

Through the Manger

Bright Valley of Love is the name of a book by Edna Hong which is the true story of a physically challenged child, Gunther, who was born near the end of World War I. His father was away at war, and his mother, who was very poor, could not care for him because he was suffering from a severe case of Rickets which caused his body to be deformed.

So his grandmother begrudgingly took him in, but she was embarrassed by him and kept him out of sight and away from people. No one talked to him. No one answered his cries. They changed him and fed him but that was it. At age six he couldn't talk and his body had gotten worse from his illness and he couldn't walk.

Eventually they decided that he should be institutionalized. And so they left him at Bethel, a Christian home for youth with epilepsy as well as other physical and mental challenges.

With the loving care of the staff and with the help of an epileptic roommate, named Kurt, Gunther began to learn how to talk and, therefore, began to learn about life. It was Kurt who told Gunther about Christmas.

The story of Jesus' birth and the love of God filled Gunther with joy. But there was something else that filled him with fear – his friend Kurt was getting worse. In fact, he told Gunther one night that he would soon be going to his heavenly home, maybe as early as Christmas time.

On the first Sunday of Advent, when Pastor Fritz began their Advent service, the joy and excitement of the day wiped out his fear. When the moment came for the Advent candle to be lit, little Kurt was chosen to do the honors.

The children watched expectantly as Kurt took the small lighted candle and leaned toward the unlighted candle of the Advent wreath. But suddenly, the burning candle dropped. Kurt cried out and his body writhed in spasm after spasm of an epileptic seizure. One of the nurses quickly took him in her arms and left the room.

Pastor Fritz rescued the cracked, but still burning candle and lit the wreath, singing as he did so. The staff and children joined in until a shrill cry emerged from the heart of Gunther's fear. The song stopped and Gunther screamed, "There's a crack in everything."

Every face in the room turned and looked at Gunther, but Gunther looked only at one face, the face of Pastor Fritz. Once again he flung his wild desperate complaint against that face saying, "There is a crack in everything!" And then he added, "What is so great about Christmas?"

The silence of the room ached with Gunther's pain. Finally, Pastor Fritz turned from Gunther and appealed to the children saying, "Gunther needs to know what is so great about Christmas. Will you help me tell him please?"

Manford, a child with a mind for mathematics said, "Christmas comes in December. December is the 12th Month. Christmas comes on the 25th day. The 25th day of the 12 month." "So it does," said Pastor Fritz. "Thank you, Manford."

Monika jumped to her feet, beamed at Pastor Fritz and spoke the only words in her vocabulary, "Alleluia, Oh Susanna!" And then she sat down. "Thank you, Monica." Said the pastor.

"Can anyone else tell Gunther what is so great about Christmas?"

Petra, the oldest of the patients there, but with a mental age of only five said, "Christmas is so great 'cause then God sent his son, Jesus our Savior."

Pastor Fritz said, "That's true, Petra. Thank you. But why? Children, why did God send his son to be our Savior?"

Finally, Leni climbed from her chair to the table top and shouted, 'Because. Because everything has a crack!'

Pastor Fritz said, "It is true, Gunther, that there is a crack in everything. God sees the crack better than we do, and the crack is ever so much worse than we think it is. That is why God sent his son. Not to patch up the crack. But to make everything new. That is why Christmas is so great!"

I know some of you have experienced the cracks in life, and when they occur at Christmas those cracks can shatter us.

And our question may not be the same as Gunther's, "What is so great about Christmas?" but rather "What is so great about God, if this awful thing can happen to me and those I love?"

Gunther was losing his friend, Kurt, to death. And many of you know this same pain.

You also know the pain of having friends and relatives who are seriously ill,
Or the deep sadness of losing your relationship with your spouse or your child,
Or the confusion and helplessness that goes with depression,
Or the struggle to get out of debt,
Or the rejection of someone you thought was a friend,
Or the worry that accompanies an uncertain future.

When those problems pervade our lives there does seem to be a crack in everything and nothing seems whole and good.

Even if we aren't experiencing these personal problems, we can't help but also see the crevices in the world around us:

countries at war – unspeakable atrocities,
the ever widening crack between the rich and the poor,
the never-ending pandemic and the devastating impact it has had on so many.

When Christ came to be our savior; he came precisely because there is a crack in everything. He doesn't cover over our cracks and make things look OK. Rather he comes to make everything new.

And I believe that without him we would / will eventually fall apart. The cracks will grow and spread until we and our world literally crumble.

But with Christ we know there is comfort and strength.

With Christ relationships can be reconciled.

With Christ there is something better beyond the struggles of the day or the week, or the year.

In the book, *Children's Letters to God: The New Collection*, (Stuart Hample, Eric Marshall, 1991) a little girl named Nan, writes this letter:

*Dear God, I bet it is very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world.
There are only four people in our family and I have trouble loving them!*

Sometimes we too have trouble loving family members.

Sometimes we too have trouble loving the people we work with or go to school with.

Sometimes we have trouble loving people of different ethnicities or religions.

Sometimes we have trouble loving ourselves.

There is a crack in everything, but Christ came because of the cracks. And he comes to make all things new.

Think about it this way. What does it say about Christian faith that its two greatest mysteries - Jesus' birth and his resurrection - take place in a feeding trough and a borrowed grave? What does it say that its two deepest convictions arise from places where no one would want to begin and no one wants to end?

And yet there is God, we sing—there and there – to show us just how much God really loves us and how much God wants a relationship with us.

One day, a woman was washing dishes at her kitchen sink. She looked at one particular plate and asked herself, "How many times have I washed this plate?" Then she set down the plate, took off her apron, packed a few of her belongings, and left.

That night she called home to tell her husband that she was all right, but that she just could not come home again. Sometimes, when she would call home to check on the children, her husband would tell her how much he loved her and ask her to come home. But each time she refused.

Then the husband hired a detective to search for her. The detective learned that she was living in a dingy hotel in a distant city. The husband took a bus to find her. When he knocked on the door of her room, his hands trembled because he did not know the kind of reception he would receive.

His wife opened the door, stood for a moment in shocked silence, then fell into his arms. Later, at home, he asked her, "When you would call before, I would tell you how much I love

you. Why didn't you come home?" She replied, "Before, your love was just words. Now I know how much you love me because you came to me."

Christ comes to be God with us.

He comes to share our pain and ease it with his presence.

He comes to us in the midst of our problems and gives us the strength to deal with them.

He comes to help us endure our illnesses and to know wholeness in him.

He comes to overcome death and to give us new life.

This year, instead of just going to the manger and then back to our lives as usual, let's go through the manger and live our lives on the other side of this good news.....Christ was born for this, Christ was born for this.

Blessed Ninth Day Christmas - and Amen!