

The Unexpected Visitors adapted from Leo Tolstoy's "Where God Is, Love Is"
by Andy Bachmann

Here we stand, yet again, on the brink of Christmas. With the wintry days slow in coming, and the turkey from Thanksgiving still lingering in our refrigerators, it can be a little shocking to have the holidays so near. And yet for some of us there have already been Christmas lists written, hand scribed letters to the North Pole have already made it to the mail box, and the scent of evergreen and spiced potpourri already greet visitors upon opening the door.

But not everyone celebrates these tell tale signs of the Advent season. The spirit of Christmas affects some people differently than others. For some people, Christmas is just another welcome lull to the busy year. A time of reflection on things past, not so much a time of hope for tomorrow.

That's how it is for the man I want to introduce you to today. His name is Mark. At the time of our tale Mark has become an old man. He has lived a full life, and now he is nearing the end of his days, and he knows it. Mark's wife is no longer living; she died a few years earlier. And Mark's son is no longer with us either, he too passed on before his time. So Mark is alone. He lives and works in his shop; a little mechanic shop just up the street; a place where you bring your cars in for a tune-up, or your lawn mower up for a new carburetor, he can fix most anything mechanical, he's gifted in that way. And although Mark lives alone, he is not lonely. He is comfortable with who he is, and where he is in this life. He is not prone to complaints, and doesn't often give way to sentimental heartache or sadness; though there are times he does think of his wife, and his son, and he misses them terribly.

As the Christmas season descends here in Florida, there are a few gentle reminders for us of the change in seasons. For one thing, the Spanish moss that hangs from the trees almost takes on a golden hue at certain times of the day. The rain showers that drift in are different from the humid afternoon showers of the summer months. They bring in a coolness that lingers in the air; bringing a freshness that reminds those of us who came from northern places of a crisp, fall afternoon, and a renewed appreciation that the mild winters here in Gainesville are a welcome change in the temperatures that don't require snow shovels or winter parkas, hats and gloves.

In the cool wintry afternoons, when things are not so busy around the shop, especially when the students leave town for a few blessed weeks, Mark likes to open the door to the bay of his shop, and simply sit in a chair and watch the world go by.

It is in these times of thoughtful reflection that Mark has taken to picking up his old family Bible again, donning his spectacles, and leafing through the gospel stories of Jesus, or the psalms of David, or the stories of Genesis or the Exodus. At night he shuts the big bay door and goes back into his little apartment behind

the shop; checks on his small vegetable garden, and makes a little supper before turning in for the night.

One December evening, as the sun sank slowly into the western sky, and Mark's pumpkin squash soup was not quite ready yet, he started reading through the seventh chapter of Luke; the one with the roman centurion and his servant, the widow and her son, and he came to the story of the Pharisee man who invited Jesus to dinner at his house. He read how when Jesus entered the house a woman from the village fussed over him, washing his feet with her tears and drying the with her hair, anointing him with oil, kissing his feet. But the Pharisee man looked down on the woman, but Jesus defended her. In the forty fourth verse, he read:

"Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment."

Mark read through these verses and thought, "He gave no water for his feet, gave no kiss, no oil for his head?" And Mark took off his spectacles, and laid them on the book, and pondered.

"He must have been like me, that Pharisee. He too thought only of himself. How to get a cup of coffee, how to keep warm and comfortable in the winter chill; never a thought of his guest. He took care of himself, but for his guest he cared nothing at all. And who was his guest? The Christ himself! If he came to me, would I behave like that?"

And as Mark sat and considered these things, the day slowly took on it's red amber hue of sunset, and Mark nodded off to sleep, in his chair.

"Mark!" he suddenly heard a voice from inside the shop, behind him.

"Who's there?"

He turned around, looked towards his apartment door and around the bay, but noone was there.

"Mark!" Said the voice again. "Look for me tomorrow, for I shall come."

Mark roused himself from his chair. By now the sun had set, and the day had given way to night. He stretched his weary bones, and shuffled back into the shop, shaking his head.

"Was I dreaming? Or did I just hear the voice of God?" he thought, as he closed up the shop for the night, and went back to his bedroom for the night.

Early the next morning, he woke with a start. Did he really hear the voice of God last night? Was there going to be a special visitor to his shop this day? He didn't know, but because it was the holiday, he took his time in welcoming the day. There was a chill in the air, so he decided to start a little fire in his fire pit just

outside the door. It helped to warm the place up a bit. He put the coffee pot on his little two burner stove, and pulled his soup from his mini-fridge to warm it up for lunch, but the whole time he kept an eye on the street, wondering if indeed he was going to receive a special visitor this day.

Soon he took his chair again, and brought it to the place by the bay, but he didn't open up the door, because it was still pretty cold outside. He sat and waited, and watched the lazy world go by.

The city was slow in waking up. Because it was the Christmas holiday, there was not the usual hubbub of activity. The street stayed quiet, with a few gusty breezes blowing by, scattering the leaves around and making Mark glad the fire out back was warming the place up a bit.

Soon, Mark began to wonder if he was being silly, sitting patiently by waiting for God to appear. And just when he was ready to fold up his chair and retreat out back to watch his garden grow, he heard a slow and low rumble coming up the street. His heart began to beat a little faster as he tried to peer around the corner, but alas, it was only the giant street sweeper rumbling round the corner. As Mark stood and watched, he saw it shudder and lurch and suddenly heard a high screeching whine that did not sound good. The giant machine grumbled to a stop, the high door swung open, and he watched old Thomas emerge from the cab, trying to gently climb down from the beast, to investigate the problem. Mark had known Thomas for years. He had worked for the city even before Mark had taken over the shop, and Mark thought he was old then! But now old Thomas seemed even more frail and fragile in this chilly wintry day. Mark opened up the bay door, and hollered out to Thomas.

"Hey Old Man, you can't park that thing here!" he chided.

Thomas waved him off, but as he opened up the hood of the big old sweeper, Mark could see him wince with pain.

"Hey, let me give you a hand there." And he came over to investigate with Thomas.

"Boy, they don't make them like they used to, I'll tell you what." Said Thomas as Mark approached.

"No sir, they don't, do they. Let me see what's going on here." As Mark glanced under he could see that a belt had just come loose, and it wouldn't take him but a minute to tighten it up a knotch.

"Come on in, Thomas, let me get you a cup of coffee while I give this old belt a squeeze."

"I'd be much obliged." Together the two men shuffled back to Mark's little apartment, and Mark set two mugs on the small table he had. As he poured the coffee, Thomas shook his head and moved closer to the fire. "It's a cold one out there today, my friend. I'm afraid my old bones and body can't fight the chill as I once could."

"Old men like us shouldn't be out trudging around on chilly days like this. We belong inside."

Before Mark even had a chance to sit down, Thomas has drained his mug.

"Another then, my friend?"

“No no, your fancy coffee doesn’t come cheap, one is plenty for me.” But Mark could see that another cup would do him good, so he filled him up again. As Thomas took his time with the second cup, he couldn’t help but notice that Mark kept gazing out through the shop at the street. “Are you expecting anyone?” asked the visitor.

“Am I expecting anyone? Well, now, I am ashamed to tell you. It isn’t that I really expect anyone; but I heard something last night which I can’t get out of my mind. Whether it was a vision or only a fancy, I can’t tell. You see, friend, last night I was reading the gospel, and the story of the Pharisee man who did not properly welcome the Lord when he came to visit. I thought on how I would receive God if God came to me; and the strangest thing happened. I heard, clear as the church chimes, a voice say to me, ‘Expect me tomorrow, for I shall come.’ Perhaps I’ve come to hear voices in my old age.”

Thomas simply shook his head in silence, and replaced his empty coffee mug, which Mark promptly refilled.

“Have you read much of the gospel, my friend?”

“No, I’m afraid I’m an ignorant man and can’t read too good.”

“I was thinking how Jesus walked on earth and called as his followers not kings and noblemen, but common folk, working folk, like you and me. He loved them, cared for them, even washing their feet, he loved them so! Blessed are they, he said. Blessed are the poor, for they shall inherit the earth.”

Thomas forgot about his coffee. He was an old man, easily moved to tears, and as he sat and listened the tears ran down his cheeks.

“Come, drink some more” said Mark. But Thomas clasped his hands in a bow, looked up to the heavens, and stood up. “Thank you, Mark. You have given me food and comfort both for the soul and for the body.” And with that, he shuffled to the door, and went back out into the cold.

“Hang on, now, let me grab my tools.” But as the two men approached the street sweeper, the belt had somehow tightened up. “Hmm. That’s odd.” Said Mark, and as he glanced around for Thomas, the old man was already back up in the cab. He started up the engine, and sure enough, it sounded good as new. With a quick wave, away he pulled, and Mark went back into the shop.

As the day passed by only a few cars passed. A few that he had worked on in the past, with a quick oil change or a new transmission. He recognized the drivers through the cars, as his business made him aware of the intricate personalities of both, through the years. But more and more often, people weren’t coming to his local shop so much any more. The two quick oil places up the street was making his everyday business tough. And when that super Wal-mart opened up, he saw his business drop off by nearly a third. People just weren’t local anymore; they think they can get it cheaper and quicker with the big body stores, and in the gradual decline of his business, Mark could read the writing on the wall. Times were tough for local shops like his.

But still, he kept his gaze to the street; waiting for a hopeful sight of something new to come popping into his shop, bringing him hope for the new year. But all he saw was a busted up old chevy Malibu roll around the corner, off 13th street into his little side street, with a flat tire, torn to shreds on the wheel base.

He could hear the crying baby in the back before he saw the young mother emerge from the old car, and pop the trunk. She looked pretty disheveled as she rounded on the trunk, and started digging around for the old donut tire in the back.

“Young lady! Oh miss! Pull her in here, and let me give you a hand.” The woman hesitated for a moment, but then pulled her car into the waiting bay, that Mark had opened up.

“Come on in, little lady, let me give you a hand with that.”

“I’m afraid I’ve got no money for a new tire. If you could just help me slip on this spare, I’d be much obliged.”

“Is that a baby I see back there? Hey there little fella, how are you? How are you?” Mark could tell from the baby’s cries, and the mother’s vacant eyes, that both were hungry.

“Tell you what, I’ve got some good soup from my very own garden on, and it should be just about ready. Care to join me for a little lunch.”

“That’d be great. We haven’t eaten all day.”

Mark brought the young lady and baby back into his tiny apartment, brushed off his table and ladled up a big bowl of soup. He then went to the cupboard and pulled out a hunk of bread.

“Here now, let me take that baby while you get something to eat. I’ve handled babies before, he’ll be in good hands. As Mark bounced the baby on his knee, the woman told him who she was, and where she had been.

“I’m a soldiers wife.” She said. “They sent my husband somewhere, far away, eight months ago, and the checks have been pretty slow in coming in. I lost my job not long ago, but I’m heading down to a new one in Ocala that starts next week. Things should be a bit better then, but right now, it’s a little tough.”

“Well, you eat up that soup, and I’ll go throw on that tire for you, and you’ll be good to go.”

Mark passed the baby back to his mother, and went around the side of his shop. He pulled out a new tire for the car, put it on, and then went to his old cigar box on the back shelf of his shop, and pulled out a twenty dollar bill. He put the \$20 in her glove box, along with a tire gage.

“I found an old tire that fit your car that I had just sitting around, so I put it on for you, no charge. When you get down to Ocala, I put a tire gage in your glove box, check the pressure and make sure it’s keeping it’s air. OK?”

The woman looked at her new tire, then up at Mark, and she burst into tears.

“God bless you, sir. Surely it was God who brought you to your window.”

“That it was, dear. That it was. Thought not for the ways you might think.”

Before she slipped into her car, she gave Mark a quick hug, and departed. As she left, Mark said a quiet prayer for her, for her child, and for her far away husband.

As the day stretched on, Mark could not help but return to his workbench to finish tinkering at an old lawnmower motor that he was trying to resurrect. He fell into the old familiar rhythms of his work, and before he knew it, the daylight faded, and it was time to call it a day. As he put away his tools, he glanced, hopefully, out the bay door one last time.

“Ahh well...” he sighed. “I guess it was just a dream after all.”

After his supper, he pulled out his bible to resume reading once again, but the book fell open to a different spot. Suddenly, in the shadows behind him, Mark felt the presence of a stranger. Turning to see, he heard the familiar voice again; say to him, “It’s me, Mark. Didn’t you recognize me?” And, stepping forward out of the shadows he saw not Jesus, but Thomas, the street sweeper. As he stepped into the light, Thomas said, “It is I.” Then with a wink and a smile and a tip of his cap, he vanished!

“It is I.” Said the voice again, and stepping into the light he saw the young mother and her baby. And with a wink and a smile, she too vanished.

And Marks soul grew glad. He clasped his hands in a prayer of thanks, put on his spectacles, and began reading the gospels where it had opened. At the top of the page he read,

“I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me in.”

And at the bottom of the page he read, “That which you have done for those around you, so to you have done for me.”

And Mark understood that his dream had come true; and that God really had come to visit him that day, and he had welcomed God in.