Book 15

CHRISTMAS EVE

DECEMBER 24, 1985

"GOD IN THE ORDINARY"

"AND SHE GAVE BIRTH TO HER FIRST-BORN AND WRAPPED HIM IN SWADDLING CLOTHS AND LAID HIM IN A MANGER, BECAUSE THERE WAS NO PLACE FOR THEM IN THE INN." "THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US."

ALL SAVING IDEAS AND EVENTS ARE BORN SMALL! TO UNDERSTAND THE ABIDING FORCES THAT WILL DIRECT AND DOMINATE THE FUTURE, WE NEED TO BE ATTENTIVE TO WHAT IS GERMINATIVE--OFTEN DIMINUTIVE OR INCONSPICUOUS, LIKE A SMALL SEED UNNOTICED YET PLANTED, AND ONE DAY BECOMES A GIANT TREE.

BUT IT'S DIFFICULT FOR US TO PAY ATTENTION TO THE ORDINARY. MAYBE WE HAVE SEEN TOO MANY CECIL B. DEMILLE FILMS, WHERE EVERYTHING IS BIG, SENSATIONAL, EXPENSIVE! WITH A CAST OF THOUSANDS!

IN OUR TIME, WE PAY BIG ATTENTION TO THE BIRTH OF A CHILD OF ROYALTY. WHEN PRINCE CHARLES AND PRINCESS DI OF ENGLAND HAD THEIR FIRST CHILD, THE WHOLE WORLD SEEMED TO KNOW ABOUT IT. YET ON THAT SAME DAY THERE WERE THOUSANDS OF BABIES BORN, AND ONE OR MORE OF THEM, UNKNOWN TO THE WORLD MAY ONE DAY TURN OUT TO BE A NOBEL PRIZE WINNER, OR A

RENOWNED LEADER IN SOME FIELD YET UNHEARD OF.

THE POINT IS THAT THE MOST INFLUENTIAL EVENTS IN THIS WORLD TURN OUT TO BE NOT THE NOISY AFFAIRS THAT SPLIT OUR EAR DRUMS AND DOMINATE THE HEADLINES, BUT RATHER THE EMBRYONIC, SECRETIVE AND OFTEN IMPERCEPTIBLE THINGS. MOST SAVING EVENTS AND IDEAS ARE BORN SMALL.

FOR EXAMPLE, ON DECEMBER 1, 1955, THIRTY YEARS AGO, A WOMAN NO ONE HAD EVER HEARD OF, REFUSED TO GIVE UP HER SEAT ON A CITY BUS IN MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA. HER NAME WAS ROSA PARKS AND SHE WORKED AT THE TAILOR SHOP IN THE MONTGOMERY FAIR DEPARTMENT STORE. SHE TOOK A SEAT IN WHAT WAS CONSIDERED THE BLACK SECTION. AFTER A FEW STOPS THE WHITE SECTION OF THE BUS FILLED UP WITH WHITE PEOPLE, SO THAT ONE WHITE MAN HAD TO STAND. THEN THE BUS DRIVER ASKED THE FOUR BLACK PEOPLE IN THE FRONT ROW OF THE BLACK SECTION TO MOVE TO THE BACK OF THE BUS AND STAND SO THAT THIS ONE WHITE MAN COULD HAVE A SEAT. THREE OF THE BLACK PEOPLE MOVED TO THE BACK, BUT ROSA PARKS DID NOT MOVE. WHEN THE DRIVER SAW THAT SHE WAS STILL SITTING THERE, HE TOLD HER THAT UNLESS SHE MOVED TO THE BACK OF THE BUS, HE WOULD HAVE HER ARRESTED. SHE TOLD HIM TO GO ON AND HAVE HER ARRESTED.

ROSA PARKS WAS ARRESTED AND TAKEN TO JAIL.

ONE ORDINARY WORKING WOMAN WHO WAS TIRED AFTER WORKING ALL DAY REFUSED TO GIVE UP HER SEAT BECAUSE SHE HAD PAID HER FARE. FROM THAT SMALL INCIDENT CAME THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT, AND FROM THAT A YOUNG BLACK MINISTER BECAME A LEADER--MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT SPREAD TO EVERY PART OF THE COUNTRY.

NO ONE COULD'VE GUESSED THAT AN UNKNOWN TIRED BLACK WOMAN'S COURAGE COULD BE THE [redacted] STRAW TO BREAK THE BACK OF SEGREGATION LAWS.

MOST SAVING EVENTS AND IDEAS ARE BORN SMALL. GOD OFTEN WORKS THROUGH THE ORDINARY. THE BIRTH OF THE BABY JESUS IS NO EXCEPTION. GOD'S CHOSEN WAY OF COMING INTO THE WORLD AND INTO OUR LIVES IS ALWAYS LOW KEY, ALMOST CASUAL. GOD SHUNS THE SPECTACULAR AND PREFERS THE ORDINARY. WHAT IS MORE ORDINARY THAN THE BIRTH OF A CHILD? GOD HAS A WAY OF APPEARING TO BE LESS THAN GOD REALLY IS, APPEARING AS A CHILD BORN INTO POVERTY AND OBSCURITY, A YOUNG MAN GROWING UP UNRECOGNIZED, A PRISONER REFUSING TO ANSWER THE FALSE ACCUSTIONS OF A JUDGE, A MAN ENTERING A CITY ON A DONKEY. A MAN DYING ON A CROSS. GOD'S COMING IS SO COMMON, OR ORDINARY THAT THE MASSES FREQUENTLY MISS GOD.

GOD CHOOSES COMMON PEOPLE AND PLACES AS GOD'S INSTRUMENTS. THAT'S WHAT THE STORY OF CHRISTMAS

IS ALL ABOUT. IN THE HILL COUNTRY OF JUDEA, TWO YOUNG PEOPLE--MARY AND JOSEPH WERE AWED BY THE MYSTERIOUS INTERVENTION IN THEIR LIVES. IT WAS A DARK AND HOSTILE WORLD, A WORLD FAR DIFFERENT FROM THE SERENE ONE PORTRAYED ON CHRISTMAS CARDS OR SEEN IN PAGEANTS. PALESTINE WAS A LAND OF DISEASE, POVERTY AND ECONOMIC UNREST.

IT WAS A LAND CONTROLLED BY THE ROMAN EMPIRE, TWO THIRDS OF WHOSE INHABITANTS WERE SLAVES, ABLE TO BE SOLD AS PROPERTY AND PUNISHED OR KILLED AT THE DISCRETION OF THEIR OWNER. MAGICIANS AND SOOTHSAYERS ABOUNDED, AND THE MOST POPULAR FORM OF ENTERTAINMENT WERE FIGHTS BETWEEN HUMAN BEINGS AND BEASTS. IN A MONTH'S TIME, 20,000 LIVES MIGHT BE SACRIFIED IN THE ARENAS. IT WAS A WORLD IN WHICH THE WORSHIP OF THE GODS WAS BASED ON FEAR AND SUPERSTITION, AND THE VICES OF THE GODS WERE HUMAN PRACTICES.

IT WAS INTO SUCH A SUPERSTITIOUS AND FEARFUL WORLD THAT JESUS WAS BORN. THE TIME AND PLACE WERE NOT WHAT YOU WOULD HAVE EXPECTED FOR THE BIRTH OF GOD IN THE FLESH. "AND SHE GAVE BIRTH TO HER FIRST-BORN SON AND LAID HIM IN A MANGER BECAUSE THERE WAS NO PLACE FOR THEM IN THE INN."

GOD IS EVER FULL OF SURPRISES! NOT IN THE SPECTACULAR, NOT IN THE SENSATIONAL, BUT

GOD COMES IN THE ORDINARY. WE LIVE IN A WORLD THAT WORSHIPS BIGNESS AND POWER! AND WE WONDER WHAT PLACE IS THERE IN SUCH A WORLD FOR THE SMALL AND ORDINARY? WHAT DIFFERENCE CAN THE BIRTH OF A BABY IN A STABLE MEAN? A BABY BORN TO COMMON PEOPLE NEVER HEARD OF BEFORE?

GOD STILL COMES TO US IN THE ORDINARY, IN THE SIMPLE. GOD STILL COMES INTO OUR WORLD, BUT NOT ALWAYS IN THE WAY WE EXPECT IT.

HERE'S ONE OF MY FAVORITE CHRISTMAS STORIES. THERE ONCE LIVED AN ELDERLY SHOEMAKER, LOVED BY HIS FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS WHO CALLED HIM, "FATHER MARTIN."

ONE CHRISTMAS EVE HE SAT ALONE IN HIS LITTLE SHOP READING OF THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN TO THE BABY JESUS AND OF THE GIFTS THEY BROUGHT. HE SAID TO HIMSELF, "IF TOMORROW WERE THE FIRST CHRISTMAS AND IF JESUS WERE BORN IN THIS TOWN, I KNOW WHAT I WOULD GIVE HIM." HE GOT UP AND TOOK FROM THE SHELF OVERHEAD TWO TINY SHOES OF SOFTEST SNOW WHITE LEATHER, WITH BRIGHT SILVER BUCKLES. "I WOULD GIVE HIM THESE MY FINEST WORK."

REPLACING THE SHOES HE BLEW OUT THE CANDLES AND RETIRED TO REST. HARDLY HAD HE CLOSED HIS EYES WHEN HE HEARD A VOICE CALL HIS NAME, "MARTIN! MARTIN!" INTUITIVELY HE FELT A

PRESENCE. THEN THE VOICE SPOKE AGAIN, "MARTIN, YOU HAVE WISHED TO SEE ME. TOMORROW I SHALL PASS BY YOUR WINDOW. IF YOU SEE ME, AND BID ME ENTER, I SHALL BE YOUR GUEST AT YOUR TABLE."

FATHER MARTIN DID NOT SLEEP THAT NIGHT FOR JOY, AND BEFORE IT WAS DAWN HE ROSE AND SWEPT AND TIDIED UP HIS LITTLE SHOP. HE SPREAD FRESH SAND UPON THE FLOOR AND WREATHED GREEN BOUGHS OF FIR ALONG THE RAFTERS. ON THE SPOTLESS, LINEN COVERED TABLE HE PUT A LOAF OF BREAD, A JAR OF HONEY AND A PITCHER OF MILK AND OVER THE FIRE HE HUNG A POT OF TEA.

THEN HE TOOK UP HIS PATIENT VIGIL AT THE WINDOW. PRESENTLY, HE SAW AN OLD STREET SWEEPER PASS BY, BLOWING HIS THIN, GNARLED HANDS TO WARM THEM. "POOR FELLOW, HE MUST BE HALF FROZEN," THOUGHT MARTIN. OPENING THE DOOR, HE CALLED OUT TO HIM, "COME IN, MY FRIEND, AND WARM YOURSELF AND DRINK A CUP OF HOT TEA." AND THE MAN GRATEFULLY ACCEPTED THE INVITATION.

AN HOUR PASSED, AND MARTIN SAW A YOUNG, MISERABLY CLOTHED WOMAN CARRYING A BABY. SHE PAUSED WEARILY TO REST IN THE SHELTER OF HIS DOORWAY. THE HEART OF THE OLD COBBLER WAS TOUCHED. QUICKLY HE FLUNG OPEN THE DOOR. "COME IN AND WARM YOURSELF WHILE YOU REST," HE SAID TO HER. "YOU DO NOT LOOK WELL."

"I'M GOING TO THE HOSPITAL. I HOPE THEY WILL TAKE ME IN AND MY BABY. MY HUSBAND IS AT SEA, AND I AM ILL, WITHOUT A PENNY."

"POOR CHILD!" CRIED FATHER MARTIN. "YOU MUST EAT SOMETHING WHILE YOU ARE GETTING WARM. THEN LET ME GIVE A CUP OF MILK TO THE LITTLE ONE. WHAT A BRIGHT LITTLE FELLOW HE IS! WHY YOU HAVE NO SHOES FOR HIM." THEN HE TOOK DOWN FROM THE SHELF THE SOFT LITTLE SHOES HE HAD ADMIRED THE NIGHT BEFORE. AND SHORTLY THE POOR YOUNG MOTHER LEFT.

AND FATHER MARTIN RESUMED HIS PLACE AT THE WINDOW. HOUR AFTER HOUR WENT BY, AND ALTHOUGH MANY PEOPLE PASSED HIS WINDOW AND MANY NEEDY SOULS TOOK PART IN HIS HOSPITALITY, THE EXPECTED GUEST DID NOT APPEAR.

"IT WAS ONLY A DREAM," HE SIGNED WITH A HEAVY HEART. "I DID HOPE AND BELIEVE, BUT HE HAS NOT COME." SUDDENLY, SO IT SEEMED TO HIS WEARY EYES, THE ROOM WAS FLOODED WITH A STRANGE LIGHT. AND TO THE COBBLER'S ASTONISHED VISION THERE APPEARED BEFORE HIM, ONE BY ONE, THE POOR STREET SWEEPER, THE SICK MOTHER AND HER CHILD AND THE OTHER PEOPLE WHOM HE HAD AIDED DURING THE DAY. AND EACH SMILED AND SAID, "HAVE YOU NOT SEEN ME? DID I NOT SIT AT YOUR TABLE?" AND THEY VANISHED.

AND THEN IN THE SILENCE, FATHER MARTIN HEARD

AGAIN THE GENTLE VOICE REPEATING THE OLD FAMILIAR WORDS, "WHOSOEVER SHALL RECEIVE ONE LITTLE CHILD, RECEIVES ME . . . FOR I WAS HUNGRY AND YOU GAVE ME FOOD, I WAS THIRSTY AND YOU GAVE ME DRINK, I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU TOOK ME IN . . . INASMUCH AS YOU DID IT UNTO ONE OF THE LEAST OF THESE MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS, YOU HAVE DONE IT UNTO ME." AMEN.