

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2011

Grace and peace to you this day in the name of the one who is born for us this night, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Stories of Christmas abound in traditions throughout the world and each year at our 5:00 Christmas Eve service, I choose one of them to tell the children of our congregation.

The one I told them earlier this evening is an old German tale about a five-year-old girl named Gretchen and her ten-year-old brother, Peter. Gretchen and Peter were the children of a poor woodcutter and his wife and they lived in a small village at the edge of a large forest. During the days just before Christmas, Gretchen and Peter would often find themselves in their village's toy shop that was just down the street from their house, and there they would dream of the gifts they wanted for Christmas. Peter's list ended up being pretty long. Except for the toys that were specifically for girls, there wasn't much in the shop that didn't appeal to him.

Gretchen's list was just the opposite of Peter's. Her list had only one item on it—a little box of blue dishes that contained a teapot, sugar bowl, cream pitcher and two little cups and saucers. Each time they would visit the toy shop, Peter and Gretchen would ask each other what they liked best. Each time, Peter's answer was different. Each time, Gretchen's answer was the same—the box of little blue dishes.

On the afternoon of Christmas Eve, Peter and Gretchen hung up their stockings over the fireplace of their house. After supper, they sat by the fire and talked about what they hoped to find in their stockings in the morning. Peter dreamed of more toys than his stocking could possibly hold, but Gretchen, of course, dreamed of only one. "I sure hope I will get those little blue dishes," she said to Peter, and with that, she went off to bed.

As soon as she was gone Peter ran to his room and opened the little bank he kept there. He only had five pennies in it, but he scooped those five pennies up, put them in his pocket, and raced over to the toy shop. He went up to the man behind the counter and asked, "What can I buy for five cents?"

"You can buy a little candy heart with a picture on it," said the man.

"But I want that set of little blue dishes," Peter said back.

"Oh, that set of dishes costs five dollars," said the man.

"Well, then I guess I will take the candy heart," said Peter disappointedly. He took the candy heart home, put it in Gretchen's stocking, and then went off to bed himself.

A little while later, Gretchen and Peter's father came home after a long, hard day of cutting wood in the forest. He was very tired and very cold, and very hungry. He sat for a moment by the fire to warm himself up and as he did so, he noticed the lump in the bottom of Gretchen's stocking. He pulled out the candy heart that Peter had purchased and because he was so hungry, he started eating it without even thinking about what he was doing.

When their father suddenly realized he was eating his daughter's Christmas present, he knew that he had to run out right away and get her something else for her stocking. He went to his wallet and looked inside. Five dollars was all he had. He took the five dollars and quickly went to the toy shop.

The owner of the shop was just about reading to close up when he got there. "What do you have for five dollars?" Gretchen and Peter's father asked the owner.

"Well, I am just about sold out of most things, but I do have this set of little blue dishes for five dollars," the owner replied.

"I'll take it," the children's father said.

He brought the dishes home, put them in his daughter's stocking, and then he, too, went to bed.

Early Christmas morning Gretchen and Peter jumped out of bed and came running to the fireplace to look at their stockings.

"Oh," cried Gretchen, "look what is in my stocking!"

She had found the set of little blues dishes and she was dancing for joy. Peter, however, was looking at his sister and her dishes with amazement. For the life of him he couldn't figure out how that candy heart he had bought her had changed overnight into a box of little blue dishes!

There is much about the birth of Jesus that defies our ability to explain it or even understand it. A virgin conceives and bears a child. This child is at the same time both fully God and fully human. This child comes to live for us, to die for us, to be raised for us. That God would love us so much that he would do this—this is a love greater than we can really comprehend, a love greater than anything we ourselves could muster.

So, we are somewhat like Peter in that story I just told. We can only look with amazement upon this story of the birth of Christ for us. For the life of us, we truly can't quite figure out how these things can be.

But the Father knows how and why these things have come to be. In Gretchen and Peter's story, their father knew how that candy heart became a set of little blue dishes. So, too, in the birth of Jesus, God knows fully how and why he has come into our lives in this child of Bethlehem, and

God asks that we not only look upon this story with amazement, but that we put our faith and trust in what he has done for us, and allow this story to change us and this world in which we live.

In a very real way we here tonight are like the shepherds in the story Luke tells of Jesus' birth. Those shepherds were going about the normal business of being shepherds, when angels came and summoned them, brought them to the manger to see the birth, and then sent them back to resume their work. We, too, gather together here tonight, taking time away from our usual tasks of life. We hear once again the story of Jesus' birth. We hear once again the song of the angels that proclaims peace on earth and God's favor to us. Then, we too, will be sent back into our world to resume our work. The question is, we will be any different for having come here this night? Will we allow this story of God's presence among us affect what we face each day of our lives? God is hoping that it will.

The last several years of my brother's life were pretty torturous for him. It wasn't until I went back to Ohio this month to attend to his funeral that I realized how bad things had really become for him. While I am still certainly grieving his death, one of the comforts I am finding is the knowing that for him, the torture has ended and he has been made well and whole and that he is now truly at peace. I am remembering in these days the witness of one of the saints of our tradition, a woman we know as Julian of Norwich, who once said that, in the end, God's word to us is simply this: All will be well, and all manner of things will be well. I grieve that my brother did not come to know a sense of peace and wellness in this life, but I am comforted to know this is precisely what he is now knowing in the resurrected life.

This is what the birth of Christ means for us: that in the end, all will be well, and all manner of things will be well. This is what is most amazing about the birth of Jesus, and even if we can't quite figure out how this will be, God knows how it will, and God is asking us to put our faith and trust in what he can do for us, and in what he can do in and through us.