

A Brethren Christmas

A Drama Cycle for Advent 2003

by Frank Ramirez

INTRODUCTION

On Christmas Day, 1723, the entire Brethren fellowship located on the North American continent met for baptism and love feast. Although members of the group had met for Bible study and worship prior to this date, this marked the true establishment of the Brethren faith in the New World.

The following cycle of plays is written for performance in worship or Sunday school. The titles and themes are based on worship materials contained on the covers of the Living World Bulletin Series for Advent 2003, which in turn are based on *The Revised Common Lectionary*. These materials are provided by the Church of the Brethren. Use of the bulletin covers is advised, but not necessary for production.

The plays are inspired by Donald F. Durnbaugh's *Fruit of the Vine* and *European Origins of the Brethren*, both available from Brethren Press. However, the plays are interpretations of history and are not intended to portray events exactly as they occurred. Any errors, omissions, or anachronisms are purely the author's.

One major point worth mentioning is that the principals spoke, sang, and thought in German. However the author, along with most of those who will perform or produce the plays, speaks English. As a result the characters speak in English and sing English hymns. This is an unavoidable inaccuracy. For the most part (with the exception of "Count Well the Cost"), rather than have the characters sing English translations of German songs, an ill fit at best, English hymns or carols were chosen. Hymns are in the public domain. Leaders may decide how many stanzas should be sung.

PRODUCTION NOTES

The Brethren wore the fashion of the day without fashion. They dressed plainly but did not wear the plain garb as we know it. The plays can be produced, complete with costumes and memorization, of course, but it is also possible to produce these plays with book in hand, the actors performing but holding their scripts so that no memorization is necessary. It is also possible to perform the play in reader's theater style. The story is communicated through words and relationships. Care should be taken in worship settings for proper amplification.

The play's the thing. Getting caught in trappings can result in too much attention to window dressing. Although you certainly want to speak clearly, it is dreadfully dull if one speaks too slowly.

It is possible that the addition of these plays to worship will result in lengthening worship. Therefore, if time is an issue, the worship leader might omit a hymn from the service.

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A Brethren Christmas

First Sunday of Advent

November 30, 2003

Your Redemption Is Drawing Near (Luke 21:25-36)

CAST

Johannes Hildebrand

Maria Hildebrand

Johann Gumre

Anna Gumre

Peter Becker

— Philadelphia, August 1723. The Market Place. —

(Enter Johannes and Maria Hildebrand. She is carrying a basket of apples in the crook of her arm. Johannes follows with a large bushel basket. He pauses and puts down his basket and wipes his forehead with his handkerchief.)

Johannes Hildebrand

So you admit it, Maria?

Maria Hildebrand

Admit what, Johannes?

Hildebrand

Oh, come, now, you've just about said it plain. We didn't come to the market at Philadelphia just for the apples.

Maria

They're very good apples. Very good. And the frost took care of many of our apples. Thank heavens just about everything else came up sound and sweet. Things grow here much better than back home in Germany, though it pains me to say it. But then, the soil is old there, and the blood of those who suffered for the faith is in the very dirt.

(She takes a bite from an apple in her basket, then offers it to her husband.)

Good— right?

Hildebrand

(He takes a bite.)

Good? Yes.

(He takes another bite, before she pulls the apple away.)

But no better than the apples we might buy in Germantown, which is a lot closer to our farm. Admit it. You came here because you thought we might get to hear Christian Liebe.

Maria

(laughing)

Who?

Hildebrand

You know very well who. Christian Liebe, who we knew back in Germany. Back where our faith was illegal and we were forced to flee from place to place. That Christian Liebe who exemplified Christian love better than just about anyone. Oh, those months when he was sentenced to life as a galley slave—we thought we'd never see him again.

Maria

I always knew he would be released through our prayers. He had too much to say on behalf of our Lord Jesus, too many sermons still to preach. And to think, he is here in Pennsylvania, and we will be able to hear him preach again. I don't want to go home until we've found him.

Hildebrand

It would be grand, wouldn't it, to be with him?

(pause)

And with the other Brethren too.

Maria

(sighs)

Yes, the other Brethren. It seems a shame we should cross the ocean in danger, fleeing danger, only to find prosperity, good land, good crops, and then fail to meet.

Hildebrand

We meet.

Maria

Not very often. And not with everyone. I miss the brethren. I miss the sisters.

Hildebrand

I do too.

Maria

We were like family then. Sisters and brothers, living together, sharing what we had so no one went hungry. We prayed together, we sang together—singing like I have not heard since we came to Pennsylvania.

(pause)

It is the only bad thing about Pennsylvania. Why don't we meet anymore?

Hildebrand

You know why. That was a terrible time in Krefeld, after the Great Argument.

Maria

It seemed like it was important then. But the argument does not seem so important now.

Hildebrand

It was real enough to split us in two.

Maria

But it's been four years since we left. Don't you think that's enough time . . .

(She stops.)

Look, Johannes, could that really be . . . ?

Hildebrand

Yes, it looks like Brother Johann Gumre and Sister Anna Gumre. We haven't seen them since, since . . .

(Enter Johann and Anna Gumre. He has a basket filled with sausage.)

Anna Gumre

So you admit it. It was not just the sausage they make in Philadelphia that means we have to harness the horse to the cart and make this journey where the air is bad.

Johann Gumre

The air is not bad in Philadelphia, and the sausage is good, very good.

Anna

My sausage is just as good, if not better, and it's as close as the smokehouse! The sows and kine thrive in this new world. Admit it, Johann, you have come because you have heard that Christian Liebe has come to Philadelphia and will preach here tomorrow.

Gumre

What if he has come? Would it not be grand to hear him?

Anna

There are stories everywhere. Who is to say if this is a true story?

Gumre

Anna, I say it's true. It's not the sort of thing people would just make up.

Anna

Johann, even so . . .

(She stops, as the two of them notice the Hildebrands for the first time. There is an awkward pause.)

Hello, Sister Maria.

Maria

(awkwardly)

Sister Anna. Hello.

(pause)

How have you been? The two of you.

Hildebrand

(stiffly)

Well. Very well. Brother Johann, hello. We hear of you and your home in Germantown. You are near the river, are you not?

Gumre

(formally)

The Wissahickon. It's more of a creek compared to the rivers of Germany, Brother John.

(pause—with a little more emotion)

Remember those waters? They sang like choirs, those waters where we were first baptized.

Anna

(sadly)

Yes. By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

Maria

How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Johann, is that why we do not sing the Brethren songs anymore in this foreign land?

Anna

I have wondered that myself.

Hildebrand

Well, I suppose we must go.

Gumre

Yes, there's much to be done. And Germantown is a good day's drive away.

(Long pause. Suddenly Sister Anna and Sister Maria rush toward each other and embrace. They share the holy kiss, and half laugh, half cry together.)

Maria

Sister Anna, how have you been really?

Anna

I have been missing you, missing you and all the Brethren. Tell me, are you here to . . .

Maria

To hear Christian Liebe? Yes, of course. Why else would we come all the way to Philadelphia when we have perfectly good apples—and sausage—in Germantown.

Anna

For us the same.

(The two women pause, and look at the men who are still standing far apart.)

Well?

(The men melt, come forward and embrace and share the holy kiss.)

Hildebrand

It is good, very good, to see you again, brother.

Gumre

It's like heaven. It's like home. I feel like singing, singing the old songs.

Hildebrand

We will sing the old songs, when we hear Christian Liebe preach.

Gumre

Maybe we shall see the others there, the sisters and the brothers who crossed the ocean with us.

Anna

And afterwards you must come to our house to stay.

Maria

Yes, yes. After the harvest. There is much to do. We can scarcely stand the time away. If it were not for the news about Brother Liebe . . .

Hildebrand

Come stay with us at the farm for a few days. We can come to your home when the crops are in.

Gumre

Yes, yes. And we can help bring in the crops with you. We've got willing hands, and I can close the shop for a few days. And after harvest we will gather all the Brethren we can. Just like the old days.

Anna

Look! Look over there!

Maria

Can it be? It looks like Brother Peter Becker, who led us over the ocean.

Hildebrand

You are right. It's him. Brother Peter! Brother Peter!

(Peter Becker enters, delighted.)

Peter Becker

Brothers! Sisters! Surely the Lord was present in this place and I did not know it!

(He embraces the men and takes the hands of the sisters warmly.)

It does me good to see sisters and brothers together. It has been a rare sight these four years since we came to Pennsylvania, am I right?

(He glances at their baskets.)

Sausage? Apples? Is that what brought you to Philadelphia?

Hildebrand and Anna

Yes!

Gumre and Maria

No!

(a pause, then laughter)

All Four

Yes!

Peter

Then divine providence was at work to get us together.

Maria

What do you mean?

Peter

I mean that the story of Christian Liebe is heard everywhere in the city, and there are many here, Mennonites, Friends, and the scattered Brethren, who have arrived to hear him. And others, others who do not yet know the Lord God. They all hear of Christian Liebe and come together to hear him.

Anna

That is marvelous.

Peter

But I'm sad to say it is not true. Our brother in Christ is still in Germany.

Hildebrand

(obviously disappointed)

What? How do you know?

Peter

I have checked the lading of every ship that has arrived and spoken to their masters. I have gone from church to church, asking. And, to tell you the truth, brothers and sisters, Brother Liebe writes regularly to us, and he has given me no indication that he intends to join us in Pennsylvania.

Hildebrand

No!

Gumre

Would to heaven it were true.

Anna

How sad! How terrible!

Maria

(sighs)

Then it is not true. What good was our coming here?

Anna

(considering)

Well, it drew us together, and we have not spoken since we arrived in Pennsylvania. Would it have happened otherwise if this story had not been spread?

Peter

Perhaps our redemption is drawing nigh.

Hildebrand

What do you mean?

Peter

Jesus told the disciples, "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near."

Maria

I have never seen a fig tree in Pennsylvania.

Peter

But you know what it means when the apples grow red and sweet. The kingdom of God is near among us. It's a sign. We are to get together.

Hildebrand

There are crops to bring in. When shall we gather? And who will gather us?

Peter

Brother Gumre lives in town. And so do I. Shall we take it upon ourselves to meet with the brethren and sisters? Let us begin to worship together in our homes.

Maria

And what about the love feast? It seems like forever since I sat at the Lord's table?

Peter

Christmas. Christmas Day? Shall we gather on that day?

Gumre

If we truly gather on Christmas Day, it won't seem like forever anymore. It'll seem like eternity, and the real gate to heaven.

Peter

Yes, brother, if we were all to gather that would be heaven indeed.

Hildebrand

But the controversy. What if brothers and sisters are still angry?

Peter

We must meet with them. We will talk to each other. We will seek to be reconciled. You know, even the stump shorn clean sends forth shoots that demonstrate there is still life, and where there is life, there is hope. Sisters and brothers, we will work together, to visit with each other, to pray, and finally to come together in the name of the Lord. And in that holy place of forgiveness we will meet the King of Kings.

(Sings "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence." The others join in, and the congregation is invited to join in as well).

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
And with fear and trembling stand.
Ponder nothing earthly minded,
For with blessing in his hand
Christ our God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.

King of kings, yet born of Mary,
As of old on earth he stood,
Lord of lords in human vesture,
In the body and the blood,
He will give to all the faithful
His own self for heavenly food.

Rank on rank the host of heaven
Spreads its vanguard on the way,
As the Light of light descendeth
From the realms of endless day,
That the powers of hell may vanish,
As the darkness clears away.

At His feet the six-wingèd seraph,
Cherubim with sleepless eye,
Veil their faces to the Presence,
As with ceaseless voice they cry,
“Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia, Lord Most High!”

“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” (public domain). No. 463 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*.

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