

# A Close Call

Luke 2:8-20

Christmas Eve

24 December 2010

It was Christmas Eve in the city so, as Henry left the LCBO, he wished the clerk at the store a Merry Christmas and crumpled the bags around the necks of the two bottles of cheap wine he had just bought.

As evening fell, he crouched in a doorway and drank the first bottle in no time flat. A bitter wind made his bare hands cold around the bottle and his knees began to ache. So he hoisted himself up and wandered down the street. Henry chose the streets tonight. He hated the shelters on Christmas Eve – so jolly, so crowded, so deceptively hopeful.

He walked past the old stone church across from the courthouse and across the long lawn, by the steps of the sanctuary, where the manger was empty except for some bales of hay and a lighted star overhead.

Henry remembered the story of the family that had no place to stay, and how the manger provided a night of rest and warmth. He decided that tonight it would do the same for him, too. Henry walked across the lawn and found the hay bales closest to the back of the manger. A dark corner. Protected from view. Henry pulled some hay around him as camouflage from any wandering police or religious pilgrims. Then he downed Bottle Number Two and curled up to sleep until Christmas morn.

In Henry's dream, there was an angel choir. And then a child speaking.

"And she gave birth to her firstborn son," the child said, "and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them at the inn."

The waking dream brought Henry a sleepy smile until his foggy mind realised the voice was no dream. This was real. Henry's eyes shot open. He froze in terror.

The child's voice went on.

"In that region, there were shepherds in their fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night...."

Henry shut and opened his eyes again and again until he remembered where he had laid down to sleep. The church, the lawn, the manger scene. It had all been deserted when he came. But now there were voices. Henry could feel the presence of people, lots of people. Holding his breath, he slowly turned his head and could see them between the bales of hay that protected him.

There he was. Smack in the middle of the local Presbyterian Church's Christmas Eve Living Crèche Candlelight Service. Henry stopped himself just in time from speaking aloud the full name of the Lord. He closed his eyes. Opened them again. And slowly let

himself breathe in the Holy mystery of a reckless Almighty that had landed him in such a ridiculous scene. Between the bales he could see Mary and Joseph and a crib made of wood. A baby doll, shepherds passing by, sheep baaing. A donkey braying. Wise men holding gifts.

And as the angel child spoke her words, Henry's memory began to work in very old ways. In little more than a whisper, he moved his lips and from his mouth came the words of the angel child, in perfect, quiet unison.

"Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

"And suddenly, with the angel child, Henry and all the children were praising God, and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.'"

Henry closed his eyes. For a moment, he, too, was an angel. He was a shepherd. He was a king.

Eventually, the crowd sang, "Silent Night," then blew out their candles, loaded up the children, got into their cars and went home. When he was certain that the last churchgoer had gone, Henry sat up, then poked his head over the top of the hay bales. Looking up at the stars, he spoke to the One he knew was watching from safe on high.

"Dear Lord," he said. "That was a close call."

As I read that story this week, it set me thinking about the times we have had a close call with the manger on. Maybe in different circumstances than Henry, but a close encounter nonetheless.

How often do we come to a Christmas Eve service, sit close to the manger, take in all the signs and symbols of Christmas, are inspired by the traditional music, hear the age-old story and are captivated by the mystery and the magic of this most wonderful evening of the year.

And we are so touched by this occasion that we say to ourselves, "Oh, from now on, I'm going to be a more loving and kind, patient and considerate, generous and compassionate person. Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me? ... Yes, I'm going to be the peacemaker in our family at my place of work. Not only that I am going to give more of my time and my money to helping the needy people in our community ... after all, isn't that what Christmas is all about? Yes, I'm going to step up to the plate in this respect from now on.

“And not only that, I am so impressed with the way that this Child of Bethlehem has changed the world down through the centuries that I am no longer going to sit on the sidelines. I am going to get involved. I am going to become a committed follower. Yes, Jesus, from now on you can count on me. I am going to be one of those who believes in you and who makes a difference in the world.”<sup>1</sup>

And we know only too well how that Christmas Eve Service feeling of being close to the Manger lasts and lasts – all the way to the church door! Where the cold air hits us in the face and, suddenly, we realise just what we have done and, like Henry, we exclaim, “Dear Lord, that was a close call!”

Oh, how often does that happen at a Christmas Eve Service? How often do we have close encounters of the spiritual kind? And then we get cold feet. We back off. “Oh,” we say to ourselves afterwards, “I must just have got carried away by the occasion.”

I’d like to think, though, that maybe this year things would be different. That, as soon as we leave this place, we would not let the mystery and the magic of Christmas Eve evaporate. But that we would carry it with us into tomorrow. And the day after. And the day after that. And into the weeks and months that lie ahead.

Just think, if we did, how we would change and how the world around us would change for the better if we were to do just that! I am quite sure the angels would be singing, “Hallelujah! Glory to God in the highest!”

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a story by James McTyre, Lake Hills Presbyterian Church, Knoxville, TN