

The Visit

Titus 3:4-7

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

January 1, 2023/First Sunday After Christmas Day

On this first Sunday of 2023, I want to share something that was shared with me on Christmas Eve.

Some of you may remember a story I told in a sermon on December 11. The sermon was about how God sometimes reroutes us and derails our best laid plans.

I told the story of getting a phone call from a guy from the Blood reserve who said that his mother had told him that God told her to tell him to call a Ryan Dueck at Lethbridge Mennonite Church, that I was going to play a role in his journey of recovery.

Well, I ended up meeting him for coffee on Dec 23. And then he made his way to our Christmas Eve service (some of you likely met him). We've had a few good conversations and plan on connecting in the future.

Anyway, on Christmas Eve he texted me a story by J.B. Phillips called "The Visit." Some of you may be familiar the story. Others might recognize the name.

J.B. Phillips was a famous translator of the Bible and Anglican clergyman from England. He is perhaps well known for his *The New Testament in Modern English* first published in 1958.

The story my new friend sent me is called "The Visited Planet."¹ I read it and loved it. And I thought, "Well, I'm going to have to find a way to use this for my first sermon of 2023."

¹<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53212406e4b09d85eb0bcdb9/t/5675d89d05f8e2dd006ef90c/1450563741944/The+Visited+Planet.pdf>

Once upon a time ...

A very young angel was being shown round the splendors and glories of the universes by a senior and experienced angel.

To tell the truth, the little angel was beginning to be tired and a little bored. He had been shown whirling galaxies and blazing suns, infinite distances in the deathly cold of inter-stellar space, and to his mind there seemed to be an awful lot of it all.

Finally, he was shown the galaxy of which our planetary system is but a small part. As the two of them drew near to the star, which we call our sun, and to its circling planets, the senior angel pointed to a small and rather insignificant sphere turning very slowly on its axis.

It looked as dull as a dirty tennis-ball to the little angel, whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen.

"I want you to watch that one particularly," said the senior angel, pointing with his finger.

"Well, it looks very small and rather dirty to me," said the little angel. "What's special about that one?"

"That," replied his senior solemnly, "is the Visited Planet."

"Visited?" said the little one. "You don't mean visited by -----?"

"Indeed, I do. That ball, which I have no doubt looks to you small and insignificant and not perhaps over clean, has been visited by our young Prince of Glory."

And at these words he bowed his head reverently.

"But how?" queried the younger one. "Do you mean that our great and glorious Prince, with all these wonders and splendors of His Creation, and millions more that I'm sure I haven't seen yet, went down in Person to this fifth-rate little ball? Why should He do a thing like that?"

"It isn't for us," said his senior a little stiffly, "to question His 'whys', except that I must point out to you that He is not impressed by size and numbers, as you seem to be. But

that He really went I know, and all of us in Heaven who know anything know that. As to why He became one of them—how else do you suppose could He visit them?"

The little angel's face wrinkled in disgust.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said, "that He stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?"

"I do, and I don't think He would like you to call them 'creeping, crawling creatures' in that tone of voice. For, strange as it may seem to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like Him."

The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond his comprehension. "Close your eyes for a moment," said the senior angel, "and we will go back in what they call Time."

While the little angel's eyes were closed and the two of them moved nearer to the spinning ball, it stopped its spinning, spun backwards quite fast for a while, and then slowly resumed its usual rotation.

"Now look!" And as the little angel did as he was told, there appeared here and there on the dull surface of the globe little flashes of light, some merely momentary and some persisting for quite a time.

"Well, what am I seeing now?" queried the little angel.

"You are watching this little world as it was some thousands of years ago," returned his companion. "Every flash and glow of light that you see is something of the Father's knowledge and wisdom breaking into the minds and hearts of people who live upon the earth. Not many people, you see, can hear His Voice or understand what He says, even though He is speaking gently and quietly to them all the time."

"Why are they so blind and deaf and stupid?" asked the junior angel rather crossly.

"It is not for us to judge them. We who live in Splendor have no idea what it is like to live in the dark. We hear the music and the Voice like the sound of many waters every day of our lives, but to them—well, there is much darkness and much noise and much distraction upon the earth. Only a few who are quiet and humble and wise hear His Voice.

But watch, for in a moment you will see something truly wonderful."

The Earth went on turning and circling round the sun, and then quite suddenly, in the upper half of the globe, there appeared a light, tiny but so bright in its intensity that both the angels hid their eyes.

"I think I can guess," said the little angel in a low voice. "That was the Visit, wasn't it?"

"Yes, that was the Visit. The Light Himself went down there and lived among them; but in a moment, and you will be able to tell that even with your eyes closed, the light will go out."

"But why? Could He not bear their darkness and stupidity? Did He have to return here?"

"No, it wasn't that" returned the senior angel. His voice was stern and sad. "They failed to recognize Him for Who He was - or at least only a handful knew Him. For the most part they preferred their darkness to His Light, and in the end they killed Him."

"The fools, the crazy fools! They don't deserve ----"

"Neither you nor I, nor any other angel, knows why they were so foolish and so wicked. Nor can we say what they deserve or don't deserve. But the fact remains, they killed our Prince of Glory while He was Man amongst them."

"And that I suppose was the end? I see the whole Earth has gone black and dark. All right, I won't judge them, but surely that is all they could expect?"

"Wait, we are still far from the end of the story of the Visited Planet. Watch now but be ready to cover your eyes again."

In utter blackness the earth turned round three times, and then there blazed with unbearable radiance a point of light.

"What now?" asked the little angel, shielding his eyes.

"They killed Him all right, but He conquered death. The thing most of them dread and fear all their lives He broke and conquered. He rose again, and a few of them saw Him and from then on became His utterly devoted slaves."

"Thank God for that," said the little angel.

"Amen. Open your eyes now, the dazzling light has gone. The Prince has returned to His Home of Light. But watch the Earth now."

As they looked, in place of the dazzling light there was a bright glow which throbbed and pulsated. And then as the Earth turned many times little points of light spread out. A few flickered and died; but for the most part the lights burned steadily, and as they continued to watch, in many Parts of the globe there was a glow over many areas.

"You see what is happening?" asked the senior angel. "The bright glow is the company of loyal men and women He left behind, and with His help they spread the glow and now lights begin to shine all over the Earth."

"Yes, yes," said the little angel impatiently, "but how does it end? Will the little lights join up with each other? Will it all be light, as it is in Heaven?"

His senior shook his head. "We simply do not know," he replied. "It is in the Father's hands. Sometimes it is agony to watch and sometimes it is joy unspeakable. The end is not yet.

But now I am sure you can see why this little ball is so important. He has visited it; He is working out His Plan upon it."

"Yes, I see, though I don't understand. But I shall never forget that this is the Visited Planet."

Titus 3:4-7

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that,

having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

These words from Paul's little letter to Titus were among the readings for Christmas Day this year. Because we usually don't have a Christmas Day service, I have never had a chance to preach on this beautiful little passage.

But these words, too, I thought, were great ones to begin a New Year.

They speak of the way in which God visited this planet.

I was drawn to a bunch of words in these four short verses: Goodness. Loving kindness. Saved. Mercy. Grace. The hope of eternal life.

And all of this, Paul reminds us, has nothing do with what we have done or could ever do. We have been saved by grace.

Ah, grace.

I was having a conversation recently with someone about New Year's resolutions, the desire to do better in the year ahead, and the perceived expectation to always be "doing more" for Jesus.

More faithfulness, more discipleship, more commitment, more spiritual vitality, more sacrifice for the sake of others, more Christ-like character, more inspiring leadership more _____. The list was a diverse and lengthy one, but the main idea was *more*.

"I'm tired of it," my friend said. "I don't want to always be told that I need to do more, to work harder. I want to hear about grace."

Me too. I always want to hear about grace.

In one of the first bible studies I led as chaplain at the jail, I told the guys something I heard a long time ago (I forget the source).

Justice is getting what we deserve.

Mercy is not getting what we deserve.

Grace is getting what we don't deserve.

They made me repeat that a few times. Some of them even wrote it down. So I'm going to repeat it again for us, too.

Justice is getting what we deserve.

Mercy is not getting what we deserve.

Grace is getting what we don't deserve.

Grace is a visited planet. Grace is a visited people, who did nothing to earn their visitation. Grace is a light that spreads across this "fifth rate little ball."

Grace is the hope of eternal life.

This little ball is important. God has visited it.

And our little lives are important. Because God, in Christ, has visited us, too. Each one of us. God has visited us with love and forgiveness and a summons to new life.

So may we venture out into 2023 supremely confident in the character and purposes of God—far greater and surer and more trustworthy than our own.

May we play our small part in spreading the light and the glow of Christ over all the earth.

And may we point always to the sure hope that in the end, the little lights will indeed all join up with each other, and that all will be light, on earth as in heaven.

Amen.

