

Christmas Eve 2017

CHRISTMAS REUNION

(THE TABLECLOTH)

A True Story - by Pastor Rob Reid

The brand new pastor and his wife, newly assigned to their first ministry to reopen a church in suburban Brooklyn, arrived in early October excited about their opportunities. When they saw the church, it was very run down and needed much work. They set a goal to have everything finished in time to have their first service on Christmas Eve.

They worked hard, repairing pews, plastering walls, painting and so on, and on December 18th they were ahead of schedule and just about finished; but then, on December 19th, a terrible tempest—a driving rainstorm—hit the area and lasted for two days.

On December 21st, the pastor went over to the church. His heart sank when he saw that the roof had leaked, causing a large area of plaster about 20 feet by 8 feet to fall off the front wall of the sanctuary just behind the pulpit, beginning about head high. The pastor cleaned up the mess on the floor. Not knowing what else to do and thinking he would have to postpone the Christmas Eve service, he headed home.

Along the way he noticed that a local business was having a flea market type sale for charity so he stopped in. One of the items was a beautiful, handmade, ivory-colored, crocheted tablecloth with exquisite work, fine colors and an embroidered cross right in the center. It looked to be just the right size to cover up the hole in the front wall. He bought it and headed back to the church.

By this time it had started to snow. He saw an older woman coming from the opposite direction, trying to catch the bus, but she missed it. The pastor invited her to wait in the warm church for the next bus, which was due to arrive 45 minutes later. She sat in a pew and kept to herself while the pastor got a ladder and hangers to put up the tablecloth as a wall tapestry. When he was finished he could hardly believe how beautiful it looked. It covered up the entire problem area.

Then he noticed the woman walking down the center aisle. Her face was as white as a sheet. “Pastor,” she asked, “where did you get that tablecloth?” The pastor explained how he had bought it at a flea market sale for charity. The woman asked him to check the lower right corner to see if the initials EBG were crocheted into it there. They were. These were the initials of the woman. She had made this tablecloth 35 years before, in Austria. The woman explained that before the war she and her husband were well-to-do people in Austria. When the Nazis came to power, she was forced to leave. Her husband was going to follow her the next week, but he was captured by the Nazis and sent to prison. She never saw her husband or her home again.

The pastor wanted to give her the tablecloth, but she insisted that he should keep it for the church. The pastor asked if he could drive her home—it was the least he could do for her. She lived on the other side of Staten Island and was only in Brooklyn for the day for a housecleaning job,

What a wonderful service they had on Christmas Eve. The church was full, and the music and the spirit were great. At the end of the service the pastor and his wife greeted everyone at the door, and many said they would return. But one older man, whom the pastor recognized from the neighborhood, continued to sit in one of the pews and stare. The pastor wondered why he wasn’t leaving.

The man asked him where he got the tablecloth on the front wall because it was identical to one that his wife had made years ago when they lived in Austria before the war. “Reverend,” he asked, “how could there be two tablecloths so much alike?” He told the pastor how the Nazis came, how he forced his wife to flee for her safety and he was supposed to follow her, but he was arrested and put in a prison. He never saw his wife or his home again all the 35 years in between.

The pastor asked the man if he would go for a little ride with him. They drove to Staten Island, to the same house where the pastor had taken the woman three days earlier. He helped the man climb the three flights of stairs to the woman’s apartment and knocked on the door. Then he saw the greatest Christmas reunion he could ever imagine.

That wonderful, supposedly true story (and I do hope it is true) reminds us of what we’re celebrating this Christmas Eve night. It’s a reunion: the reunion, the coming back together, of God and humankind. The entire Bible is the story of how human creatures turned away from their Creator and had a terrible falling out. God and humanity were separated by sin; they were estranged from one other because of humanity’s disobedience. Over and over again in the Holy Scriptures, God called to God’s people to turn and back to Him. God longed

for reconciliation, but God's people repeatedly and continually refused. They stubbornly rejected the call to be reunited with God.

But our God can be stubborn, too. Lovingly, compassionately, graciously, mercifully stubborn. Despite numerous rejections and refusals to return, our God never gave up. God loved us so much that God decided to take a radical, drastic course of action. If we wouldn't come to God, God would come to us. God yearned so deeply and passionately to be reunited with God's people that God took the initiative. That initiative is described in one of the most well-known and beloved passages in the New Testament: John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life."

God accomplished that reunion by becoming human like us, so that God could be one with us. We call what God did the Incarnation, and John's Gospel describes that action God took, as well. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us."

Why did God do that? Because God wanted desperately to be reunited with us. And that's exactly what God did when he was born into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. God came into the world in the guise of a newborn infant so that God could be with us again, the way God was with us in the beginning, before humanity's fall into sin and death.

Christmas is a wonderful time for reunions. Some family members and friends don't see each other at all except for weddings and funerals—and at Christmas.

"Long time, no see, Aunt Jane."

"Wow, you've really grown tall since I saw you last Christmas, Billy."

"Where did you get that table cloth, Reverend? It looks just like the one my wife made it before the war. We were separated 35 years ago and I haven't seen her since."

"Well, you must come with me. There's someone I want you to see—again. "

Yes, reunion. At Christmas. A joyous coming together again on this most joyous of holidays. That's what we're celebrating tonight. A Christmas reunion. Because God so loved the world that the Word became human like us and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

And a holy child cried in the night, and the angels sang Glory to God in the highest, and the shepherds quaked, and God said, "I've come here to be with you, my people. In the flesh."

Christ.

Emmanuel.

God with us. Again.
May your reunion with God this Christmas be a very blessed and joyful one.
Amen.