

Well, here we are -- it's Christmas Day. We've traveled through Advent, with hope, peace, joy and love lighting our way. We've traveled through Scripture and carols to greet the Bright Star of the Morning--Jesus Christ.

We have connected to the wonder of God come among as Emmanuel; and we have, from the perspective of over 2000 years, the knowledge that Jesus--the Christ--the Messiah changed the world forever.

However, this day, with all its joyfulness and thanksgiving will eventually fade as Christmas ends. We'll be putting away the manger scene, the decorations, re reading and putting away the holiday cards we received.

Things will go back to normal--the mundane--the worldly. So, as it is each year, the challenge will be to keep the light, the warmth and love of Emmanuel with us.

I have a story that I'll be reading to you this morning, entitled "The Rabbi's Gift." It has been a long time--in several versions. I'll be reading, for the most part, Dr. Scott Peck's version from his book *The Different Drum*. It just may help us in the days ahead.

Before I begin, will you pray with me:

Gracious God, be in our eyes and our seeing, our ears and our hearing, our mouths and our speaking, and in our hearts and our loving. May we learn from your word, the gift of your Son Emmanuel, and the Rabbi's gift, how to live from today on. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **The Rabbi's Gift**

There was once a great monastery that had fallen on hard times. Over some decades in the past, it had been filled with over a hundred monks. Townspeople would come and sit on the lawns, to listen to the bells, and the chanting of the monks' choir.

But gradually, and for a variety of reasons, the monastery's numbers had dwindled. And as the numbers dwindled, the atmosphere changed. Chores didn't get done. The grass on the lawn looked like a hayfield. There was less and less singing. Eventually, there were only the abbot and four monks remaining and they were all in their seventies.

They had difficulty keeping up their spirits. In fact, you might say they were dispirited for moaning and complaining were heard more and more. For the most part, they were able to keep their complaints about each other to themselves, but negative thoughts would sneak in--brother so & so is always praying instead of doing his tasks; and that one is getting more and more crotchety; isn't he possibly getting too self-righteous---and so it went, in what seemed a downward spiral.

It was nearing the end of another year, and the abbot wondered how long they could continue to exist. Now it just so happened that in the nearby woods was a hut. The rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used it as a hermitage. The monks, after all their years of prayer and contemplation, had become a bit psychic and so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage.

"The rabbi is in the woods; the rabbi is in the woods again," they would whisper to each other. When the abbot heard the monks whispering a thought struck him. I've never met the rabbi. I wonder if by some chance, he might be able to give me some advice that would save the monastery.

So off he went. The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is. The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore."

So the old abbot and old rabbi wept together. They read parts of the Torah and spoke of deep things. The day passed quickly and began to darken outside and the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here.

"Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give you. The only thing I can tell you is that "the Messiah is among you." The abbot left somewhat puzzled as to what that might mean.

When he returned to the monastery, his fellow monks gathered around him asking, "Well, what did the rabbi say?"

"He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. There was one thing he said though, just as I was leaving--it was something cryptic--he said that the Messiah is among us. I don't really know what he meant by that."

In the days and weeks that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is among us? The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one?

Brother Thomas thought to himself, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. Father Abbot, on the other hand, had been thinking about Brother Thomas. Brother Thomas was certainly a holy man--a man of light. Brother Thomas thought I wonder about Brother Elred. He gets crotchety at times, but come to think of it, Elred is virtually always right about things--very right. Brother Elred was

considering Brother Phillip. Phillip always seemed so passive, a kind of nobody. But when you really think about it, Phillip has a gift for always being there, almost mysteriously, when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. And Brother Anthony, he seemed to be a bit too nosy at times, but wasn't it really that his concern was out of caring and kindness?

And so it went round and round. Then, of course, each one had to pause and ask, "Surely the rabbi didn't mean me. I'm just an ordinary monk. But suppose he did? Suppose I am the Messiah, O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I? As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect and kindness on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And, on the off chance that each monk might **himself** be the Messiah, they began to treat **themselves** with extraordinary respect.

Well, spring came, and the townspeople began to sense something different. The monastery had always had a beautiful location in the forest, and now as the grass was cut it seemed more welcoming, and they began to come once again to visit the monastery, to picnic on its lawn, to wander along some its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate.

As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect and loving kindness that now began to surround the five old monks. It seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive--even compelling--about it. Hardly knowing why, the townspeople began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them--then another, and another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm--with joy and hope and love for all to see.

So that's the story. It's a story often told at Christmas--when God came to earth to be among us. It reminds us of the mystery of human community. God loved enough to be present in human life. When we discover God in a spouse, in a child, in a parent, in a friend, in a fellow congregant, in a stranger, in an enemy, we discover God's continued presence in the world.

May we consider Christmas as an invitation to that continued discovery.

Amen