

This is a sermon of short stories, with each story having a moral to the tale and all the morals being the same.

Story 1: this past Thursday, I was packing up my things here at the office when I looked at the clock and realized it was 5:02 p.m. My daughter Lillian takes sewing lessons on Thursdays and they get over at 5:30 p.m. I told myself, I'll call Moira and tell her she doesn't have to run back out to get Lillian, that I can pick her up on my way home. When I called Moira, though, she told me that sewing was going for an extra 30 minutes tonight. "Lillian won't be done until 6 p.m.," she told me. Perfect! I thought. I'll get there early and read my book in the car. (I've been reading a real page turner lately.) But first, I'll stop and get myself a cup of something hot at Dunkin Donuts. It's cold. I'll be sitting there for 40 minutes and I don't want to leave the engine running the whole time. So that's what I did.

I must admit, what I got tasted especially good. So good in fact that when Lillian got in the car I handed my cup back to her and said, "Do you want to taste something really good?"

"What is it?" she asked. "It doesn't have caffeine in it, does it? Mom told you not to give us caffeine."

"No," I assured her. "Just try it."

"Mmm, that is good," she exclaimed. "What is it?"

"It's just hot chocolate."

"That's not just any hot chocolate," she added. "Must be the whipped cream that does it." We continued to drive along, me still thinking about the last page I had read and her making sipping noises in the backseat.

"Dad."

"Yes."

"I've been thinking about this cup of hot chocolate. It's so good that I feel like complimenting someone." Now Lillian is a bit of a philosopher/psychologist all rolled into one, and a bit of a savant, if I do say so myself.

“Some people might think this cup of hot chocolate is so good because it’s the end of the day and by now all the chocolate has settled to the bottom of the machine, making our cup extra chocolatey.” I decided at this point not to enlighten her as to the meaning of the phrase, *scraping the bottom of the barrel*. “You mean like they saved the best for last?” I asked her. And that’s when her inner Plato kicked in. “But I think the reason this cup of hot chocolate is so good is because at the beginning of the day there are so many people wanting some, which means they have to make it extra fast, and things that are rushed don’t usually come out as good as they could.” And because she doesn’t like to speak critically of anyone, she made sure to add, “Not that the people at Dunkin Donuts had a choice. They were just doing their job.”

“Uh huh,” was my dumb response.

“But because we waited till the end of the day, they had more time to spend making this cup of hot chocolate.” Thinking she might be familiar with the phrase, *good things come to them that wait*, I expected her to end by saying something like that. Instead she concluded, “It’s nice of them to still care so much at the end of the day.”

Story 2: When I was in seminary, I had a professor who said, “There are certain people you will meet in the Bible, as in life, who are like a drunk uncle at a party. These are people you never want to get a Christmas card from.” This morning we have met one such uncle in the person of John the Baptist. He’s not drunk, but he is clearly intoxicated by something. For not having received any invitations to any parties this year, John has gone out into the desert wilderness to throw his own party. There are no fancy appetizers at this party, and John isn’t wearing an ugly sweater. Based on Matthew’s telling of the story, John is barely wearing any clothes at all! He is wrapped in camel’s hair. If you open his fridge, all you’ll find is a half-drunk bottle of wild honey and some locust bugs.

Once upon a time, sometime not long after the beginning of creation, God sent a swarm of locusts to plague the Egyptians—punishment against them for keeping slaves, for allowing a society based on systems of inequality and exploitation, for refusing to open their eyes to the suffering around them, for fear it would also open their hearts, and cause them to have to change. There’s an old spiritual that sings of it: And God said to Moses,

“Go down Moses,
Way down in Egypt land,
Tell all pharaohs,
Let my people go.”

Which pharaoh? Tell which pharaoh to let my people go? *All* pharaohs. For pharaoh doesn't always have to live in the palace in the center of town, sit on a throne, and carry a scepter. I could be Pharaoh. You could be Pharaoh. (Are you Pharaoh?) Pharaoh could be all of us, for Pharaoh is anyone who refuses to let go that which God means to be free.

We know, though, that Pharaoh never lets go easily. Some 1500 years later, John is out in the wilderness and the locusts are still swarming. And what's John doing? He's eating them. He's eating the locusts. He is taking this age-old sign of God's judgment and displeasure, and he is taking it into himself. Is John doing this because he thinks that by removing the sign of judgment, it will also remove the judgment itself? “Maybe if I eat up all the locusts, it will finally make-up for the sins of Egypt. It will remove the sinful stain of slavery, of racism and bigotry and hatred, from our world. Get rid of the locusts and we get rid of this plague upon our house.” I know people, I know people who have tried to do this. Stuck in an abusive relationship with someone and we tell ourselves, if I just stick it out a little longer, I know I can help them. But sometimes the help needs to come from elsewhere. Or worse, we tell ourselves, it's my fault, I deserve what I'm getting. And we take all that blame, all that toxicity, and we swallow it whole, and what was never ours to eat, has now made us sick in every way possible.

It's well intentioned, I suppose. We don't want other people to suffer, or we're just so tired of the fact that nothing is getting better and no one is doing anything to fix it, so we eat all the locusts. We say, “I'll do it. I'll do what no one else is willing to do.” And maybe that will fix it, but it usually doesn't.

Fortunately, there is another possibility. Matthew says that among those who went out to see John in the wilderness were Sadducees and Pharisees. These are men who walk around town and in and out of their synagogue like they own the place. Like their fathers before them, they eat caviar and show up at parties where everyone knows them. Arriving

at John's party in the wilderness, however, John calls them a brood of vipers, a den of snakes who have slivered their way up Abraham's family tree, perching themselves at the top, where they don't have to see anyone, or make room for anyone, or be bothered by anyone. "Don't think you're safe," John warns them. "Just because your family name is Abraham, or Pierce, or Trump, or Al Saud. Go back far enough and we're all children of Abraham. Anyway, how do you think Abraham got to be Abraham in the first place?"

How did any of us get to be? God. It's all God's gracious doing. You remember what I said about Father Elias Chacour two weeks ago. The Archbishop of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church in Palestine, and a leader in the efforts to broker peace in the Middle East, when someone asked him "Father, what is that we have forgotten about one another that we need to be reminded of?" and he replied, "I remember that I was born a baby."

John is out in the wilderness eating locusts as a testimony to the fact that the world is still not the way it should be. Not when Mary and Joseph are turned away at the door to the inn. Not when little girls must flee their country for fear of their lives, only to die at the border crossing. Not when the rich have so much and the poor so little. Not when our leaders make us to feel afraid instead of making us to feel brave. Not when there are so many locusts still to swallow. The world is not the way it should be. But God is coming to show us a better way: a baby. That we might learn to hold one another again, and feed one another, and comfort and care for one another. God is coming as a baby to remind us, this is who we are: we were all born a baby.

Story 3: I read this past week about Dirk Willems, a 16th-century Dutch Anabaptist who was captured and tried for his views of what he felt it meant to follow Jesus. Jailed and awaiting the decision on how he would be put to death, he had an unexpected chance to escape. He bolted from his cell and ran across the thin ice of a nearby lake, his jailer in pursuit, a flaming torch in hand. Dashing at full speed, he heard a loud crack and then the anguished cries of the man chasing him who had fallen into icy water. He stopped. He listened. He turned. He made his way back. He reached out, offering open hands to

someone who wished him harm. A few days later, Dirk Willems was burned at the stake by the very person whose life he had saved.¹

Story 4: At the last meeting of our church Council I shared with the group a piece by Brennan Manning who, in thinking about the different characters at the manger, imagines them—the shepherds, the angels, Mary and Joseph, even the baby Jesus—he imagines them to be like a shipwrecked crew. Thrown overboard, they all wash ashore together in a place none of them expected to find themselves. Manning writes:

In 1980, the day before Christmas, Richard Ballenger's mother from Anderson, South Carolina was busy wrapping packages and asked her young son to shine her shoes. Soon, with the proud smile that only a seven-year-old can muster, he presented the shoes for inspection. His mother was so pleased, she gave him a quarter.

On Christmas morning as she put on the shoes to go to church, she noticed a lump in one shoe. She took it off and found a quarter wrapped in paper. Written on the paper in a child's scrawl were the words, "I done it for love."

When the final curtain falls, each of us will be the sum of our choices throughout life, the sum of the appointments we kept and the appointments we didn't keep. The glory of the shipwrecked will be that they habitually failed to turn up for duty. In their defense they claim they were detained by a baby in swaddling clothes. When interrogated as to why they hung out at a stable, they will answer, "We done it for love."²

What's the moral of the story? That on this third Sunday of Advent, with nearly a week to go to Christmas, may it be said that in all things, we done it for love.

¹ <https://onbeing.org/blog/advent-manifesto-does-my-soul-still-sing/>

² Manning, Brennan (2004). *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Publishing, p. 202.