

“Holy Night” A Story of Christmas

I.

Blessed peace at last... relatively speaking, at least. It had taken a frantic flurry of activity, but they were finally in the car and on the way to Katherine's mothers' house for Christmas. It was only a four hour drive; but the interval offered welcome respite from the frenzy. Why exactly had they decided that the family room needed new carpet right at Christmas? And why had the drier chosen precisely this time to make that odd moaning noise when it started and stopped? And why had their love-lorn dog sitter chosen the day before Christmas Eve to make up with her boyfriend and change her plans for the holiday? Everything seemed to need doing at once. The bird feeder for grandma had arrived broken. The packages were almost wrapped when they ran out of scotch tape; so Greg finished them up with duck tape. They had been scurrying and scrambling to get on the road. But now at last they were launched. Brady in the back seat was lost in his iPod, and Greg and Katherine had some moments to breathe.

As it worked out their timing had a real upside to it—nothing they planned, mind you, but perhaps only because they didn't think of it. With their late getaway they would not arrive until *after* 7:00, which meant that they would not have to go to church with Katherine's mother and the rest of the family. Thank you, Jesus! That was a major relief.

It was a nice enough little country church, and the people certainly tried to make things festive and special. But their very part-time, mostly retired pastor, Archibald McCracken, really got under Greg's skin, and Greg had difficulty disguising his disdain. It wasn't that Greg was a Scrooge or hated Christmas; quite the opposite. But he thought that the kindly old pastor was so innocuous and inept that he seemed to make a mockery of the solemnity and importance of the holiday—or any holiday, for that matter. And the funeral he had done for Katherine's Dad... not only did he use the wrong name at one point; the eulogy deteriorated into McCracken's reminiscences about being a boy during World War II. It seemed there was no substantive occasion he could not trivialize.

“Just once,” Greg had said the year before, “I'd like to hear even the faintest suggestion at Christmas that the baby Jesus grew up and actually did something. I'd like to hear that he got in trouble because he believed in helping common people, that he died because of what he stood for and believed in, and that those who follow him should be committed to making the world a better place. But what we get is sentimental platitudes, an hour of fumbling around and ‘Silent Night’ on a piano that hasn't been tuned in decades. It doesn't have to be great; but it isn't even terrible. It's the bland leading the bland.”

Katherine, bless her heart, knew better than to overreact to Greg's outbursts. She let him blow himself out and then simply said, “But the point is really just everybody being together. It means a lot to my mother when we can all go to church on Christmas

Eve. And there's good in everything and everyone. You just have to stop being so critical and look for it."

And that was certainly true enough. Sometimes Pastor McCracken, or McCreakin' as they occasionally called him, supplied some unintended comic relief: like the time he fell asleep during the anthem; or the time he stood up to read the lesson and called for the offering instead, setting off a wild scramble among ushers who had slipped off to have a cup of coffee. Greg wanted to cut the old guy some slack, and always felt guilty for being so critical. But comic relief seemed thin gruel at Christmas.

Fortunately their son Brady had been oblivious to all of this a year ago. But it wasn't likely that the controversy would slip by him again. Katherine was not eager for a repeat of last year. So they had had a talk about church, and she had repeated her mantra once again, "You have to *let* it be special. You have to *feel* the magic. There is good in everything and everyone. Just listen for the good."

Brady was crazy for Christmas. He started with his Christmas Countdown Calendar on the day after Thanksgiving. He had on his Christmas socks and his Christmas sweatshirt and his Christmas hat. Last night Brady had found Greg where he was wrapping presents and he triumphantly held up a pair of underwear. "These are the ones," he said. "These are the ones I'm wearing on Christmas." He was crazy for Christmas.

Greg glanced at his watch. "Looks as though we'll make it just about 7:15. The traffic has been really good. How did your mother take it when you told her we'd be too late to go to church?"

"She didn't seem too upset. She just said, 'Don't you worry about that. Just drive carefully and we'll see you when you arrive. We have a surprise.' I have no idea. Maybe Uncle Teddy and Aunt Roberta are coming over or something. I hope he doesn't bring that flea-bitten old Santa outfit. No telling what's been living in that beard."

"Well, whatever the surprise is," Greg replied, "we'll just go with the flow. After the past couple of days, whatever it is will be a relief." And he settled into the drive, lost in thought and letting himself slowly unwind.

Greg was right. They arrived right at 7:15. Katherine's mother came tottering out to meet them in the driveway. After hugs of greeting she said breathlessly, "Hurry on in. Dinner's on the table. We'll just have time to eat and then we can still make it to church. They changed the time this year to 8:00. Surprise!"

Katherine looked at Greg and the look said it all. "Listen for the good."

II.

For better or for worse, they made it all right. They got to church just before 8:00; and of course, for the only time all year, the little sanctuary was packed. Greg and Katherine and Brady followed Katherine's mother in... and discovered that Katherine's brother and sister-in-law had saved them seats... in the very first row.

The prelude was already underway: a twelve year old girl was playing the violin, accompanied by piano; which, Greg noted immediately, was even more out of tune than

ever. But that was OK. It meant that the piano and the violin both found some of those amazing in-between notes. The selection was *Up on the Housetop*. Even in small towns, Greg noted, they aren't teaching religious music in the schools much any more.

"Listen for the good," he reminded himself. "Of course she's right about this. Don't let yourself get all worked up. There's something good going on here somewhere. Listen for it."

They all sang energetically on *O Come All Ye Faithful*, nearly drowning out the piano. That was good. Greg found himself reflecting on the beauty of the language in the hymn. And before he knew it, the familiar scripture reading had begun. It was read by a high school student, who did a very fine job of it. Not needing to worry whether she would make it through, Greg found himself relaxing into the words and being carried off by some of the images as they flowed over him.

"In those days..." [once upon a time] "a decree went out from Emperor Augustus" [who fancied himself divine ruler of the universe] "that all the world should be registered" [right: so that they could be taxed to within an inch of their lives to support Augustus's armies and to pay for all the fancy buildings in Rome.] "Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee" [the country-fried center of nowhere] "to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem" [a small town just six miles from the capital of Jerusalem—about like Baghdad with its warring factions and occupying foreign troops—right near the heart of the whole mess.] "He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child" [the scandalous couple invited to no one's Christmas party]. "And while they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child" [ready or not, here he comes.] "And she gave birth to her firstborn son" [sounds easy—this must have been written by a man] "and wrapped him in bands of cloth" [too poor for a blanket?] "and laid him in a manger" [welcome to the world, bambino, here's the nursery] "because there was no room for them in the inn."

[Cue the shepherds, the resident alien, low status workers of ancient Judea] "living in the fields" [huddled around the fire, bad hygiene, bad teeth, coarse language, dirt under their fingernails] "keeping watch over their flock by night" [a 24/7 occupation]. "Then an angel of the Lord stood before them" [so it's just one at first, maybe silently stepping into the edge of the light around the campfire] "and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified" [of course they were: in those days light came only from fire, the sun, and God. Who in their right mind wouldn't be afraid?]

"I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people" [not just the Jews or eventually Christians but *all* the people] "to you is born this day in the city of David a savior" [careful, buddy: that's a title August likes to reserve to himself; let's not be singing *Hail to the Chief* here] "who is the Messiah" [there you go again with that king stuff] "the Lord" [another word Augustus likes. Here he comes, the helpless baby king, smack dab in the middle of the whole mess.]

She went on to read the rest of it, of course. The angels singing "glory" and disappearing as suddenly as they had come; the shepherds scraping themselves together to go see about this baby who is supposed to be a sign. Mary taking it all in and saying

nothing, pondering it in her heart because maybe she alone can see the enormity of it. Right here, right now, right in the middle of it all. God is here, right now.

Greg was roused from his thoughts by an elbow to the ribs. Katherine pointed in front of them where creaky old Archibald McCracken was seated on the steps up to the altar. He had summoned the children to him (all three of them, counting Brady), launched off on a story about birds lost in a storm, wandered to a place of stopping and sent the children back to their families. Now, poor thing, he was struggling to get up. Greg moved to him right away. “Here, let me help you.”

III.

The air was crisp and clear as they walked out the front door of the church. The stars were shining brightly, filling up the sky—not like in the city, where street lights obscure the glory of the heavens. Greg paused for a moment on the steps to savor the night.

He felt a tap on the shoulder. “Thank you for the helping hand, young man,” said the old pastor. I’m not as nimble as I used to be, either physically or mentally, I’m afraid. I’d like to turn this place over to somebody younger; but they’re not exactly standing in line to serve little churches like this one. Each year I wonder if this won’t be the last Christmas, either for me or for the congregation.”

Greg paused for a moment. “If you don’t mind my asking, why do you keep doing this? What is it that keeps you going? I can tell it isn’t easy for you.”

“Oh, it’s the story. We need to tell the story over and over, how this night is different from all other nights, how this night helps us see the holy.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Greg reflected. “Except that what makes it different is that it isn’t different. The world God comes to in Jesus is the same world we know, where puffed up rulers jerk people around and people jockey for power and the poor are neglected and there is no room at the inn. If this night is holy—and surely it is— then all nights are holy, because this one is as filled with the problems of the world as any other; only somehow it reminds us that God is at the heart of it all, even the mess; maybe especially the mess.”

McCracken smiled and shook his head. “Whoa! Slow down, Shakespeare! You’ve been doing some heavy lifting. Whatever in the world got you started on all that?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Greg answered. Just listening for the good. Hearing it all, and listening for the good. Katherine’s right: it’s here. Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas to all,” he replied. “And to all a good night... a holy night.”

Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ

4126 Ingersoll Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50312
(515) 255-3149

Worship and Church School: 9:00 and 11:00 AM
Fax: 515-255-8667

E-mail: druhe@plymouthchurch.com