

A Christmas Day Journey

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It was Christmas morning. The joy and spirit that had captured my body just six hours earlier at the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service at the church was still there, but now I moved a little slower, my physical body exhausted from the hectic pace and lack of sleep. It had been an uplifting service with pipe organ, tympani, and brass heralding the celebration of the Lord's birth. The Lukan Gospel has always seemed to speak with greater feeling and meaning in the midst of the midnight flicker of candlelight on that holy evening.

For some reason, though, our Christmas Eve worship seemed more meaningful this year. I really don't know why specifically, but I believe it may have something to do with a recent struggle with my own serious illness; for I do know that, after that experience, there is now within me a greater hunger for wholeness and meaning in my life. I must admit I thought a lot about that hunger in the early hours of the Christmas dawn. Anyway, after assisting Santa Claus with some last minute details, it was quite late till "visions of sugar plums danced in my head."

I was awakened Christmas morning by the scurrying sound of three-year-old footsteps scampering toward the Christmas tree in the living room. This was to be the first Christmas that we didn't have to rush off to the grandparents. They were coming to be with us this year, and I must admit I was excited about their coming, about sitting around the tree and sharing our gifts, and about staying at home. No Christmas Day journey for me this year. It was a good morning, relaxed, affirming, joyous, refreshing. Every year, it seems the words family and love and Christmas become more synonymous. I guess I'm just "getting older," and I hope, a little wiser.

By midmorning, however, I was restless, and decided that the local soup kitchen was the place I wanted, no, the place I needed to be for a while. I'd thought about going to help the soup kitchen for several days, but hadn't told the other volunteers. Maybe by not telling them, I subconsciously thought I could intellectually reason myself out of going. After all, this was to be my first family Christmas at home; but something or someone seemed to be pulling me toward that destination. It was an inner kind of "guiding star" that lighted some sort of mysterious, secret journey from my brain to my heart. Christmas had always been a day of traveling, and it was still true, for even though I had not left town, I soon discovered myself on a journey—not by Chevrolet, but by Spirit.

I traveled first to the church to pick up a few things, and in all honesty, to try to recapture one last taste of the forenoon's celebration. As I arrived, I saw an old gentleman walking on the sidewalk past the building. His destination was, no doubt, the same as mine, the soup kitchen. However, this elderly man, whom I've now come to call Luke, was slower in his pace because of a limp in

his awkward gait. His back was arched by the burdens of past years, and his frame was meager and thin. Luke looked to be in his seventies, but if the truth be known, I would bet that he was probably not a day over fifty-five.

On his head, he wore a tattered cap of red. The white shirt about his chest, now yellowed with the passage of time, was surrounded by at least two sweaters, a checked wool sport jacket and a ragged overcoat. (It wasn't that cold, if you remember, but I've been told that Luke and his friends resist taking their coats off in warm weather, even in the summer, because they fear someone might steal them.) His shoes were split and torn, and his muddied socks showed through the cracked sides.

Luke's short hair was curled and grayed. His cheeks carried several days growth of beard, and his gums contained at least twice as many spaces as teeth. Yet, his eyes - his eyes, deep with meaning and purpose, took me prisoner for the next few moments. Luke was indeed heart-wrenching to behold, yet something or someone drew me like a magnet toward him; maybe it was because of my own inner hunger or recent illness or something like that. Or maybe I am finally getting a little wiser.

I continued my watch of Luke while he paused in his trudging walk before the creche in the church yard — the babe lying in the manger with Mary and Joseph at his side and the angel overhead. As Luke stood there quietly, the stark silence of the downtown made itself deliberately real.

Suddenly, however, Luke's crumpled, aged body seemed to stand straight and tall, as if in some mystical way, the scene before him had touched the depths of his being and healed the scars and pains of his life. A small, faint smile appeared and exposed Luke's semi-toothless grin.

And then, reverently, so reverently, this castaway - this fellow human being - this child of God - slowly raised his arm and with his ancient hand, lifted the tattered cap from his head and put it to his chest. Then with a child-like motion, Luke gestured with his other hand a simple, sort of wave to the babe in the straw.

Almost instantaneously, as if staged by some heavenly director, the bells from the church's carillon pierced the day's silence, and the sun's light, through this time-honored man's silver hair, reflected a halo effect around his humble, compassionate face of black; and his deep, hungering eyes penetrated the cries of all humanity.

Needless to say, I was overcome with emotion as I stood there on that fire escape. Amidst all the planning and giving and worshiping and cooking and sharing - amidst all the innkeepers and merchants and angels and kings and shepherds - amidst all the sights and sounds and smells and feelings of this season - a member of society's outcast humbles himself before a plastic baby, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ miraculously comes alive with new meaning and new imagery and new vision and new hope for this war-stained world.

Then Luke, almost hesitantly, returned his cap to his head and turned to proceed down King Street toward his luncheon meal. I hurriedly finished my "few things," which I thought so important, and rushed to join him. When I arrived at the soup kitchen, Luke was already seated, his plate full in front of him with all the traditional foods of the day.

Yet, I perceived that the deeper hunger which, if we are honest, lies in all of us, the hunger which we strive to feed by the standards and values of the world - that deeper hunger, at least for Luke, was no where visible. The calm and peace that surrounded him like some "saintly aura" was breathtaking.

And again, as if cued by some heavenly director, I knew at once, that somehow, in someway, through that kind, tender, and aged gentleman seated before me — by some mysterious, divine, holy passage way, the Christ child had been born again in the cradle of my heart.

Thank you Luke, my new friend. Thank you for guiding me on my Christmas Day journey. Thank you for enabling me to see past myself and all the festivities to behold the true meaning of Jesus' Nativity. Thank you for renewing in me the assurance of the Lord's promise that he continually comes to us in these days of struggle and doubt. Thank you for resurrecting in me the "centuries-old hope" that Christ will come again. Thank you for sharing with me and your plastic friends your humble proclamation of God's glorious Good News. Thank you Luke, my friend, wherever you are.

Oh yes, before I forget. Undoubtedly, you know now why I call my new friend and fellow pilgrim, Luke; more appropriately, St. Luke!