

Miracles and Lost Causes  
Philippians 2:5–11  
Tuesday, December 24, 2024

Let us pray: Lord, may the good news of this night echo through the centuries to meet us here, that we may find in your Word the hope, peace, joy, and love that we need, in Christ. Amen.

Three years ago, I was in a store looking at books, when I came across one that I hadn't heard of before. It was a children's book about Christmas, and after reading the description and flipping through a few pages, I thought that it might be fun to read with our kids. There were just enough chapters that, if we read one each night, we would finish on Christmas Eve. So I got the book, took it home, and at first, all three of them were listening to me read it. But after the first sentence in the third chapter, which said, "Dad didn't live with them anymore after that," the boys were like, "Nope. Don't want to read this anymore." And I was thinking, "Maybe I should have read this on my own first...." But it was just me and Emily. For weeks and weeks, we read this book together every night. And when we finished, we made a pact that we would never read that book together again.

How many of you have heard of a book called *The Christmas Pig*? Well, get ready, because I am about to tell you about the saddest book that has ever been written in the history of the world. *The Christmas Pig* tells the story of a 7-year-old boy named Jack and his favorite stuffed animal in the world, a pig named DP. (DP is short for Dur Pig, because when Jack was really little, he couldn't say *the* pig, just *dur* pig, so they called it Dur Pig or *DP*.) DP is Jack's very best friend. He can tell DP all of his secrets, and DP understands. DP makes him feel safe, even when things are scary. The two of them are inseparable.

Well, on Christmas Eve, Jack and his stepsister get into a fight, and she grabs DP from him and throws it out the window of the car. They go back to look for it, but there is too much traffic and snow, and they can't find it. DP is lost, and Jack is absolutely inconsolable. Jack's family goes out and buys a replacement pig that is almost identical to DP, except as any parent who has ever tried to replace a stuffed animal knows, it's *not*. They name the new pig CP or Christmas Pig, but Jack hates him, wants nothing to do with him, throws him across the room, and cries himself to sleep.

Late that night, Jack wakes up and hears voices that he does not recognize talking in his room. It turns out that all of his toys and stuffed animals have come to life, and they are talking about how to help him. Jack can't believe it; he thinks he's dreaming. But the new pig, CP, tells Jack that his *old* pig, DP, has gone to the Land of the Lost, where things go when you lose them. No living boy has ever been to the Land of the Lost before, but the Christmas Pig tells Jack that he can take him there to rescue DP, because Christmas Eve is the night for miracles and lost causes.

So Jack magically shrinks down to the size of his toys and goes to the Land of the Lost. He and CP have all kinds of adventures trying to find DP and bring him back. Eventually, they *do* find him, and Jack is overjoyed. He hugs DP and laughs and cries and says, "CP, we did it!" And then he realizes that the Christmas Pig is not there. He has sacrificed himself so that Jack could find DP, because Jack's happiness was more important to him than his own. (This was where the sobbing started.)

Jack realizes that he has come to *love* the Christmas Pig, because he's the best and bravest pig there ever was, and they've been through so much together. And when Jack sees how happy and safe DP is in the Land of the Lost, he decides to let him stay there and go rescue the Christmas

Pig from the Loser, who rules the Land of the Lost and eats lost things, causing them to be lost forever. Jack can't bear the thought of the Christmas Pig being lost forever, so he and DP hug one last time. Jack thanks him for being his very best friend, and they say goodbye, as Jack goes off to rescue the Christmas Pig. (At this point the sobbing was so hard that I didn't know if we were going to be able to *finish* the book.) But Jack *does* rescue the Christmas Pig, they make it back to the Land of the Living just before midnight on Christmas Eve, and they live happily ever after.

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I was rereading the book last week to refresh my memory for this, and when Emily saw it on my nightstand, she said, "Why do you have that book out...?" When I told her that I was going to be talking about it tonight, her response was basically, "*Why* would you *do* that? On *Christmas Eve*? You're going to make everyone sad!" So let me tell you why. Because as I was reading this story, it reminded me of Jesus, who left the Land of the Living to come to the Land of the Lost and sacrificed his own life out of love, so that *we* could live. Because *our* lives were more important to him than *his own*.

It's like Paul says to the Philippians, "Even though Jesus was God, he didn't take advantage of that, but he emptied himself out, being born in human likeness, and he humbled himself to the point of death on a cross." This isn't a reading that we typically hear at Christmas, but it is so perfectly fitting. Because Christmas is not *just* about the birth of a baby. That's only the *beginning* of the story. Christmas is about sacrificial love. Mary sacrificing her reputation for God. Joseph sacrificing his pride for Mary. God giving up the glories of heaven to come to earth to live as one of us, dying that we might be forgiven, and then rising from the dead so that we could truly live new lives with God and with each other, now and forever.

God did not come to us as a powerful king or a mighty warrior, but as a helpless baby. Jesus did not save the world by *conquering* his enemies, but by *loving* them and *forgiving* them and *sacrificing* himself for them. And it is for *that* reason that he was exalted by God and given “the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God.” Not because he gained power through violence or force or lording his authority over others, but because he emptied himself out in sacrificial love, so that we would always know how much God loves us. Enough to give up the glories of heaven for us. Enough to give up his *life* for us.

*This* is the one whose birth we celebrate tonight. The one who shows us that *peace* and *glory* and *power* come, not when we fill ourselves up and have everything we need. Peace and glory and *real* power come when we empty ourselves out in sacrificial love for one another, that *they* might have what they need to live the fullness of life.

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Paul talks about *Jesus* this way to the Philippians, but he also says, “Let this same mind be in *you*.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and author who left Germany when Hitler rose to power in the 1930s. He could have lived out the rest of his life comfortably, teaching at a seminary in America. But instead he went back to Germany to speak out against Hitler. And it ended up costing him his life. But before he died, he wrote this from a German concentration camp: “Who among us will celebrate Christmas correctly? Whoever finally lays down all power, all honor, all reputation, all vanity, all arrogance, all individualism beside the manger;

whoever remains lowly and lets God alone be high; whoever looks at the child in the manger and sees the glory of God precisely in his lowliness.”<sup>1</sup>

We live in a world where so many people insist on *their own* way, seek to fulfill their own needs. But what this night shows us is that that is not the way of God. In Jesus Christ, God laid down all power and honor and reputation and vanity and arrogance and individualism and came to us in lowliness. And he calls us to do the same. To love one another. To look to the needs of the other. To give ourselves up for each other. *That* is how we celebrate Christmas.

And what this night shows us is that it is never too late to start doing that. What Scrooge and the Grinch and George Bailey and Jack and the Christmas Pig show us is that it is never too late to start being the kind of person that you want to be. Because tonight is the night for miracles and lost causes. And the greatest miracle of all is that there *are no lost causes*. Tonight is the night when we can kneel by the manger in *our* lowliness, in our loneliness, in our fear and anxiety, in our grief and pain, in our joy and our hope, and know that Christ came *to us*, to bring us back to the land of the living. Tonight is the night when we can *all* be transformed. We can *all* become more patient and kind and loving. We can *all* become more generous. We can *all* seek and extend forgiveness. Tonight is the night when nothing is impossible and no one is too far gone. Tonight is the night when Christ can be born in *all of us*, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God Is in the Manger*.