did wrong? God asks us to forgive as God forgives us. Do you have grandchildren?" This made her pause as she thought of her own grandchildren whom she loved but who lived far away. "Yes," she answered as she loosened her grip on the boy a little. Then Martin turned to the boy and said, "And you must ask her for forgiveness. I saw you take the apple." The boy offered his apology. As the woman bent down to pick up her things, the boy lifted them for her and offered to carry them to her home. Off they went down the road together.

Martin was cold and warmed himself by the fire. After he had cleaned up his tools, he sat down to eat what was left of his soup. He was wondering about his day and chuckled over his dream about his special visitor. Just then he heard footsteps behind him. When he turned around, it seemed to him that there were people standing in the dark corner of the room. He couldn't recognize them at first. "It is I," the voice said and out of the dark corner stepped Stepanitch, smiled and vanished. "It is I," the voice said once more and out of the shadows stepped the young woman with her baby. They smiled at him and vanished. "It is I," the voice said again and

there were the old woman and the boy smiling at him before vanishing from his sight. Finally, the voice spoke, "As much as you did to the least of them, you did it unto me."

And so it came to be that Christ did visit Martin that Christmas Eve. Martin had welcomed Christ well. Martin found himself blessed and lifted beyond his own despair. He had carried the Christ light of hope, peace, joy and love in his own life right where he was planted. This is the invitation of Christmas to all of us both to give and receive as we are able. Brother Roger of Taize¹ once said: "Making the earth a place where all can live, be they nearby or far away, is one of the beautiful pages of the Gospel for you to write by your life." May we be filled once again this night with the grace, courage and beauty to keep filling the pages of the Gospel in our own life and time. God lives all this with us, in and as our lives. Living in a Christ-soaked world, we are not alone. Thanks be to God!

¹ He founded the ecumenical Christian community in Taize, France. Their early work was to aid Jewish refugees. Taize is now a place where thousands of people gather to practice mutual welcome and deeper understanding.