

## Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

## Homily for Christmas Eve

*December 24, 2019*

The Kingdom of Israel was a **great nation**. At least, it was for a short time. United under **King David**, overcoming a brief rebellion led by Absalom, David’s son, and finally getting their act together under King Solomon, the northern and southern tribes stayed together as long as Egypt to the south and Assyria and Babylon to the north were weak and fighting their own troubles. Christian author and theologian **Frederick Buechner** put down some comments about the situation that I want to share with you. Taken from his book, *Wishful Thinking*, he writes this:

The nation that God chooses to be the hope of the world becomes the stooge of the world. The nation of priests becomes a nation of international politicians so inept at playing one major power off against another that by the time they're through, Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Rome, all have a chance at wiping their feet on them—the cream of the population deported, the Temple destroyed, Jerusalem razed. The law of Moses becomes the legalism of the Pharisees, and "Can mortals be righteous before God?" becomes "Is it kosher to wear my dentures on the Sabbath?" The high priests sell out to the army of occupation. The Holy City turns into Miami Beach. Even God is fed up. Nobody knows all this better than the Jews know it. Who else has a Wailing Wall? Read the prophets.

But the Jews went on hoping anyway, and beginning several centuries before the birth of Jesus, much of their hope took the form of an implausible dream that someday God would send them Somebody to make everything right. He was referred to as the Messiah, which means in Hebrew "the Anointed One," that is, the One anointed by God, as a king at his coronation is anointed, only for a bigger job. The Greek word for Messiah is "Christ." How and when the Messiah would come was debatable. Theories as to what he would be like multiplied and overlapped: a great warrior king like David, a great priest like Melchizedek, a great prophet like Elijah. Who could possibly say? But whatever he was, his name would be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace," and "of the increase of his government and of peace there would be no end" (Isaiah 9:6-7).

And, when the reality came, as we read of it in the Christmas story tonight in the *Gospel of Luke*, the Messiah comes in a humble setting, producing **awe and wonder** for everyone concerned. Those who witnessed the events that night would never forget. Even foreign Gentiles, non-Jews, figured it out. And, we will learn more about their message and the significance of their visit as we move into **Christmastide**, the twelve days that follow Christmas and end with **Epiphany** on January 6<sup>th</sup>: the visit of the Magi.

The story of Christmas remains **a mystery**, but certainly it is **no secret**. It remains a major world event, even though we take its majesty and significance for granted, losing the deep theological questions that surround and permeate all through it, confusing it further in promoting ourselves and our own well-being and combining it with a few myths thrown in along with traditions borrowed from rituals that preceded Christian influence in England, Germany, the Netherlands, and elsewhere. But, at the core is just what Buechner described and the **Gospels proclaim:**

The Christ child is born- **The Messiah** has come!

## Papa Panov's Special Christmas

by Leo Tolstoy

*This wonderful Christmas story is great to read with children. It was translated into English by Leo Tolstoy. The original story was written in French by Ruben Saillens and demonstrates the virtues of kindness and compassion. It is based on a verse from the Bible, Matthew 25:35:*

*"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink,  
I was a stranger and you welcomed me.."*

It was Christmas Eve and although it was still afternoon, lights had begun to appear in the shops and houses of the little Russian village, for the short winter day was nearly over. Excited children scurried indoors and now only muffled sounds of chatter and laughter escaped from closed shutters.

Old Papa Panov, the village shoemaker, stepped outside his shop to take one last look around. The sounds of happiness, the bright lights and the faint but delicious smells of Christmas cooking reminded him of past Christmas times when his wife had still been alive and his own children little. Now they had gone. His usually cheerful face, with the little laughter wrinkles behind the round steel spectacles, looked sad now. But he went back indoors with a firm step, put up the shutters and set a pot of coffee to heat on the charcoal stove. Then, with a sigh, he settled in his big armchair.

Papa Panov did not often read, but tonight he pulled down the big old family Bible and, slowly tracing the lines with one forefinger, he read again the Christmas story. He read how Mary and Joseph, tired by their journey to Bethlehem, found no room for them at the inn, so that Mary's little baby was born in the cowshed.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear!" exclaimed Papa Panov, "if only they had come here! I would have given them my bed and I could have covered the baby with my patchwork quilt to keep him warm."

He read on about the wise men who had come to see the baby Jesus, bringing him splendid gifts. Papa Panov's face fell. "I have no gift that I could give him," he thought sadly.

Then his face brightened. He put down the Bible, got up and stretched his long arms to the shelf high up in his little room. He took down a small, dusty box and opened it. Inside was a perfect pair of tiny leather shoes. Papa Panov smiled with satisfaction. Yes, they were as good as he had remembered -- the best shoes he had ever made. "I should give him those," he decided, as he gently put them away and sat down again.

He was feeling tired now, and the further he read the sleepier he became. The print began to dance before his eyes so that he closed them, just for a minute. In no time at all Papa Panov was fast asleep.

And as he slept he dreamed. He dreamed that someone was in his room and he knew at once, as one does in dreams, who the person was. It was Jesus.

"You have been wishing that you could see me, Papa Panov." he said kindly, "then look for me tomorrow. It will be Christmas Day and I will visit you. But look carefully, for I shall not tell you who I am."

When at last Papa Panov awoke, the bells were ringing out and a thin light was filtering through the shutters. "Bless my soul!" said Papa Panov. "It's Christmas Day!"

He stood up and stretched himself for he was rather stiff. Then his face filled with happiness as he remembered his dream. This would be a very special Christmas after all, for Jesus was coming to visit him. How would he look? Would he be a little baby, as at that first Christmas? Would he be a grown man, a carpenter -- or the great King that he is, God's Son? He must watch carefully the whole day through so that he recognized him however he came.

Papa Panov put on a special pot of coffee for his Christmas breakfast, took down the shutters and looked out of the window. The street was deserted, no one was stirring yet. No one except the road sweeper. He looked as miserable and dirty as ever, and well he might! Whoever wanted to work on Christmas Day -- and in the raw cold and bitter freezing mist of such a morning?

Papa Panov opened the shop door, letting in a thin stream of cold air. "Come in!" he shouted across the street cheerily. "Come in and have some hot coffee to keep out the cold!"

The sweeper looked up, scarcely able to believe his ears. He was only too glad to put down his broom and come into the warm room. His old clothes steamed gently in the heat of the stove and he clasped both red hands round the comforting warm mug as he drank.

Papa Panov watched him with satisfaction, but every now and then his eyes strayed to the window. It would never do to miss his special visitor.

"Expecting someone?" the sweeper asked at last. So Papa Panov told him about his dream.

"Well, I hope he comes," the sweeper said, "you've given me a bit of Christmas cheer I never expected to have. I'd say you deserve to have your dream come true." And he actually smiled.

When he had gone, Papa Panov put on cabbage soup for his dinner, then went to the door again, scanning the street. He saw no one. But he was mistaken. Someone was coming.

The girl walked so slowly and quietly, hugging the walls of shops and houses, that it was a while before he noticed her. She looked very tired and she was carrying something. As she drew nearer he could see that it was a baby, wrapped in a thin shawl. There was such sadness in her face and in the pinched little face of the baby, that Papa Panov's heart went out to them.

"Won't you come in," he called, stepping outside to meet them. "You both need a warm seat by the fire and a rest."

The young mother let him shepherd her indoors and to the comfort of the armchair. She gave a big sigh of relief.

"I'll warm some milk for the baby," Papa Panov said, "I've had children of my own -- I can feed her for you." He took the milk from the stove and carefully fed the baby from a spoon, warming her tiny feet by the stove at the same time.

"She needs shoes," the cobbler said.

But the girl replied, "I can't afford shoes, I've got no husband to bring home money. I'm on my way to the next village to get work."

A sudden thought flashed through Papa Panov's mind. He remembered the little shoes he had looked at last night. But he had been keeping those for Jesus. He looked again at the cold little feet and made up his mind.

"Try these on her," he said, handing the baby and the shoes to the mother. The beautiful little shoes were a perfect fit. The girl smiled happily and the baby gurgled with pleasure.

"You have been so kind to us," the girl said, when she got up with her baby to go. "May all your Christmas wishes come true!"

But Papa Panov was beginning to wonder if his very special Christmas wish would come true. Perhaps he had missed his visitor? He looked anxiously up and down the street. There were plenty of people about but they were all faces that he recognized. There were neighbors going to call on their families. They nodded and smiled and wished him Happy Christmas! Or beggars -- and Papa Panov hurried indoors to fetch them hot soup and a generous hunk of bread, hurrying out again in case he missed the Important Stranger.

All too soon the winter dusk fell. When Papa Panov next went to the door and strained his eyes, he could no longer make out the passers-by. Most were home and indoors by now anyway. He walked slowly back into his room at last, put up the shutters, and sat down wearily in his armchair.

So it had been just a dream after all. Jesus had not come.

Then all at once he knew that he was no longer alone in the room.

This was not dream for he was wide awake. At first he seemed to see before his eyes the long stream of people who had come to him that day. He saw again the old road sweeper, the young mother and her baby and the beggars he had fed. As they passed, each whispered, "Didn't you see me, Papa Panov?"

"Who are you?" he called out, bewildered.

Then another voice answered him. It was the voice from his dream -- the voice of Jesus.

"I was hungry and you fed me," he said. "I was naked and you clothed me. I was cold and you warmed me. I came to you today in everyone of those you helped and welcomed."

Then all was quiet and still. Only the sound of the big clock ticking. A great peace and happiness seemed to fill the room, overflowing Papa Panov's heart until he wanted to burst out singing and laughing and dancing with joy.

"So he did come after all!" was all that he said.

*Papa Panov's Special Christmas was featured as [The Short Story of the Day](#) on Sat, Dec 22, 2018*

Papa Panov's Special Christmas is a featured selection in our collection of [Christmas Stories](#) and [Children's Christmas Stories](#).

<https://americanliterature.com/author/leo-tolstoy/short-story/papa-panovs-special-christmas>