

Glory to God. Luke 2. Christmas Eve 2013. Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV

The shortest day of the year was not putting up much of a fight. A pale overcast sunset was sliding quickly away as the conquering shadows took their bounty in long, strong grasps.

He saw her again, as he had the past two nights, sitting there quietly wrapped in, perhaps, a blanket – its formless shape concealed any identity. It was partially a guess on his part that she was indeed a “she.”

Quiet – no, still – she sat, huddled up in her seat, as compact as an old or sick woman could wrap herself in a blanket; with a cup of previously hot, now tepid, liquid held close to her mouth. He couldn't be sure if she ever took a drink, or just allowed the warm vapors to waft across the lines of her face, chasing away, with diminishing success, the dark chill of the descending evening.

Each of the past two evenings, she must have dropped the blanket and quickly taken refuge inside the small house, while his face had turned to take in the glow of the furthest edge of the horizon. He'd never seen her depart. She would be there, all wrapped up one moment, and be gone when his distracted eyes returned.

This night, he resolved to watch her departure, as if somehow it might satisfy his curiosity about the mystery woman. Perhaps the biggest mystery was “what about her made him so profoundly curious?” He passed people on the street each day, knowing no more nor less of their story, and never giving it a second thought.

As the evening passed now quickly into the night, she had not arisen to go inside, and he began to think that she had already gone without his noticing. But, then, he realized her small dark shape was still there, when she moved. And, then without warning nor precedent, there was a flash of light, followed by the dimmer, larger, igniting of a lantern's wick, and the following spread of amber light. And,

even more surprising, was the turn of her torso revealing a full illumination of her face in the pale flame's luster.

Then a bare hand came out of the shroud like fabric. And she beckoned him to come. **Come and take his place next to her on this longest night of the year.** "Come," her simple gesture was clear. "Come."

And so he went.

After walking the few steps from his little place to where she was staying, he wasn't quite sure what he was doing, nor why. When he arrived a few paces from where she sat, she silently motioned for him to sit in the small wooden chair next to hers. He did as he was told. And for a few moments, they just sat there. Then, from under the blanket wrapped around her thin shoulders, he heard her small, but not weak voice, speak, "**Welcome. I'm glad to have some company on this long night. The stars will be out soon. Then you will see what I wanted you to see. Just wait. Be patient. Wait.**"

He looked for clues in how she spoke. She was not from around here, but her accent did not reveal her home. The size of her body did not quite fit with the size of her voice. She looked weak, or sickly. Her voice, with a husk of seniority, did not sound weak. Perhaps tired. He waited for more clues, but the air was silent. So he did as she directed. He waited. And he looked up into the sky in the same direction her face was headed. Soon, he was comfortable just sitting there. Indeed, it felt restful, waiting, waiting, not knowing for what he was waiting.

"There it is. Right over there. See?"

He followed, at first, her voice's cue, and then the dim shadow of her small hand coming out from under the blanket, pointing to the sky, up to the left. And then he saw it. It was the first glimmering of a star, in an otherwise overcast and dark night.

“**Hmmm**,” was all he muttered. And he didn’t know what he even meant by that. But he continued watching, and it seemed like the sky around that first star began to brighten in its aura. Gradually more and more stars began to show their faint twinkling in just this one area of the sky – but not in any constellation he recognized. But, then again, absent Big Dipper, Little Dipper, Orion, and Cassiopeia, he didn’t remember his childhood constellations, as his grandfather had taught him.

So he just watched, and her hand still remained, pointing in that direction, without wavering; just pointing.

“That was the sign. That star was the sign back then. It’s what they followed. It’s where the sky opened up on that night, until all heaven looked to be aflame.”

He didn’t know what she was talking about. So he just held his tongue.

“Glory to God! Glory, indeed!” she said with excitement in her voice.

“I suppose so,” he stammered, with no disrespect intended, but beginning to grow a little cold from the night air and a little on edge by something, he wasn’t sure what.

“Don’t be afraid,” she said, with no offense taken, and none apparently intended. **“It’s just not everyone who gets to see and to understand. Not as many understand as see. And, in these days, not that many even notice seeing.”**

Well, he had not much been afraid before then. Maybe he should be. He didn’t really know who this woman was, and was not really sure what he was doing here alone with her. Truth be known, it suddenly didn’t feel quite like they were *all* alone – just two of them. Maybe he *should* be afraid.

He decided to risk being completely honest. **“OK,”** he said. **“But, what is this that we are watching? And, while I’m asking questions, to whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”**

“Oh, it seems like so long ago when I first saw that star. I was so young back in those days. It was in a time gone by, when I was innocent ... so very, very innocent. I believed so much of what I was told. And I was innocent enough to have dreams. It was in a time that seems so very, very long ago. But it was the night when I first began to understand just how big is God’s glory.”

“Hmmm,” he repeated himself, without meaning to be dull. He couldn’t quite catch where this story was going, but something in her voice caught him up in her tale. Actually, he, too, understood about innocence and about believing, and about having a sense of just how big God’s glory could be. He’d had some recent experiences of his own that had taken him out of my comfort zone. He was curious what hers might have been, as well. **“Tell me more,”** he said.

“I’m sorry, son. I don’t know why I called you over here. I’m just an old woman ... an old, sick woman, who has an old heart that has been pierced and battered and patched together. I apologize. No one wants to hear some old woman’s ramblings.”

“It’s OK. I happen to, among other things, specialize in collecting stories. I’d like to hear yours. Tell me about these stars you pointed out. What’s the deal with them?”

“If I told you, you might not even believe me. Let me ask you this: have you ever heard about a man named Jesus?” she asked him.

Well, with that you could have knocked him over with a feather. **“Jesus, did you say, Ma’am? Did you say Jesus? Would you be talking about the one from Nazareth?”**

At this, she seemed taken aback. Could it be that she – the one who had told him not to be afraid – was now a bit nervous herself? But, no, that wasn't it. Fear just didn't live any more in these old bones. No, she had just taken a chill, and wrapped the blanket more tightly around her small thin frame.

“Are you cold, Ma'am? Can I help you?”

“I don't think there's much can be done for me, now, young man. You see, I've got this chill clear down in my bones. They say I need a doctor. But I haven't found one, and not sure what one could do for me anyway.”

“Well, maybe, since you're looking right into the eyes of one, perhaps you can tell me all about it. Listen, why don't we get you inside out of this cold night air. Let me be your doctor. And you can be my storyteller, OK? Remember, I said that my specialty is in collecting stories.”

Then he put out his hand to touch hers and to introduce himself. **“Luke's my name, Ma'am. What's yours?”**

“Well, Dr. Luke, my name is Mary. Maybe, I ought to tell you my story. And maybe you could give me some doctor-help.

“You see, it was on a night pretty much like this one, when I gave birth to a little baby, that we named Jesus ...”

And as she began to tell him her story, he decided that he should pay very careful attention. **Glory to God.** There might be others who would like to hear about that very night in question. **Glory to God, indeed.**