

## THE LITTLE MAN JESUS

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*For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)*

Jesus said that it is more blessed to give than it is to receive. But let's face it: it takes two to tango, and receiving gifts can be just as tricky as giving them. Let me tell you about a time I was not a good receiver of a gift. When I was growing up my older brother and I were passionate players with those little plastic immovable toy figures, each about two inches high. We called them "little men," and we must have had hundreds of them: soldiers, cowboys, Indians. But the little man I wanted above all others was a turquoise, rather plain figure. My brother already had one that he carried around with him and played with so much that it was worn smooth. I wanted exactly the same thing.

At one point my father was away on an extended trip, and when he returned he had presents for all of us. Mine was a turquoise little man. Out of the goodness of his heart my father had gone shopping for what he thought was the object of my desire. Unfortunately, shopping for anything was not my father's forte, and although the little man he bought was turquoise, it was not the one I wanted. This one wore a cowboy hat, and cowboy pants. It simply wouldn't do, and I said as much as I revved up into a major temper tantrum. I took the little man out back and threw it in the dirt, and continued to stew in anger and disappointment for the rest of the day. You see, I have not always been the remarkably cheerful person that I am today!

At length my parents must have had enough. Dad sat me down for a scolding. He told me that he'd tried his best, that the little man was a gift, and that my rejection of it had really hurt his feelings. What he said and how he said it got through to me. Even at my young age I wished I could turn the clock back and undo the things I ought not to have done, but I knew that the moment was lost. Many years later I asked my father if he remembered the incident, and he claimed to have no recollection of it. Not so for me; I remember it still. Beware of giving gifts, and beware of receiving them. It is tricky business.

*For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.* Of course, with the sound of these familiar words, our minds turn towards Christmas. But the truth is, the words date from a time some seven centuries before the birth of Jesus, and to understand them fully we must encounter a man who has never appeared in any Christmas pageant or nativity scene. The man's name was Ahaz, and he was the king of Judah during the late 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. For the tiny nation of Judah it was a time of tremendous anxiety and fear. To the east of them was the mighty, massive nation of Assyria, bent on world domination. To the north were the smaller nations of Israel and Syria. The kings of Israel and Syria wanted to form an alliance with Ahaz to stand against the giant Assyrian army. But Ahaz refused the alliance, knowing that even their combined forces would be ineffective. Thus, the kings of Israel and Syria went to war against Ahaz to force him into the alliance. Israel and Syria took up siege positions around Jerusalem, and the heart of Ahaz, and the heart of his people shook with fear as the trees of the forest shake before the wind (*Isaiah 7:2*). Imagine yourself standing on the walls of Jerusalem. You are Ahaz, and everywhere you look you see a hostile army arrayed against you. The world is crashing in on you. You are frightfully alone. It is not good to be the king.

Just about this time, just as Ahaz was checking the water supply to see if Jerusalem could withstand the siege, God sent the prophet Isaiah to give the king a gift. Isaiah told Ahaz not to fear. Judah would not perish at the hands of her enemies. God's gift was an invitation to trust. Fear not. Ahaz found Isaiah's words impossible to believe, so God gave him a sign that would be a tangible token of the promise. Isaiah pointed to a young woman standing with him and said, *Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.* And by the time the child is about two years old, this crisis before you will be forgotten (Isaiah 7:10-17). Isaiah went on to say, *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.* If you focus on the child, Ahaz, and not on the problems surrounding you, you will endure. The child is a sign that God is with you. Immanuel.

How do you think Ahaz responded to God's gift? Well, let's put it this way: the little man he got was not the one he wanted. I can even imagine Ahaz revving up into a king sized temper tantrum. *"Thanks ever so much, Isaiah, but a child is not what I need right now! How about a legion of angels, or at least few divisions of troops to clear up my problems?"* So Ahaz rejected the little man who was God's gift. Ahaz didn't understand it. Rather than trusting God's sign of Immanuel – God's gift not to fear – Ahaz panicked and sold himself and his people into the service of the Assyrian king. Ahaz sold out to the biggest bully on the block. Yes, it takes two to tango, but Ahaz was completely out of step with God. Beware of giving gifts, and beware of receiving them. It is tricky business.

Seven centuries later God was preparing to give the gift again, but this time some people were willing to receive it. Not all of them, mind you, but some of them. You know the cast of characters all too well. You know Mary, barely a teenager when the angel Gabriel visited her with the news that she would conceive and bear a son named Jesus. It was hardly the perfect gift for an unmarried Jewish peasant girl, but Mary said, Yes, *behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.* You know Joseph, Mary's espoused husband. When he learned of Mary's unusual pregnancy, he no more understood nor trusted her story than Ahaz did Isaiah's words. Joseph contemplated calling off the marriage. But unlike Ahaz he decided not to fear, and to receive the child as a gift from God. You know the shepherds. We've heard how the angels said to them: *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.* Immanuel. God is with us. Here was the same invitation to trust and not to fear. Unlike Ahaz of long ago, they received the gift. They came in haste to see the child, and went away glorifying God.

Make of the pageant cast what you will. If the skeptic in you registers alarm over choirs of angels singing to shepherds, and a star in the sky coming to rest over where the young child lay, be of good cheer. Fear not that you are becoming the Grinch or Scrooge. You can still celebrate Christmas in all its depth of meaning and glory. You see, apart from Mary and Joseph, we stake no truth claims whatsoever on who might have peered into the crib of Jesus: be they shepherds, Wise Men, or a girl with a torch named Jeanette Isabella. Rather, what the Gospel writers Matthew and Luke want us to take from the story is essentially two things: First, that when Mary was great with child, *the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger.* At a certain time and place, Jesus was born. Second, they want us to understand that in the birth of Jesus, God visited us in a unique way. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19)," is how St. Paul would phrase it.

So let's turn the clock forward again – this time two-thousand years until we reach today. Today, God is giving the gift of himself again. Yes, Christmas comes once more, but we needn't think that it's only in this season when God comes to us. By the power of the Spirit, God is

available and accessible to us each and every day. I'm sure you know the unwritten rule of the social climber: always entertain up. Well, God respects no such rule of engagement. God entertains down. God comes down from the heights of his transcendent otherness through the mysteries of being and existence to visit humanity. Down he comes through the dimensions of time and space to dwell among us, so that we could behold his glory. Down he comes through culture, myth, and prophecy to be born of Mary at a specific time in a certain place. Down from heaven above to earth he came in the birth of Jesus. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, God came down. Love came down at Christmas. In Jesus, God humbled himself to be born in our likeness. God emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.

I once heard a clergy colleague tell a story about going shopping to buy a gift for his wife. He wanted to purchase a cross necklace for her, so he went to a jewelry store and asked the young lady behind the counter what was available. The clerk brought out a number of samples and began commenting on them: "Ooh, isn't this one pretty?" "Oh my, that one's very nice." "And look at this one; isn't that interesting: this one has a little man on it." Yes, the little man Jesus went all the way to the cross, and stretched out his arms on the hard wood so that all of us might come within his saving embrace. God entertains down – down to you and me, down to the places of our deepest pain. There was no room in the inn, but he found room on the cross for us and for our salvation. Immanuel. God with us.

What will you do with him? I mean, really: what *will* you do with him this year? I warn you, receiving a gift is every bit as tricky as giving one. I warn you: God's gift of Jesus is not the little man you may have ordered. God's gift of Jesus is not a recipe for triumph and success, not a new code of morality to live up to, not a new set of laws to follow, not a new or more religion to inflict on yourself. Instead, the little man is a sign of God with us. Instead, the child is the gift of a relationship with a living person – Jesus Christ. Will you, can you receive God's gift this year?

Perhaps in the past year, like old King Ahaz, you have faced your armies; it has not been a good year to be you. Perhaps you have stood on the walls of your life in 2016, and everywhere you have looked you have seen a bereavement, or a sickness, or a loss, or trouble. Perhaps you are trapped and have gone nowhere and nothing has happened that you'd hoped would happen. What will you do? Well, Like Ahaz of long ago you can brood and fret and panic over all that is arrayed against you. You can essentially orient your life around your problems and sell yourself to these hostile powers. Or you can orient your life around the gift of God. You can take the child in by trusting God's gift of Immanuel.

So will it be your problems, or God's promise that defines you? Remember the words of St. John's Gospel (1:11-12): *He came unto his own, but his own received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.*

And hear again the gift of Immanuel: *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.*

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