

Brian Abel Ragan's father told him the same story every year, growing up. About a little boy so poor he had nothing but one toy: a little beat-up plastic car with two wheels and a broken windshield. It was Christmas, and at midnight Mass in that village people would put gifts around baby Jesus in the crib --- jeweled chalices, fat checks, baskets of food and so on.

It was the little boy's first time to get to go to midnight Mass, so he worked shoveling snow and removing trash, and had two whole dollars to give God. He was so happy to have something to give, until his widowed mother spied the money sitting on the table. "O Son, what a good boy you are." Now we can have a real Christmas dinner," and before he could explain, she'd run out of the house to buy food before the market closed.

Now what was he going to do? You know, don't you. When he arrived at church he walked timidly to the manger and put the broken toy amidst all the treasures. But it wasn't two minutes later that an usher walked up, spied the car and flung it into the trash by the door, muttering "Who would leave a piece of garbage like that at our Lord's crib?"

Then everything stopped and hushed. Jesus was getting out of the manger. He walked over to the trash and removed the broken car with great tenderness. Then he tucked it under his arm and walked back lying in the straw and becoming a statue again.

Brian says he remembers resenting this Christmas tale. His dad was a mean drunk, and the sappy story was just a pathetic attempt to manipulate him into being a good little boy. Only years later, he figured out what his father was trying to tell him. Here's what he says: "As I think of my father's story now, I realize I cast him in the wrong role. My father was not the good little boy who gave his last plaything to the Lord. My father was the smashed ... car ... He was a wreck. But despite - or because of - all this, he clearly longed to be cradled in his Savior's arms, to have Christ still seek him after he had been rejected by everyone else."..(from Dynamic Preaching XXIV, 4, p. 71)

If you've been a really good girl or boy, welcome to the manger of God for an embrace. But if your life's been a car wreck, you're particularly welcome. We were all made for this story of Christmas. Yes, to some people it seems sappy and sentimental. But it doesn't go away. Which means maybe it's true, and we're wired inside by God for it.

Let me close with another Christmas story. The Church was having its kids' pageant, so of course there were the kids, in flannel bathrobes with towels on their heads. The divine manger itself glowed with the presence of the newborn Jesus. That's because the divine infant was played by a light bulb nestled there, to make Mary and Joseph's face shine as they bent over. And all went well till a smart aleck shepherd said in a whisper all the kids could hear: Well Joe, when ya gonna pass out the cigars. Which set those nervous kids giggling and giggling, till the angel perched on a ladder fell flat on the stable, which came down on Mary and Joseph.. No one was hurt, but Mary and Joseph were on the floor, laughing so hard. (Dynamic Preaching XIV, 4, p 78)

And it was all a disaster ... except the light bulb. The fragile bulb just went on shining.

Which has to be a parable. Because the props around as we try to tell the Christmas story: the preachers, the institutional churches, the choirs, the music, the incense ... sometimes work and sometimes, though sin and hypocrisy, we all come tumbling down.

But the light ... the light keeps shining. Jesus, the light of the world, with us today and always. It's great if it's true. It's true. Happy birthday, light of the world.