

Maybe Christmas Doesn't Come from a Store

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You will recall from Dr. Suess's holiday "horror" story, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, that the devilish Grinch determined to rob Who-ville of every holiday treat. In a nefarious scheme in which the Grinch dressed as Santa himself, he moved through Who-ville taking every package, tree, ornament, and stocking. We now come upon him as he leaves the city, chuckling to himself in delight over the pain he will have caused children like little Cindy-Lou Who.

*Three thousand feet up! Up the side of Mt. Crumpit,
He rode with his load to the tiptop to dump it!
"Pooh-Pooh to the Whos!" he was grinch-ish-ly humming.
"They're finding out now that no Christmas is coming!
"They're just waking up! I know just what they'll do!
"Their mouths will hang open a minute or two
"Then the Whos down in Who-ville will all cry Boo-Hoo!
"That's a noise," grinned the Grinch,
"That I simply MUST hear!" So he paused. And the Grinch put his hand to his ear.
And he did hear a sound rising over the snow.
It started in low. Then it started to grow ...
But the sound wasn't sad!
Why, this sound sounded merry!
It couldn't be so!
But it WAS merry! VERY!
He stared down at Who-ville!
The Grinch popped his eyes!
Then he shook!
What he saw was a shocking surprise!
Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small,
Was singing! Without any presents at all!
He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming!
IT CAME!
Somehow or other, it came just the same!
And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,
Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?"
"It came without ribbons! It came without tags!
"It came without packages, boxes or bags!"
And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store.
Maybe Christmas ... perhaps ... means a little bit more!"
(Dr. Suess, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, New York: Random House, 1957.)*

Part of the purpose for telling the story of Christmas is to remind us that Christmas doesn't come from a store. Indeed, however delightful we feel about it, even as children, each year it "means a little bit more." And no matter how many times we read the biblical account of that evening in Bethlehem, we always come away with a thought—or two—we haven't had before.

There are so many lessons to be learned from the sacred account of Christ's birth that we always hesitate to emphasize one at the expense of all the others. Forgive me while I do just that in the time we have together here.

One impression which has persisted with me recently is that this is a story—in profound paradox with our own times—that this is a story of intense poverty. I wonder if Luke did not have some special meaning when he wrote *not* “there was no room in the inn” but specifically that “there was no room *for them* in the inn.” (Luke 2:7; italics added.) We cannot be certain, but it is my guess that money could talk in those days as well as in our own. I think if Joseph and Mary had been people of influence or means, they would have found lodging even at that busy time of year. I have wondered if the Inspired Version also was suggesting they did not know the “right people” in saying, “There was none to give room for them in the inns.” (JST, Luke 2:7.)

We cannot be certain what the historian intended, but we *do* know these two were desperately poor. At the purification offering which the parents made after the child's birth, a turtledove was substituted for the required lamb, a substitution the Lord had allowed in the Law of Moses to ease the burden of the truly impoverished. (See Lev. 12:8.)

The wise men did come later bearing gifts, adding some splendor and wealth to this occasion, but it is important to note that they came from a distance, probably Persia, a trip of several hundred miles at the very least. Unless they started long before the star appeared, it is highly unlikely that they arrived on the night of the babe's birth. Indeed, Matthew records that when they came Jesus was “a young child,” and the family was living in “a house.” (Matt. 2:11.)

Perhaps this provides an important distinction we should remember in our own holiday season. Maybe the purchasing and the making and the wrapping and the decorating—those delightfully generous and important expressions of our love at Christmas—should be separated, if only slightly, from the more quiet, personal moments when we consider the meaning of the Baby (and his birth) who prompts the giving of such gifts.

As happens so often if we are not careful, the symbols can cover that which is symbolized. In some of our lives the manger has already been torn down to allow for a discount store running three-for-a-dollar specials on gold, frankincense, and myrrh. I do not feel—or mean this to sound—like a modern-day Scrooge. The gold, frankincense, and myrrh were humbly given and appreciatively received, and so they should be, every year and always. As my wife and children can testify, no one gets more giddy about the giving and receiving of presents than I do.

But for that very reason, I, like you, need to remember the very plain scene, even the poverty, of a night devoid of tinsel or wrapping or goods of this world. Only when we see that single, sacred, unadorned object of our devotion—the Babe of Bethlehem—will we know why “tis the season to be jolly” and why the giving of gifts is so appropriate.

As a father I have recently begun to think more often of Joseph, that strong, silent, almost unknown man who must have been more worthy than any other mortal man to be the guiding foster father of the living Son of God. It was Joseph selected from among all men who would teach Jesus to work. It was Joseph who taught him the books of the law. It was Joseph who, in the seclusion of the shop, helped him begin to understand who he was and ultimately what he was to become.

I was a student at BYU just finishing my first year of graduate work when our first child, a son, was born. We were very poor, though not so poor as Joseph and Mary. My wife and I were both going to school,

both holding jobs, and in addition worked as head residents in an off-campus apartment complex to help defray our rent. We drove a little Volkswagen which had a half-dead battery because we couldn't afford a new one (Volkswagen *or* battery).

Nevertheless, when I realized that our own night of nights was coming, I believe I would have done any honorable thing in this world, and mortgaged any future I had, to make sure my wife had the clean sheets, the sterile utensils, the attentive nurses, and the skilled doctors who brought forth our firstborn son. If she or that child had needed special care at the Mayo Clinic, I believe I would have ransomed my very life to get it.

I compare those feelings (which I have had with each succeeding child) with what Joseph must have felt as he moved through the streets of a city not his own, with not a friend or kinsman in sight, nor anyone willing to extend a helping hand. In these very last and most painful hours of her "confinement," Mary had ridden or walked approximately 100 miles from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea. Surely Joseph must have wept at her silent courage. Now, alone and unnoticed, they had to descend from human company to a stable, a grotto full of animals, there to bring forth the Son of God.

I wonder what emotions Joseph might have had as he cleared away the dung and debris. I wonder if he felt the sting of tears as he hurriedly tried to find the cleanest straw and hold the animals back. I wonder if he wondered: "Could there be a more unhealthy, a more disease-ridden, a more despicable circumstance in which a child could be born? Is this a place fit for a king? Should the mother of the Son of God be asked to enter the valley of the shadow of death in such a foul and unfamiliar place as this? Is it wrong to wish her some comfort? Is it right He should be born here?"

But I am certain Joseph did not mutter and Mary did not wail. They knew a great deal and did the best they could. Perhaps these parents knew even then that in the beginning of his mortal life, as well as in the end, this baby son born to them would have to descend beneath every human pain and disappointment. He would do so to help those who also felt they had been born without advantage.

I've thought of Mary, too, this most favored mortal woman in the history of the world, who as a mere child received an angel who uttered to her those words that would change the course not only of her own life but also that of all human history: "Hail, thou virgin, who art highly favoured of the Lord. The Lord is with thee; for thou art chosen and blessed among women." (JST, Luke 1:28.) The nature of her spirit and the depth of her preparation were revealed in a response that shows both innocence and maturity: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word." (Luke 1:38.)

It is here I stumble; here that I grasp for the feelings a mother has when she knows she has conceived a living soul, feels life quicken and grow within her womb, and carries a child to delivery. At such times fathers stand aside and watch, but mothers feel and never forget. Again, I've thought of Luke's careful phrasing about that holy night in Bethlehem: "The days were accomplished that *she* should be delivered. And *she* brought forth *her* firstborn son, and [*she*] wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and [*she*] laid him in a manger." (Luke 2:6-7; italics added.) Those brief pronouns trumpet in our ears that, second only to the child himself, Mary is the chiefest figure, the regal queen, mother of mothers—holding center stage in this grandest of all dramatic moments. And those same pronouns also trumpet that, save for her beloved husband, she was very much alone.

I have wondered if this young woman, something of a child herself, here bearing her first baby, might have wished her mother, or an aunt, or her sister, or a friend, to be near her through the labor. Surely the birth of such a son as this should command the aid and attention of every midwife in Judea! We all might wish that someone could have held her hand, cooled her brow, and when the ordeal was over,

given her rest in crisp, cool linen. But it was not to be so. With only Joseph's inexperienced assistance, she herself brought forth her firstborn son, wrapped him in the little clothes she had knowingly brought on her journey, and perhaps laid him on a pillow of hay.

Then on both sides of the veil a heavenly host broke into song. "Glory to God in the highest," they sang, "and on earth, peace among men of good will." (Luke 2:14, Phillips Translation.) But except for heavenly witnesses, these three were alone: Joseph, Mary, the baby to be named Jesus.

At this focal point of all human history, a point illuminated by a new star in the heavens revealed for just such a purpose, probably no other mortal watched—none but a poor young carpenter, a beautiful virgin mother, and silent stabled animals who had not the power to utter the sacredness they had seen.

Shepherds would soon arrive and later, wise men from the East. Later yet the memory of that night would bring Santa Claus and Frosty and Rudolph—and all would be welcome. But first and forever there was just a little family, without toys or trees or tinsel. With a baby—that's how Christmas began. It is for this baby that we shout in chorus: "Hark! the herald angels sing Glory to the newborn king! ... Mild he lays his glory by, Born that man no more may die: Born to raise the sons of earth, Born to give them second birth." (*Hymns*, no. 60.)

Perhaps recalling the circumstances of that gift, of his birth, of his own childhood, perhaps remembering that purity and faith and genuine humility will be required of every celestial soul, Jesus must have said many times as he looked into the little eyes that loved him (eyes that always best saw what and who he really was), "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 18:3.)

Christmas, then, is for children—of all ages. I suppose that is why my favorite Christmas carol is a child's song. I sing it with more emotion than any other:

*Away in a manger, no crib for his bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down his wee head. ...
I love thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky
And stay by my side until morning is nigh. ...
Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay
Close by me forever and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in thy tender care,
And take us to heaven to live with thee there.
(Sing with Me, p. F-2.)*

"Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before! 'Maybe Christmas,' he thought, 'doesn't come from a store.'"

Ensign, Dec 1977, 63–65

From an address given to the Religious Instruction faculty at Brigham Young University, December 12, 1976