

A HOLY DAY.

An Interesting Sermon Appropriate to the Holiday Season.

Christmas Commemorates the Birth of the Greatest Being That Ever Walked the Earth—Dr. Talmage's Discourse.

The text selected by Dr. Talmage Sunday was Colossians ii, 16: "In respect of a holy day."

What the Bible here and elsewhere calls a holy day we, by change of one letter and change of pronunciation, call holiday. But by change of spelling and accentuation we can not change the fact that holidays have great significance. As long as the world stands Christmas day and New Year's day and Easter day will be charged and surcharged with solemn suggestiveness and holy mirth. Whether you take the old style of my text and call them holy days, or the modern style and call them holidays, they somehow set all my nerves a-tingle and my deeper emotions into profoundest agitation. I am glad that this season we have holidays completely bounded.

For years Christmas day, starting in the midst of one week, and New Year's day, starting in the midst of another week, we have been perplexed to know when the holidays began and when they ended, and perhaps we may have begun them too soon or continued them too long. But this year they are bounded by two beaches of gold—Sabbath, December 25, 1892, and Sabbath, January 1, 1893. The one Sabbath this year commemorates the birth of the greatest being that ever walked the earth; the other celebrates the birth of that which is to be one of the greatest years of all time, the one day supernatural because of an unhinged star and angelic doxology, and the other day natural, but part of a procession that started with the world's existence and will go on until the world is burned up; both the first and the last days of these holidays coming in with Sabbath-like splendor and solemnity, and girding all the days between with thoughts that have all time and all eternity in their emphasis. How shall we spend them? At haphazard and without special direction, and they leaving, as they go away from us, physical fatigue and mental exhaustion, the effect of late hours and recklessness of diet, adding another chapter to the moral and spiritual and eternal disasters which have resulted from misspent holidays? Oh, no! A stout and resounding no! for all the eight days.

I propose that we divide this holiday season, the two Sabbaths of the holiday and the six days between, into three chapters—the first part a chapter of illustrious birthday; the second part a chapter of annual decadence; the third part a chapter of the chronological introduction.

First, then, a chapter of illustrious birthday. Not a day of any year but has been marked by the nativity of some good or great soul. Among discoverers the birthday of Humboldt was September 14, and of David Livingston, March 19. Among astronomers the birthday of Isaac Newton was December 25, and of Herschel, November 17. Among orators the birthday of Cicero was January 3, and of Chrysostom, January 14. Among prison reformers the birthday of John Howard was September 2, and of Elizabeth Fry, May 1. Among painters the birthday of Raphael was March 28, and of Michael Angelo, March 6.

Among statesmen the birthday of Washington was February 22; of Hamilton, May 8, and of Jefferson, April 2. Among consecrated souls the birthday of Mrs. Hemans was September 25; of Lucretia Mott, January 3, and of Isabella Graham, July 29. But what are all those birthdays compared with December 25 for on or about that day was born one who eclipsed all the great names of all the centuries—Jesus of Bethlehem, Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus of Golgotha, Jesus of Olivet, Jesus of the Heavenly throne.

The greatest pictures have been made about scenes in his lifetime. The greatest sacrifices on field of battle or in hospital or on long march or in martyrdom have been inspired by his self abnegation. The finest words of eloquence ever spoken have been uttered in the proclamation of His Gospel. The grandest oratorios that have ever rolled from orchestras were descriptive of his life and death. There have been other orators, but none like Him who "spake as never man spake." There have been other reformers, but none like Him who will not have completed His mission until the last prison is ventilated, and the last blind eye opened, and the last deaf ear unstopped, and the last lame foot bound like a roe, and the last case of dementia shall come to its right mind.

There have been other discoverers, but none like Him, able to find how man may be just with God. There have been other deliverers, but none like Him, the rescuer of nations. There have been other painters, but none like Him who put the image of God on a lost soul. No wonder we celebrate His birth—Protestant church, Catholic church, Greek church, St. Isaac's of St. Petersburg, St. Peter's at Rome, the Madeline at Paris, St. Paul's in London, joining all our American cathedrals and churches and log cabin meeting houses and homes in keeping this pre-eminent birth festival.

Elaborate and prolonged efforts have been made to show that the star that pointed to the manger in which Christ was born was not what it appeared to be, but a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. Our wise men of the west say that the wise men of the east were mistaken. Astronomers, you know, can calculate backward as well as forward, and as they can tell what will occur a hundred years from now among the heavenly bodies, so they can accurately calculate backward and tell what occurred eighteen or nineteen hundred years ago. And it is true that before Christ in Chaldeas, about three hours before day dawn, there was a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn.

Standing in Jerusalem and looking over toward Bethlehem those two stars would have seemed to hang over that village, and it is suggested by a learned professor that the magi may have had weak eyes so that the two stars may have looked like one. In order to take everything supernatural out of the story we have to blind the eyes of the magi and introduce a second star to help out the idea of the one star. But I prefer the simple story of the Bible, that a light of some kind—stellar or meteoric—pointed from the sky to the straw cradle.

When it is so easy for God to make a world that he put eighteen millions of them within one sweep of the telescope, he could certainly afford one silvery or fiery signal of some kind to point the world to the place where the sovereign of the universe lay incarnate and infantile. If God could afford to make an especial earthquake at the crucifixion, the aslant rocks on Mt. Calvary still showing that there was a convolution of nature at that particular spot which was felt in none of the surroundings, then he could afford something unusual, something brilliant, something positive, something tremendous at the nativity.

If a king at the birth of a son can have the palace illuminated and couriers sent with swift dispatch to announce the gladness at the gates and wake up an empire with cannonade, I am not surprised that at the birth of the Son of God there was celestial agitation, and my only wonder is that, instead of one star or one meteor giving signal, all worlds did not make demonstration. Why not other worlds take interest in the event when Christ came from another world and another world was to get the souls that would be saved by this celestial descent? It would have been a stellar disgrace, an astronomical scandal, if, when the Godhead lay compressed in the form of an infant, something from above had not pointed down, as much as to say: "There he is! Look, all earth and heaven! Look, all time and all eternity!"

You see, the birth at Bethlehem must have been more novel and startling to the heavens than the crucifixion on Calvary. It was expected that Christ would be maltreated. The world always had maltreated its good and great friends. Joseph hurled into the pit, Shadrach put into the fire, Daniel lowered into a dungeon, David bounded from the throne, Elijah compelled to starve or take his food from the beak of a filthy raven, Socrates condemned to death, so that the Calvarian massacre was in the same old line of maltreatment. But the novelty of all ages was the conjunction of divinity and humanity. Invisible deity, muscled and nerved and fleshed in masculine physique. A child and yet a God! Why, if the meteor had not pointed down that night some angel would have rushed down and pointed with his glittering scepter.

Isaiah and David and Ezekiel, who foretold the coming, would have descended from their thrones and stood on the roof of the barn or in some way designated the honored locality. As the finger of light that December 25 pointed to the straw cradle, now all the fingers of Christendom this moment, fingers of childhood and old age, fingers of sermon and song and decoration and festivity, point to the great straw cradle. Am I not right in saying that the first of the three chapters of the holidays should be devoted to the illustrious birthday? By song and prayer and solemn reflection and charities to-day, and by gifts and trees that bear fruit in an hour after they are planted, and family gathering and hilarities sounding from cellar to garret to-morrow, keep Christmas.

As far as possible gather the children and the grandchildren, but put no estoppel on racket whether of laughter or swift feet or toys in shape of rail trains or trumpets or infant effigy. Let the old folks for one day at least say nothing about rheumatism, or prospect of early demise, or the degeneracy of modern times, or the poison in confectionery. If you can not stand the noise, retire from it for a little while into some other room and stop your ears. Christmas for children without plenty of noise is no Christmas at all.

If children and grandchildren can not have full swing during the holidays, when will they have it? They will be still soon enough, and their feet will slacken their pace, and the burdens of life will bear them down. Houses get awfully still when the children are gone. While they stay let them fill the room with such resounding mirth that you can hear the echoes twenty years after they are dead. By religious celebration to-day and by domestic celebration to-morrow keep Christmas.

As for our beloved church, we to-morrow night mean to set the children of our Sabbath school wild with delight, and in The Christian Herald, with which I am connected, we are celebrating the holidays by sending out two to four thousand Bibles a day, and they will continue to go out by express, by messengers and by mail until we have distributed at least 100,000 copies of the good old Book on which Christmas is built, and which gives the only healthy interpretation of these swift flying years.

The second chapter of the holidays must speak of annual decadence. This is the last Sabbath of the year. The steps of the year are getting short, for it is old. When it waved the spring time blossoms the year was young, and when it swung the scythe and cradle through the summer harvest fields the year was strong, but it is getting out of breath now, and after six more throbs of the pulse will be dead. We can not stop this annual decadence. Set all the clocks back, set all the watches back, set all the chronometers back, but you can not set time back.

For the old family clock you might suppose that time would have especial respect, and that if you took hold of those old hands on the face of that centenarian of a time-piece and pushed them back you might expect that time would stop or retreat for at least a few minutes. "No, no!" says the old family clock. "I must go on. I saw your father and mother on their wedding

day. I struck the hour of your nativity. I counted the festal hours of the day in which you brought home a bride. I sounded the knell at your father's death. I tolled at your mother's departure. Yea, I must sound your own going out of life. I must go on. I must go on. Tick, tock! Tick, tock!"

But there is a great city clock high up in the tower. There are so many wrongs in all our cities to be righted, so many evils to be extirpated, so many prisons to be sanitized—stop the city clock until all these things are done. Let common council and all the people of the great town decree that the city hall clock shall stop. We do not want the sins of 1892 to be handed over to 1893. We do not want the young year to inherit the misfortunes of the old year. By ladders lifted to the tower and by strong hands take hold and halt that city clock.

"No, no!" says the city clock. "I can not wait until you correct all evils or soothe all sorrow or drive out all sin. I have been counting the steps of your progress as a city. I have seen your opportunities. I have deplored your neglects; but time wasted is wasted forever. I must go on. I must go on. Tick, tock! Tick, tock!" But in the tower of the capitols at Washington and London and Berlin and Vienna and all the great national capitals there are clocks.

Suppose that by presidential proclamation and resolution of senate and house of representatives our national clock in the capitol turret be ordered to stop. "Stop, O clock, until sectional animosities are cooled off, until our Sabbaths are better kept and drunkenness turns to sobriety, and bribery, fraud and dissipation quit the land! Stop, O clock in the tower of the great United States capitol!" "No, no!" says the clock, "I have been going on so long I can not afford to stop. I sounded the birthday of American Independence. I rang out the return of peace in 1865. I have seen many presidents inaugurated. I struck the hour of Lincoln's assassination. I have beat time for emancipation proclamation, and Chicago fire, and Charleston earthquake, and epidemics of fever and cholera. Nations never stop. They march on toward salvation or destruction. And why should they stop? I chime for the national holidays. I toll for the mighty dead, I must go on. Tick, tock! Tick, tock!"

There may be a difference of a few seconds or a few minutes in the time pieces, but it will be a serious occasion when next Saturday night about the same hour the family clocks, and the city clocks, and the national clocks strike one! two! three! four! five! six! seven! eight! nine! ten! eleven! twelve!

Sorry am I to have 1892 depart this life. It has been a good year. What bright days! What starry nights!

What harvests! What religious convocations! What triumphs of art and science and invention and enterprise and religion! But, alas, how sacred it has been with sorrows! What pillows hot with fever that could not be cooled!

What graves opening wide enough to take down beauty and strength and usefulness!

What octogenarians putting down the staff of earthly pilgrimage and taking the crown of heavenly reward!

What children, as in Bible time, crying: "My head, my head!" And they carried him to his mother, and he sat on her knees until noon and then died."

This year went the chief poet of England and the chief poet of America. Our John G. Whittier—great in literature and simple as a child—for did I not spend an afternoon with him in a barn in the Adirondacks, and in the evening we played blind man's buff, he tying over my eyes the handkerchief, while the hotel parlors rang with the merrymaking? And Tennyson, this year gone—he who for this particular season of the year wrote:

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,

Ring flying cloud, the frosty light.

The year is dying in the night.

Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.

What mingling of emotions in this closing year! What orange blossoms for the marriage altar, and what myrtle for the tombs of dead! Hosannas and lamentations in collision! Anthem and dead march mounting from the same ivy keys. Before this year quite leaves the earth let it hear our repentance for opportunities that can never return; kind words spoken too late or not spoken at all; means of getting good or doing good so completely gone by that the archangel's voice could not recall them. Can it be that this year is closing and our sins are unforgiven, and we have no certainty that when our last December 31 has sped away we shall enter a blissful eternity? The most overwhelmingly solemn week of all the year is the last week of December.

But on opening this subject, "In respect of a holy day," as my text put it, or a holiday, as we moderns write and pronounce it, I advised that you divide this season into three chapters—the first a chapter of illustrious birthday, the second a chapter of annual decadence, and the third a chapter of chronological introduction and this last chapter we have reached. In olden times there was a style of closing an old year and opening a new one that was very suggestive.

The family would sit up until twelve o'clock at night, and when the clock struck twelve the family would all go to the front door of the house, take down the bar and turn back the lock and swing the door wide open to let the old year out and the new year in. And that is what we are going to do. With the same measured step that time has kept since it started, it will come to our door in the closing night of this week. With what spirit shall we let the new year in? I have already indicated that it is to be one of the greatest of all chronology.

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