

Meditation: "Christmas Shopping with Two Coins"

Date: December 19, 2021

Occasion: Blue Christmas Service

Scriptures: Luke 1:5-23; Mark 12:41-44

Preacher: Rev. Robert Dean

Did you know that two nights from now is the longest night of the year? While we call this service a "Blue Christmas" service, many churches use a different name for this service. The other name is the "Service of the Longest Night" and is often offered for individuals who are struggling with grief over the loss of a loved one during the holidays.

For many years, I did not understand what that meant. I always thought of January as having the longest and darkest nights of the year. How could a person see darkness when there are so many lights in yards, parades on streets, and people with warm smiles? Who thinks of darkness when there are so many beautiful Christmas trees to look at throughout the season?

I never knew how dim lights could grow when the people you love are no longer next to you. I never knew how challenging it could be when you try to get through the holidays while facing an illness, dealing with an addiction, going through a separation from a loved one, or any of a thousand reasons why the lights seem to shine less brightly.

Tonight is a night when it is okay to admit that this season is not always easy. With COVID causing disruptions and fears again, a world that seemingly cannot seem to understand the word "peace," and the difficult patches of life around, it can be difficult to find hope.

There is a story in our scriptures that seems to sum it up nicely for me. In Jesus' day, the temple was a place where people came to worship.

The temple was at the center of the Hebrew faith and there was only one temple. The rich, wealthy, and powerful worshiped alongside the poor, the struggling, and the destitute. In one corner of the temple, you might see a wealthy man bringing an offering of gratitude for the safe birth of a child while outside of the temple there was a pool near the temple where desperately sick people gathered to seek healing as the sick were not allowed in the Temple.

One day, Jesus was at the temple when he noticed a woman putting two small coins into the treasury. Now, if I were to tell you that the coins were mites, that might not mean much to you. If I were to tell you that the coin was probably a lepton, which was a small coin minted by Alexander Jannaeus, King of Judea from 103 to 76 BCE, that also might not mean much to you. If I were to tell you that it took over 330 lepta to equal a Greek drachma, over 750 lepta to equal a shekel, or nearly 200 lepta to equal a Roman denarius, I also might get some blank stares. Our scriptures say it was worth a penny, which might be accurate. Two lepta did equal one quadrans, which was the smallest Roman coin. Suffice it to say that she was not putting much into the plate.¹

Jesus noticed this woman and lauded her faith. She put everything in her offering to the temple. Even if it was just two small coins, she put everything into the offering and Jesus applauded her faith. What an amazing and generous woman to offer all she had to her name, even if it was just worth a penny.

As someone who is personally experiencing a rather Blue Christmas, I feel for the woman who put everything in the offering. I feel for someone who sees the world in front of them asking for more than they could possibly pull out of their wallet. Everyone seems to want you to

¹ Source: <https://coinweek.com/ancient-coins/what-are-widows-mite-coins/>

smile, to sing, to laugh, to eat, to drink, and be merry. People want you to buy into all of the yuletide spirit, but all you have in your pocket is two small coins that are so small that the pastor can spend time describing just how seemingly worthless the coins once were.

To be honest, sometimes it feels as if I am Zechariah. People like Mary get a visit from an angel and get to ask as many questions as they like, while I am left standing there in stunned silence. Elizabeth, Zechariah's partner, gets to experience the Holy Spirit leaping around in her womb while I get to sit around while people try to get me to tell my wife she can't name our son John. Shepherds get to hear tidings of great joy and a sign in the heavens accompanied by angel after angel singing, but I literally can't say a word about anything. Sometimes it simply seems unfair that life has turned out the way that it has turned out.

If you feel like Zechariah too, then I have good news for you. You are not alone in having a difficult time. This may be a difficult year, a difficult decade, or even a hard life. The pain may have set in so completely that you've lost all sense of what it feels like to live without that pain in your heart.

Friend, it is okay to hurt. I feel pain too. Your pain is not my pain and my pain is not your pain. The pain in me sees the pain in you, and neither of us are alone. It is okay to admit it hurts.

The beautiful thing about the story of Jesus and the woman with two coins is not that she reached into her purse and it was magically overflowing with coins. The beautiful thing about that story is that Jesus saw where the woman was, what the woman was going through, and I believe in my heart of hearts that God met that woman where she was in her life. It is not in the text, but I believe that God was with that woman with faith, hope and love.

Friends, we too are met with love tonight. In a short while, we are going to pray over some mites and ask a simple thing of God. We are going to ask God to meet us where we are, ask God to hold us through the rough bits in the days ahead, and pray that we will make it through as whole people. We are going to ask for help because sometimes that's where a journey to healing begins.

If you can't pray for yourself, if you can't find your own way forward to a place where that's possible, then I invite you to pray for others and to trust they are praying for you. We do not need to do any of this life of faith alone. I invite you to take a moment of silence and to lift up to God the days ahead, the sorrows behind, and to trust that all will be well.

Luke 1:5-23

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. 7 But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

8 Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. 10 Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11 Then there

appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. 14 You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. 16 He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." 18 Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." 19 The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. 22 When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. 23 When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

Mark 12:41-44

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large

sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44 For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."