

CHRISTMAS EVE, 1944

The following sermon was preached on December 24th, 1944 by Martin Niemöller while he was imprisoned in Dachau Concentration Camp.

Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Luke 2:10-12

When Christmas must be celebrated in captivity it is naturally a rather dismal affair. Ordinarily we human beings are really satisfied only when the holidays, as one says, “have finally been happily endured again.” And this is readily understood. There is no feast in the course of the year that moves us so deeply as Christmas, that brings back so many cherished and intimate memories, that awakens in us such strong and deep longings for what has been taken from us!

Thus it happens that in these holidays we feel somewhat uncertain about ourselves and actually fear continuously that we may lose control over ourselves. Bitterness in bearing the burden laid upon us and revolt against our lot are then particularly close to us. We must strive with innumerable contending feelings in our breast. And so it finally happens that we are really glad when the average daily routine again enfolds us and when the stormy waves of the emotions, which make us restless and uneasy, gradually subside again.

Under such circumstances there remains little chance for the joy of the heart, as we knew it formerly in the Christmas days and which used to make our souls spacious, luminous, and grateful. We are now indeed a “people that walked in darkness,” as the prophets said (Isa. 9:2), men who are tossed back and forth between fear and hope and who finally can find nothing better to do than to let things take their course.

But now the ancient proclamation sounds in our ears, those Christmas glad tidings with the angel’s announcement to the shepherds in the fields, that moving story of a babe in the manger who would bring to all people joy and salvation. Centuries have drawn comfort, joy, and hope from it; but today it looks almost as if the era of grace is finished, as if all this was merely an echoing sound which our ears still perceive, but which is no longer strong and powerful enough really to set human hearts in motion.

If we ask the reason for this, however, we obtain a simple, but significant answer: man has fallen into the habit of living his life without God. My dear friends, I do not wish to be misunderstood. I do not mean the people who call themselves “godless,” and for certain scientific, philosophical, or political reasons assert, “There is no God” —people with whom we cannot be classed. I mean decidedly ourselves, who are assembled here, who have not yet discontinued the practice of opening and closing the course of our days with prayer. But God often seems to us to be so infinitely far that we think He is not concerned with our planet. It does in fact really seem as if He had left this earth to its own devices, in order that mankind might at last destroy it completely. And from this notion it is but a narrow step to the distrustful question, “How could God be concerned with me, a small, miserable, little man, in a time when hundreds of thousands, and millions, perish dismally? Is that not utterly senseless and paradoxical?” The result of such thoughts, which actually force themselves upon us at this time, is that unconsciously we exclude the thought of God from what happens to us day by day, that we see only the human beings and the terrestrial conditions and base on them,

according to circumstances, either our hopes or our fears. This is the situation which I have in mind when I say “to live without God”; it prevents us from drawing from the Christmas story such comfort, joy, and hope as our fathers did.

Precisely in this plight of the heart the glad tidings of Christmas will bring us help, if only we hear the message properly, and believe it as the word which the living God speaks unto us and which we shall meditate for a moment.

There, then, lies the Babe in the manger. Innumerable poets have sung His praises, numberless painters have pictured Him, and since the days of our own childhood we see Him thus through our inner eye, crowned with a nimbus and transfigured with the romantic radiance which art and the poetry of the human spirit have poured upon that scene in the stable of Bethlehem.

The reality of the Gospel message ignores all this fictitious magic. In the tidings imparted to the shepherds only a twofold “sign” is named for them and for us, i.e., two matters which are significant for this Child and His identification: this Babe is wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. That is all. And what does this tell us? First of all, the Child that lies there wrapped in swaddling clothes is no less feeble and helpless than any other babe born into this world. The mother must care for Him lest he perish, must wrap Him in swaddling clothes lest He freeze to death, must nourish Him lest He die of hunger. So the swaddling clothes are a characteristic sign and presage for the life of the Man of whom it was said on a later day: “He saved others; Himself He cannot save” (Matt. 27:42). In the second place, the manger likewise is no mere pictorial feature for the enhancement of the poetry of Christmas; it is again a sign, a sign of the homelessness of this Babe: “there was no room for them in the inn.” The manger also is an omen, for the Babe was to grow into the Man who was forced to say of Himself, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head” (Matt. 8:20). These are the two signs given to the shepherds, and to us also.

But if we now look deeper and ask what the human helplessness and earthly homelessness of the Infant Jesus can tell us, then the tidings of great joy begin precisely here: God, the eternally wealthy and almighty God, enters into the most extreme human poverty imaginable. No man is so weak and helpless that God does not come to him in Jesus Christ, right in the midst of our human need; and no man is so forsaken and homeless in this world that God does not seek him, in the midst of our human distress.

Here the situation is therefore not as in the man-made religions. These require that we human beings set out to go to a distant deity, throned in its majesty above us in unattainable heights, on which we must laboriously climb—but without ever reaching the goal because our strength is simply not adequate. Here, conversely, God comes down to us and cares for us; and He does not single out the strong and good, in order to abandon to himself and to his fate the feeble and ill. Here, out of the swaddling clothes and the manger, comes this call unto us: “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Here takes place what the Apostle Paul comfortingly proclaims to us: “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor” (2 Cor. 8:9).

This is what is so singularly peculiar in the Christian message of salvation, which tells us, “You need not go to search for God; you should not imagine that He is far from you and is not concerned with what crushes you! He is here and is close to you in the Man who, as a Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, was lying in the manger. All your need is so far from being alien to Him that on the contrary He gave himself freely in order to bear it with you.”

Whoever can grasp this in faith is not forsaken in prison and in death; for in the worst darkness he may say, “Thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Ps. 23:4).

My dear friends, on this Christmas feast let us seek, in the Babe of Bethlehem, the One who came to us in order to bear with us everything that weighs heavily upon us. Then we will undoubtedly become aware of the great joy that is announced to us; and out of the brilliance that surrounded the shepherds a shining ray will fall into our darkness. This child is called “Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us” (Matt. 1:23). Yea, God Himself has built a bridge from Himself to us! A dawn from on high has visited us!

We have thus considered a single phase of the Christmas message, and it may seem that in this manner the essential has been said. But there is still another phase, and in the end it is even more important for us. For sure, the signs — swaddling clothes and manger—remain loyal to the man after the child has outgrown them. He goes on His way, onward into the depths of mankind: He becomes an itinerant preacher, followed by the common people while great men and scholars face Him with explicit skepticism, if they consent to notice Him at all. He becomes that peculiar kind of Saint who associates with publicans and sinners, with harlots and lepers. He becomes at last the “Man of Sorrows,” betrayed by His own disciple, understood by none of His friends, and even deserted by God’s hand —His earthly life ended on the cross (and that means on the gallows). “See, what a Man!” His whole life was a path of grief and woe, from the manger to a grave which was not even His property. Such is the life of this Child, as it unfolds before our eyes.

But God has placed His own superscription on this life; He sends us this message about this Child: “Unto you is born this day ... a Savior, which is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). Here more than comfort is at stake, as God inclines toward us; here salvation, deliverance from mortal need and danger are involved; for the word which our Bible translates as “Savior” means originally rescuer or deliverer, One bringing help when we ourselves are no longer able to help ourselves.

The Holy Scriptures do not leave in doubt what sort of need is meant here —from which only a Savior, a Deliverer, can rescue us. They speak plainly of sin and mean thereby our disobedience against God’s holy commandments, the impudent mutiny of the human creature against his Creator. And the Scriptures trace this perversion in the basic human attitude toward God back to the first beginnings of the human race and regard pessimistically all human striving for improving this condition: “Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). Death and judgment are the end; for “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23), and God “shall reward every man according to his works” (Matt. 16:27).

To recognize the truth of such a verdict we need not follow human history step by step; a glance at our own heart and life — when they are honorable — shows us more clearly than all examples that we cannot abide one instant before the holy God and His commandments, and that in reality all the misery of our lives is well deserved if, yes, if there is a God in heaven who demands of us obedience to His holy will. This bad conscience is consequently almost always the secret mainspring of all crass or refined atheism and godlessness. For who could ever have found a way to redeem himself from his bad conscience, and therefore from his sins, other than to deny God, or to forget Him, or at least try to forget Him, and to place himself in God’s place as his own legislator and lord?

Yet no one can escape from the grasp of God! “Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from Thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in

hell, behold Thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me” (Ps. 139:7-10). There is no escaping from God and none may elude His judgment. It is therefore hardly astonishing that this earth is becoming more and more a hell, that a battle of all against all rages here; but it is astonishing when, to this human world, these tidings are proclaimed: “Unto you is born this day ... a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

Of course *how* this promised salvation will occur, *how* our deliverance takes place, is not told us in the Christmas Gospel; but it had already been foreshadowed and ushered in. The seer of Isaiah 53 had foreseen it: “Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows.” A pious man has coined this fine saying, “The passion of Christ begins with His swaddling clothes.” In Christ, God Himself brings the deliverance which we are unable to secure for ourselves: He not only inclines toward us, but lifts us toward Himself: “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jer. 31:34). Christ, the “God with us,” is also the “God for us,” and we may joyfully cry out, “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31).

That is truly a proclamation which deserves the name “great joy.” Fear may now withdraw: “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.” Surely this is a joy which passeth all understanding; for it concerns God’s work and activity, and how could we understand that? This joy is more than what we human beings may ever dare to expect and hope. But it is an object of petition, it is to be believed. And who believes has!

It is to the shepherds that was given the first information about the Savior who lies as a babe in the manger. They are simple, plain, people: “to the poor” is the gospel preached (Luke 4:18). They certainly did not have unlimited wishes and no grandiose hopes for their earthly existence; they assuredly did not dream of a Paradise on earth that was soon to come. And whoever does so will always disregard the Biblical tidings about Christ. But he who wishes to reach again an agreement with God and seeks peace of mind may and must be helped. The glad tidings of Christmas proclaim to him: “God is near, to help you; Jesus Christ, your brother and your Savior, is here; fear not, only believe!”

And we, dear friends, who are cut off from the outside world, inactive spectators of all men’s battles and convulsions, we who have daily many hours to gaze inwardly and to understand ourselves clearly, we who often miss so painfully the peace of mind because we do not look at God and His word, but rather at mortals and their doings — should not our inward hearing be especially receptive to the tidings brought to us by the Christmas gospel? Should not the saying about the “great joy” concern us in particular, since we know fear—fear of death as well as fear of life? Let us therefore today, on this holy Christmas Eve, beseech the Lord Jesus Christ that He, who came as a Babe into a world alienated from God in order to save it, may enter also into us, bring us His salvation, and grant us His joy! Amen.