

# A Brethren Christmas

Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 21, 2003

## Restore Us, O God (Psalm 80:1-7)

### CAST

Magdalene Traut

Anna Gumre

Peter Becker

Martin Urner

Catherine Urner

Leader of Kallithumpian Band

Ruffian (member of the band)

Reveler

Reveler's wife

### Also:

Many other Brethren

Members of Kallithumpian Band

Another couple or two of revelers

— Christmas Eve, 1723.

Outside the home of John Gumre, on the road to the Wissahickon River. —

*(Enter several Brethren singing one stanza of "Count Well the Cost" led by Peter Becker.)*

Count well the cost, Christ Jesus says,  
When you lay the foundation.  
Are you resolved, though all seems lost,  
To risk your reputation,  
Your self, your wealth, for Christ the Lord,  
As you now give your solemn word?

"Count Well the Cost," st. 1 (words by Alexander Mack, trans. by Ora Garber), No. 437 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*.

*(Enter Magdalene Traut and Anna Gumre. They lag behind just a bit. Anna bends down to pick up something.)*

Magdalene Traut

Anna. What is that you are picking up?

Anna Gumre

Nothing.

Magdalene

It's a pine cone.

Anna

Yes. I suppose it is.

Magdalene

Why are you doing that?

Anna

There are seeds in here. Seeds for new life. Sometimes it takes a fire to release the new life. Sometimes it just takes someone like me to crack it open.

Magdalene

New life, eh?

Anna

We had the fires of persecution that led to our new life in the old country. Now it is easier, much gentler, for those who choose the new life in the new country. Yet it is the same gift, the same grace, offered to all.

Magdalene

Anna, you'd make a great preacher.

Anna

Don't speak nonsense. Women cannot be preachers.

Magdalene

Don't be so . . .

*(She gets closer to Anna.)*

Anna, you're crying.

Anna

No, I'm not.

Magdalene

*(embraces Anna)*

Yes, you are. Why are you crying? We're not supposed to cry on Christmas.

Anna

I know, I know. It's just that on this holy day I always miss my family the most—all those people we left behind across the ocean, whom we may never see again.

Magdalene

Hush, hush. Now you've got me crying too. There are so many we left behind to come here.

Anna

Yes. On most days life is so busy, with cooking and baking and planting and harvesting, with making the clothes and cleaning the house, that there is no time to think about them. Magdalene, I am so happy we came to Germantown. We are free to worship God without having to fear arrest or imprisonment. And even though my parents are buried across the ocean, my children live here!

*(daubs her eyes)*

Maybe I just have to get these tears out of my heart before everyone comes to my home later for the love feast.

Magdalene

That's right! These six new brothers and sisters must know what it means to come together around the table of the Lord! And it does not mean eating burnt food!

*(They start to laugh.)*

Quiet. Don't laugh so loud. Oh, Peter Becker is getting ready to talk.

*(The Brethren gather together around Peter.)*

Peter

The peace of the blessed Lord be with you all, brothers and sisters. I rise to greet you all in the name of the Lord, on this special day when we celebrate his holy birth. I see my friends here, or should I say my brothers and sisters. All of us have traveled by ship to Pennsylvania at great risk to ourselves. Some of us lost all our material goods before we left, because they were taken from us when we insisted that we would worship as the Bible tells us. Some of us lost everything because we spent our inheritance, all that came to us, to support each other in a material way.

*(looks out on the congregation, as if counting heads)*

I see Johann Heinrich Traut, and Jeremias Traut, and "Balser" Traut, all sackmakers. And Magdalene, of course.

Magdalene

The peace of the blessed Lord be with you, brother.

Peter

And you, sister. Then there is Heinrich Holtzapfel and Stephan Koch and Johann Jakob Koch. Here is Johannes Hildebrand and his wife, Maria. And there are more. The good farmer Daniel Ritter and George Balser Gantz with his wife, Johanna; Johannes Price and Johannes Kampher; and, of course, Johann Gumre and his wife, Anna, who have so graciously offered to host us after our worship this morning at the love feast! Their hospitality is already well known, because they often house our Brethren when they first come to these shores, while they get settled.

*(pause)*

Some of us lost loved ones on the crossing who are with God now, where they feel no pain. And there are many we left behind, both brothers and sisters in the faith, and our earthly families, people who cherished us, or perhaps who rejected us when we chose to follow God rather than human wisdom.

None of that matters now. When our brothers and sisters asked for baptism, that was a sign to all of us to come together. And this is the day that the Lord has made. Come, let us carry out this command of the Lord.

*(All walk around together.)*

Anna

Where is this place where we will have the baptism? I have heard it is not too far.

Magdalene

Really, it is the only real place we could have done this. The sides of the creek are so steep in most places we can hardly stand on the edge.

*(A racket is heard in the distance, spoons on pots and pans.)*

Anna

Thank goodness it's not far. I'm worried I'm going to slip in this snow. Look out!

*(The Brethren huddle together. Enter a group of ragged men, wearing dirty, ragged clothing. They have pots and pans and other percussion instruments, perhaps a drum or two. They are drunk, part of a Kallithumpian Band.)*

Leader of the Kallithumpian Band

Get them!

Kallithumpian Band

*(in ragged chorus)*

Money! We want money! Drink! Strong drink!

*(They sing to the tune of "We Wish You a Merry Christmas.")*

La, la, la-la-la-la-la.

La, la, la-la-la-la-la.

We wish you a Merry Christmas,

And a Happy New Year.

Sing it with us!

We want some figgy pudding,

We want some figgy pudding,

We want some figgy pudding,

And a cup of good cheer!

Band leader

And what else?

Kallithumpian Band

We won't go until we get some,

We won't go until we get some,

We won't go until we get some,

So bring it right here!

Band leader

Now quick, where's your money? And your drink? This is Christmas!

Magdalene

*(holding tight to Anna)*

Oh, it's those Kallithumpian bands again. What a terrible custom they have here in America.

Anna

It should not be allowed. What a way to mark our Savior's birth.

Band leader

Speak English, you lousy Germans. You are in our country now. We speak English here. And hand over your money and your liquor.

Peter Becker

My brother, if there is anything you want, you have simply to ask, and we will give it to you without the need of threat. But that is true not only for Christmas, but every day. The Lord Jesus has commanded us to feed the hungry, for in the gospel he says whatever we do for the least we do for him.

Ruffian (a member of the band)

Beat him! Rob him! This is our day. This is when we get our own!

Band leader

*(holding up his hand)*

Are you one of those they call the Dunkers?

Anna

Yes, we are Brethren, brothers and sisters. Some have called us Dunkers, for that is how we baptize. If you choose to come with us, you may observe how we will baptize in the stream near at hand.

Band leader

What? But the river is frozen. There is ice. Are you telling me you will break that ice and descend into the water?

Magdalene

Yes.

Ruffian

Then you will die of sickness.

Peter

The Lord will protect us, as he protected us in our homes in Germany. There we were persecuted for baptizing in this fashion. We will not take sick. Come and see.

Band leader

And afterwards, after you freeze yourselves in the river, what will you do next? Set your heads on fire?

Peter

No, my brother.

Band leader

I'm not your brother! I am an Englishman, and you are a dirty German.

Peter

We are all brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ. And to answer your question, after we are through, we are going to the home of a brother and sister to share the love feast. We shall wash each other's feet after the manner of Jesus and his disciples, and we shall eat a meal together and share the bread and cup.

Ruffian

This is too much trouble. Let's beat them and be done with them.

*(raises a soup ladle to strike Peter)*

Band leader

*(stops him)*

There's no money here, or strong drink. Let us go on our way and find better meat. Fare well, Pastor Dunker. Your church is too hard. Why should I freeze, wash someone's feet? I will let someone be religious for me! Goodbye.

*(The ruffians march away, singing and shouting. The Brethren sing a stanza of "Count Well the Cost.")*

Into Christ's death be buried now through baptism's joyous union.  
No claim of self dare you allow if you desire communion  
With Christ's true church, his willing bride,  
which, through his word, he has supplied.

"Count Well the Cost," st. 2 (words by Alexander Mack, trans. by Ora Garber), No. 437 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*.

Martin Urner

This is terrible. Did we flee the persecution of Europe in order to be harassed in this fashion by those who can scarcely claim the title of men?

Peter

If our brother Alexander Mack were among us, he would tell us to share with them and to recognize in every man and woman a soul that Christ died for. Christmas is the one day that the poor people can demand money from the rich. Do not grudge them this light in their misery.

Anna

Well, the Lord says if we are true to our beliefs, then we will suffer. That much is sure.

Magdalene

Oh no, here come more people.

*(Enter a group of two or three couples, dressed in finer clothes. They walk past the Germans. They stagger just a little.)*

Reveler

Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas! Perhaps we will stop at your house later, Brother Dunker, for a drink.

Reveler's wife

Don't encourage them. If we go to drink at their house, they will come to drink at ours. We have friends to visit, a long list. Let's not waste time with them.

*(exits)*

Magdalene

I don't know which is worse, the poor who bang their pots and take money and drink from the rich, or the rich people who go from house to house all day on Christmas, getting more and more drunk.

Peter

The world is like that, sister. The world needs the gospel.

*(The group comes to the Wissahickon Creek. The Brethren sing the song "As I Went Down to the River to Pray.")*

*(refrain)*

As I went down to the river to pray  
Studying about that good old way,  
And who shall wear the starry crown,  
Oh Lord, show me the way.

O sisters, let's go down,  
Let's go down, come on down.  
O sisters, let's go down,  
Down to the river to pray.

Refrain alternates with stanza changed to include *brothers, fathers, and mothers.*

— Traditional hymn

*(The group acts out the baptism of the six. Peter Becker steps into the icy water, taking with him a stick, which he uses to measure the water. He cracks the ice.)*

Peter

See. The water moves beneath the ice. Even in the cold of winter God's Spirit is bright and alive.

*(The water may be indicated by a long blue sheet held by cast members, or simply be assumed to exist. First the men, then the women, descend into the creek one by one. Each is baptized in turn, then returns shivering to the creek, where they are greeted by sisters and brothers with towels, sisters drying sisters, brothers drying brothers.)*

Peter

And now, brothers and sisters, let us break bread together!

*(The group walks together to the Gumre house. Plank benches and tables are laid out, and tablecloths, bowls, plates, and pots are laid out. Bread is brought in. Children appear and begin to run up and down. Though they do not sit at the tables, they are given bread to eat. Anna turns to Catherine Urner, one of the new members.)*

Anna

You will love this.

Magdalene

This is as close as we can get to Jesus in this life.

Peter

In the 80<sup>th</sup> Psalm, King David prays to his Lord and says, “O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” I think God is restoring his people in this baptism and in this meal we share. In Germany we ate the bread of tears, but here in Pennsylvania, we are breaking bread with the King of Kings.

*(Now the group mimes the washing of feet, and the sharing of the love feast. There is much embracing and expressions of love as all sing “Joy to the World.”)*

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!  
Let earth receive her King;  
Let ev’ry heart prepare him room,  
And heav’n and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing,  
And heav’n, and heav’n and nature sing.

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!  
Let all their songs employ  
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains,  
Repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

“Joy to the World” (Isaac Watts, 1719, and Lowell Mason, 1836. Hymn #318 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*.)

Catherine Urner

Brothers and sisters, never have I felt so close to God as this most holy night. This makes me wonder, why we do not share this blessing with all who live around us.

Martin Urner

Brother Peter, you said the gospel of Jesus Christ is for all the world. But for the past few years we have been taking care of ourselves, getting used to our new country, and even learning words in this English. Is it not time for us to go forth, as the apostles, into all the world, to spread the word?

Peter

My brother, my sister, you are right! Brothers and sisters, let us resolve that when the winter is over, and the planting of the spring seeds is over, that all of us men here present will go forward into the surrounding countryside, planting the more lasting seeds of the gospel.

Magdalene

Just the men?

Peter

Well, yes. And you women will run the farms, as you do so well, with the children and whatever help we can find. We will return in time for the harvest! And what a harvest it will be, not only from the goodness of the earth, abundance more than we can imagine, but also a harvest of souls for the Lord—people who need his love!

The Brethren

Amen! Amen!

*(Now the group begins to break up. Magdalene stops Anna as they prepare to leave.)*

Magdalene

Do you still feel like crying?

Anna

A little. I still miss my family so far away. But I know now that it is like the Gospel story we read together, where the people told our Lord Jesus that his mother and his brothers were waiting for him outside. And he said that his real family included all who did the will of the Heavenly Father.

*(She holds her hands out.)*

This is my family. The others, so far away, will always be precious to me. But this is my family, and this is my home, all of you brothers and sisters who have taken up the yoke of the gospel and walk together in love.

*(The cast concludes with "Silent Night." The congregation is invited to join them in song.)*

Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright  
'Round yon virgin mother and child! Holy infant, so tender and mild,  
Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night! Shepherds quake at the sight,  
glories stream from heaven afar, heavenly hosts sing, "Alleluia!  
Christ the Savior is born, Christ the Savior is born."

Silent night, holy night! Son of God, Love's pure light,  
radiant, beams from thy holy face with the dawn of redeeming grace,  
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth, Jesus, Lord at thy birth.

Silent night, holy night! Wondrous star, lend thy light.  
With the angels let us sing "Alleluia" to our King,  
"Christ the Savior is born, Christ the Savior is born."

"Silent Night" (Joseph Mohr, 1818, and Franz Gruber, 1818). No. 193 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*.

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