

Christmas Day
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The Legend of the Christmas Apple
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On Christmas Day we have the beautiful, powerful, and mysterious words from John's Gospel about the Word being made flesh and dwelling with us. John's Gospel is drastically different from the story we usually associate with the birth of Jesus - with angels and shepherds, mangers, and stars. That version is for Christmas Eve, which is really a vigil service to prepare us for today's celebration of the event and the mystery of the Incarnation. We call it a mystery not because the Incarnation is a problem to solve like a true crime drama, but because it is something we can't ever fully comprehend intellectually. Instead, it is a deep truth we can come close to, be touched by, and perhaps even transformed by.

Which is why on Christmas Day, I don't try and parse John's Gospel to try and offer explanations. Instead, I let the words of the Gospel and the Word dwell with us through storytelling, much like Jesus himself did throughout his life and ministry.

The story I want to share this Christmas is an old one that comes from Germany. It's a legend of the Christmas Apple. Before I tell the story, I thought I would share some background on the symbolism of the apple in Christian art and lore to help us better appreciate the legend and learn how the apple became one of the Christian symbols of Christmas.

Long ago, apples were associated with the Garden of Eden and the fall of Adam and Eve by representing the forbidden fruit. However, for a very long time this association was not negative. There was, in what is now Germany, a tradition called Mystery Plays that involved, among other things, the decorating an evergreen tree with fruit. Mystery Plays were like Christmas pageants in that they were reenactments of Bible stories. Every year, on Christmas Eve, there was a Mystery Play recreating the Garden of Eden to pay homage to Adam and Eve. On Christmas morning the tree became the reminder of Christ's birth redeeming humanity from sin. The apple was a reminder humanity can learn from our mistakes and change when we follow Christ.

During the Middle Ages Mystery Plays were banned, so people took the tradition of the tree inside their homes. Eventually, in addition to hanging the evergreen branches with fruit, they decorated the tree with communion wafers to symbolize the tree of life. Later, cookies took the place of communion wafers, which evolved into ornaments many of us hang on our trees.

There is another explanation as to why the apple is a Christmas symbol. It is because the apple itself represents Jesus. The red color of the apple's skin represents Jesus' sacrifice. The sweet flesh of the fruit represents how our lives are made sweeter by Christ's sacrifice. And the seeds represent faith and how when nourished the smallest seed can grow into a large tree that not only provides shelter for animals, it provides more fruit. So, the apple also represents spiritual growth as well as redemption, a reminder that through Christ God's love has transformed the world and us.

There is a story that captures all this and the spirit of Christmas. It said to be loosely based on an actual miracle.

The legend of the Christmas Apple begins with the town clockmaker whose name was Herman Joseph. Herman made beautiful clocks, but he never had much money because he was always helping others. He was also kind and generous to the children of the town by letting them interrupt him whenever their toys were broken. Without complaint he always fixed the children's toys. He was generous to everyone and attended church faithfully.

In the cathedral in the town Herman lived in there was a beautiful statue of Mary and Baby Jesus. Every Christmas Day, as part of the church service, people brought gifts for the Christ Child and laid them at the foot of the statue. It was said that if a gift was given that particularly pleased Jesus, the statue would reach down to take it. Although no one had ever seen this miracle, people believed it would happen and every year on Christmas Day people brought the most elaborate, expensive, and exquisite gifts and put them at the feet of the statue, always hoping one gift would bring about the miracle for all to see.

Herman believed the miracle too. Although he had yet to bring a gift to the cathedral on Christmas Day, he watched others bring their gifts and craned his neck to see if the statue would move. Back in his workshop, Herman had been working for many years on a gift to bring on Christmas Day. It was a Christmas Clock that looked like a stable with wooden figures of Joseph, Mary, shepherds, and angels and when the hour chimed, the figures knelt to the Baby in the manger. Herman said his clock was a reminder we should all honor Jesus every day, not just on Christmas.

The year Herman finished the clock, he put it in his shop window so people could see it, but he didn't sell it to anyone because he was going to bring it to the Cathedral on Christmas Day. However, on Christmas Eve, his neighbor, a young mother named Trudi came to him asking for help. Her husband was ill and all the money she had saved for Christmas gifts and treats for their children had to be used

to pay the medical bills. Herman told Trudi not to worry, he would sell a clock and give her the money for Christmas gifts and treats.

Herman went from door to door asking the people of the town to buy a clock, but only one person was interested: the richest man in town. And he only wanted one clock, the one Herman had put in his shop window, the Christmas Clock. Herman tried to talk him into buying a different clock, but the rich man wasn't interested. So, Herman sold him the Christmas Clock and gave the money to Trudi and her family.

On Christmas Morning, the cathedral bell rang calling people to the church service, but Herman's heart was heavy. He had no gift to bring. After years of work, he would have to go empty handed again. Then he noticed the food he had set out for his own Christmas feast: a loaf of bread and an apple. The apple was large and ripe, a lovely deep shade of red. On the spur of the moment, he took the apple to give at the cathedral.

That year the gifts people brought to the cathedral seemed especially extravagant. There were jewels, riches, exquisite fabrics all laid at the feet of the statue of Mary and the Christ Child. When people saw Herman walking up the aisle with an apple, they criticized him for selling his magnificent clocks and giving such a stingy gift to the Christ Child. Herman felt shame burn his cheeks, and he lowered his head as he kept walking. When he reached the statue, however, he heard a gasp from the congregation and from the clergy. Even the bishop gasped in surprise. When Herman looked up, he saw the Christ Child reaching down to take his gift. A gift that was not just an apple, it was the gift of himself that Herman unselfishly gave away, much like our Lord Jesus Christ.

The next time you see an apple, I hope you remember that you are loved by God who became flesh and dwells among us and through that Love we are beautiful and valued and called to love God and our neighbors with all we are and all we have. Merry Christmas.

- One of the sources for the Legend of the Christmas Apple comes from a story by Ruth Sawyer