

IN SIN AND ERROR PINING...

It was Bethlehem, the end of a long night. The star had just disappeared, and the last pilgrim had left the stable. The Virgin arranged the straw; at last the Child could sleep. But who can sleep the night of Christmas? Gently the door opens, so gently that it seems more like the wind than a hand. A woman appears on the threshold, covered with rags. She was so old and wrinkled that you would have thought her mouth was one more deep wrinkle in a face the color of dirt.

A fearful chill came over Mary when she saw her as if a malicious fairy had come into the room. Fortunately Jesus was asleep. The ass and the ox placidly continued munching their hay, as if there was nothing unusual, as if they had known her forever. The Virgin didn't take her eyes off her. The woman walked slowly, each step seeming to take centuries. She continued, the old woman, and approached the manger. Thank God, Jesus was still sleeping. But who can sleep on Christmas night? Suddenly he opened his eyelids. His mother was completely astonished to see that the eyes of the old woman and his eyes were exactly the same, they both shone with the same hope.

The old woman sank down on the straw. One hand disappeared into her rags, looking for something, taking ages to find it. Mary watched her closely, still concerned. The animals watched her too, but always without surprise, as if they knew beforehand what was going to happen. Finally, after a long time, slowly, tiredly, the old woman pulls out of her clothes a little object hidden in her hand, and gives it to the child. All the treasures of the Wise Men and the offerings of the Shepherds, what could this present be? From where she was Mary could not tell. She saw only the shoulders bowed down, the woman's back, bent over from age, now bent over even more before the crib, and the Child within it. The ox and the ass watched, and were not amazed. The woman stayed bowed before the Child for a long time. Finally she arose, as if relieved from a great weight which had dragged her down to the ground. Her shoulders were no longer bowed down, her head almost touched the low roof, her face seemed miraculously renewed, as if she was finding once more the vigor of her youth. She turned from the crib, smiled at Mary and went out through the door into the dawning day.

Finally, Mary could see the mysterious present. An apple, a little apple, having within it all the sin of the world, given to the baby Jesus by Eve, for it was her, the old woman, who had come to worship the Child born of her blood, who would save her from her sins. The apple of the original sin, and the sin of so many who would follow her. And the little red apple shone in the hands of the Child, as if it were the globe of the kingdom and the new world which had just been born with the King.

“A people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” We are in the darkness. For much of our lives we live in the dark. Who will lead us through the darkness? Who will lead us into the light? Who will be light for us? My mom will no longer go to sleep if there is not some light on in her room, at least a small lamp on her night table. She is less afraid if the light is on. It is primordial.

The darkness breeds fear and the fear slowly paralyzes us. We become prisoners of the darkness. Prisoners of our fears. Prisoners of our sins. In the story I just read, Eve comes seeking—and she comes in the dark. And she brings her sin with her. And she gives it to the Child. That is really what He wants us to do. Give him our sins—believe in his power. Believe in his way. Believe in Him.

The light that Christ brings is not a light that strikes fear but often we react with fear. The angel Gabriel tells Zechariah not to be afraid and Mary, “Do not be afraid, Mary,” and Joseph, “Do not be afraid to take Mary into your home,” and the shepherds are told not to be afraid.

Sin is not all there is. There is grace—grace in abundance. Transforming grace. It is not true that things can never change; that hearts do not soften; that lives do not turn around; that sickness is not overcome. “Long lay the world in sin and error pining till he appeared and the soul found its worth.”