

“THE GREAT BIG BOOK OF CHRISTMAS (#1):
THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS”

(Luke 21:25-36)

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[East Cobb U.M.C.; 11-29-09]

-I-

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read Text: Luke 21:25-36 and Pray.
2. [Dramatic Reading: “A Visit from St. Nicholas / ‘Twas The Night Before Christmas”]
3. Christmas is a time for stories: stories that inspire hope, promote love and motivate peace – stories that foster joy, and help us believe again in Christmas.

A–And throughout the centuries, many such stories have been written and shared throughout the world that convey these feelings and experiences about Christmas.

B–Some have been made into poems, many into songs, and still others simply as prose.

C–But in whatever form, whenever we hear them, they remind us of the joy and magic of the Christmas holidays.
4. But what do they have to do with the biblical meaning of Christmas (if at all)?

A–Well, for the next four weeks – during the Christian season known as “Advent” (or “coming”) – I want us to spiritually prepare for Christmas through a series called The Great Big Book of Christmas, ...

B–...in which I’ll be inviting us pretend that we’re little kids again, sharing in some of the classic secular holiday songs, poems, and stories, but then also connecting these to the true story and meaning of Christmas as found in the Bible.

-II-

5. Today we begin with the famous poem you heard [Joe Harden] read just before this message.

A–Originally titled “*An Account of a Visit from Saint Nicholas*,” it’s better known today simply as “*‘Twas the Night Before Christmas*.”

B–It’s been commonly attributed to an Episcopalian minister named Clement Clarke Moore, who wrote it in 1822 merely as a fun story for his three young daughters.

C–It took a while to be published,¹ but when it finally was, it became so popular that by the mid-20th century it was largely responsible for our contemporary iconic image of Santa Claus – his looks, his mannerisms, the details about his reindeer and sleigh, how he gets into homes, and so on... all were first articulated in this poem.²

D—And yet, even though it’s a nostalgic and fun story that many of us experience every year, if we read and hear it carefully, we see that at it’s heart is a story about watchfulness and preparation – a story that says “*Saint Nicholas is coming... so watch out, and get ready!*”

6. Well, it’s no accident that today’s scripture from Luke 21 conveys this same sense of watchfulness and preparation concerning future events – only here the story is *not* about the coming of a “*jolly old elf*” in a red suit, but none other than the king of the universe himself!
 [Contemp. Service ONLY: Let me read it to you... (Read Luke 21:25-36, MSG)]

A—Now notice: here at the beginning of the holiday season, when all the stores are decorated, carols are playing, and TV commercials advertise sales and specials, not only is there nothing in this reading associated with the *secular* holiday tradition, but neither is there anything of the *biblical* Christmas story, either (at least on the surface).

1—Nothing is here of the virgin Mary and child, of shepherds and heavenly choirs, of the little town of Bethlehem, or of three Wise Men and a star.

2—Instead, we find a story about the shaking of heaven and earth in perplexity, fear, and foreboding about the coming again of Jesus.³

B—So what’s this all about? and what does it have to do with Advent and Christmas?

7. Well, remember I said earlier that “Advent” means “coming”? This is a reference to the fact that during the four weeks of Advent leading up to Christmas, we celebrate the “comings” of Jesus: ...in the *past* as a baby; in the *present* in our own lives through the power of the Holy Spirit; and in the *future* in glory as the King of kings.

A—And so, today’s scripture is meant to start with the *end* in mind (the future) and remind us that the baby we celebrate from the *first* Christmas, and the presence of Christ we experience *now* are all part of God’s ultimate plan & purpose for the *whole* universe.⁴

1—They may not be “Christmas stories” in the sense that they deal with Jesus’ birth, but they remind us that these “Christmas stories” themselves are part of something much larger that connect the past with the present and the future – ...

2—...That we can’t read, hear, or properly celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas without *also* understanding the reason for which he came – to demonstrate God’s love in such a way that one day the whole universe will answer to Him!⁵

B—Now, we don’t understand the details of exactly how or when this will all take place, nor do we need to (and we need to be suspicious of anyone who claims to, because the Bible says even the angels don’t know these details!⁶)

1—But like it did for the people for whom it was originally written, this story IS meant to offer *hope* and *promise* for the future in the midst of the challenges of today.

2–Remember Verse 28? ...(MSG) “*When all this starts to happen, up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way!*” (NRSV) “*When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*”

C–You see, Christmas is about hope that there’s a better future coming, and that that better future is made possible by God’s ultimate sovereignty over history and time itself.

8. And so, today’s scripture ends (Verses 34-36) by telling us that this awareness should produce in us a certain watchfulness about our own lives today.

A–As Bible scholar William Barclay puts it, “*We must live [today] in the shadow of eternity, in the certainty that we are [ones] who are [preparing] or [unpreparing] ourselves to appear in the presence of God.*”⁷

B–In other words, as Jesus’ followers, we need to beware of having divided attentions, of squandering away time, or of devoting ourselves to matters of ultimately trivial concern.

C–...Because in the end, both “*The Night Before Christmas*” poem, and this apocalyptic teaching from Luke 21 ultimately do the same thing: ...they tell a story about the *future* that’s so compelling that we’ll want to live life right *today*.⁸

–III–

9. Several years ago author Edward Gionest wrote a poem in the style of Clement Moore’s original classic that attempted to make this connection even clearer. It went like this:

*'Twas the night before Jesus came and all through the house
Not a creature was praying, not one in the house.*

*Their Bibles were lain on the shelf without care in hopes that Jesus would not come there.
The children were dressing to crawl into bed, not once ever kneeling or bowing a head.*

*And Mom in her rocker with baby on her lap was watching the Late Show while I took a nap.
When out of the East there arose such a clatter,
I sprang to my feet to see what was the matter.*

*Away to the window I flew like a flash, tore open the shutters and threw up the sash!
When what to my wondering eyes should appear but angels proclaiming that Jesus was here.*

*With a light like the sun sending forth a bright ray
I knew in a moment this must be ‘The Day!’
The light of His face made me cover my head; It was Jesus! returning just like He had said.*

*And though I possessed worldly wisdom and wealth
I cried when I saw Him in spite of myself.
In the Book of Life which He held in His hand was written the name of every saved human.*

*He spoke not a word as He searched for my name;
When He said "It's not here" my head hung in shame.
The people whose names had been written with love
He gathered to take to His Father above.*

*With those who were ready He rose without a sound
While all the rest were left standing around.
I fell to my knees, but it was too late; I had waited too long and thus sealed my fate.
I stood and I cried as they rose out of sight; Oh, if only I had been ready tonight.*

*In the words of this poem the meaning is clear; the coming of Jesus is drawing near
There's only one life & when comes the last call we'll find that the Bible was true after all!⁹*

10. [PRAYER]

ENDNOTES:

1. In fact, while it was a family friend who first published it in 1823, she did so without Moore's consent. When he found out she had had it published, he asked for his name to be withheld as the author. It wasn't until 30 years later that he gave permission for his name to appear as author.
2. Information from www.holidaydecorations.com, and www.carols.org. There is some doubt as to whether the poem originated with Moore (see article in www.holidaydecorations.com). However, he is the one to which the poem is most commonly attributed.
3. We often read these verses *today* as references to some future coming of Christ (and there are certainly other scriptures that point to this). But when Jesus originally shared these words with his Disciples, he was more than likely referring either to some of the events that would surround his own crucifixion and death, to events surrounding the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D., or to *both*. But regardless of *when* we interpret *these* verses to apply, the moral and meaning is much the same as what we find in "The Night Before Christmas": watch out and be ready, *whenever* the "day of days" happens!
4. Part of the reason Christmas has always had such appeal is because it highlights humanity's search for ultimate meaning and purpose in life. Our celebration of it makes us feel good, and if we didn't have it, then we'd still make up some other holiday as an excuse to celebrate goodness, kindness, peace on earth, and the doing of good for others. And yet, part of the appeal of the *biblical* Christmas story is not only that it offers a personal connection with these things, but also offers a way for us to connect with a much *larger* story – the story of God's interaction and relationship with humanity itself.
5. These passages remind us that, far from being an single, isolated event, the birth of Jesus was merely *one part* of God's ultimate plan for all of history – that, in the words of Bible scholar William Barclay, "*History is going somewhere.... that it has a goal; and at that goal, Jesus Christ will be Lord of all*" (William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), p. 272).
6. Read Matthew 24:36 and Mark 13:32.
7. William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), p. 272.
8. For example, it encourages us to ask ourselves, "*If we knew we were going to see Jesus (or Santa Claus) tomorrow, then what would we give priority to today?*" THAT is a decision and a choice that will make our lives better in the "here and now" And it is *precisely* what it means to "watch" for Jesus!
9. Poem "'Twas the Night Before Jesus Came", by Edward M. Gionest (egionest@usa.net).