

**⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,
¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"**

It was an incredibly warm December 22. The old preacher couldn't remember when he'd seen it this far from being a white Christmas. He still had a couple presents to buy for some folks in the church, so he walked over to the Town Center mall. He walked up and down, back and forth, looking for just the right presents. But, truth be told, he was often distracted in his shopping by his people watching.

He didn't come to the mall very often--perhaps *only* at this time of year, because he loved to watch all the people and the many ways in which they handled the *countdown to Christmas*. Finally, he stopped at the Hickory Farms kiosk: "Not personal, but not junk," he thought. And he bought his last four presents. Work completed, he decided he was entitled to a Starbucks Frappuccino –medium, light milk, because that allowed him to get the whipped cream without too much guilt. And then came the best part: *they asked for his name*.

He had been walking all day in his favorite cowboy boots, suit, clerical collar, and cowboy hat. He dressed everyday in the spirit of his favorite book character and television show star: Walt Longmire, the enigmatic sheriff of Absaroka County, Wyoming. So when this teenage Starbucks barista (who didn't know him from a tadpole) asked him his name– Sharpie pen in hand to write it upon the plastic cup – he said calmly and without affectation: "*Walt*." He loved it when they called his name to come and pick up his completed Frappuccino. Once, when he did it with his granddaughter, the time he introduced her to her very own Frappuccino addiction, she giggled in delight – her grandfather was using a fictitious name to fit his hat and boots, and she was the only one to share his secret!

Satisfied with his little secret joy, “Walt” put a very generous tip into the tip cup and ambled over to the side to await his order. He was one of about 20 waiting that afternoon. As he waited, he watched. He watched with careful detachment, hoping to simply notice without trying to interpret. Of course, in this he was a failure. He was a preacher; and it was so hard for him to not try to interpret everything he saw.

He watched as three high school age girls, along with one of their mothers, giggled to pick up their drinks, when their names were called. They giggled because of the names written on their cups: “Lisa,” “Not-Lisa” and “Also-Not-Lisa.” The 40-something year old mother, wearing a hair color not known in nature, seemed non-plussed by their reaction. “Funny,” Walt thought, “they get such a kick out of the name that a barista writes on their cups.” They went over to a tall-boy table where they lined up the cups side by side, and took pictures with their phones.

“Walt” noticed as he gazed about, that the line at Starbucks to place an order, and then the cluster of anticipatory recipients on the after-order side, is the longest of any store in the mall. But their customers never complained about the wait, when they voluntarily came to stand at the back of what they could clearly see would be a 20 minute wait.

Customers representing every decade from pre-teen through 70’s. Preppy, funk, grub, yarmulke, personal trainer (“I don’t work on Saturdays anymore; it’s my 50th birthday gift to myself”) matronly with skirt dusting the floor, all colors of hair, body art and piercings, pinstripe suit, white haired man in 70’s with hair pulled back in a pony tail that hung over the collar of his shirt.

“This place is more diverse than his church, which claims to be welcome to all. I wonder how Starbucks does it?” Walt thought.

He remembered reading about how intensive is the training to be a Starbucks store manager: with weeks of daily role-playing scenarios, in which the manager had to discover some way to make a win-win result from customers and baristas involved in some dispute. He wished they had done the same in today’s seminary training.

“*Island People*” – that’s the most part of what Starbucks customers are: “*Island People*.” With the exception of occasional very small groups, the people stood alone in line, with no contact with anyone else, except for the almost constant digital contact *vis a vis* their

telephones. No one initiates, nor expects, conversation. It's not hostile; it's neither friendly nor unfriendly. It is simply and casually *not anything*, but each person on their own little island, within three inches of another island.

He sat on one of the highboy stools next to the wrap around counter, to put down his heavy Hickory Farm bag, when he heard the skilled Frappuccino maker, who put an extra shot of caramel on the whipped cream, call out his pseudonym: "Walt." Upon his return, sitting in front of him was a young man, with his hair plaited carefully into dreadlocks. This young man suddenly looked up into the eyes of the middle eastern descent young woman who had been standing on the other side of the wrap around counter for five minutes. He looked up, as if he was all of a sudden noticing her, and said " *You've got jokes. You've got jokes in your eyes.*"

She smiled and laughed, and then turned and went to pick up her order. She returned and the two of them made small talk for another 90 seconds. She turned and left, going to the right -- around, behind, the Starbucks facility. He rose also and went in the opposite direction. "Yep," Walt opined without speaking aloud, "That's about the limit for any sort of relational contact between people at Starbuck, and then they turn to be *'Island People'* again."

After he finished his drink a few minutes later, Walt rose to leave, when he noticed that the young man and the young woman he had previously seen talking and then leaving in separate directions, had somehow circled around and were now side by side going up the escalator. "Well, I'll be. I didn't see that one coming. Huh?"

Walt stood, grabbed hold of his heavy Hickory Farms bag, and began to amble back through the mall; time to return to work. Someone had sent him a text message that they needed to get into the church for something. Being just two days before Christmas, all the clerical work was done, and all the staff had gone for the day. He needed to get back and let them in to the locked building. He had replied that he would be there in about 15 minutes.

As he walked through the Transit Mall – where the local and nearby destination buses pick up and drop off passengers, it looked like *Mardi Gras*. This strangely warm weather had brought life into the street people, like a sleuth of bears coming into spring after their winter hibernation. People were laughing, and chatting, some on skateboards, one on that new contraption called a hover board, and one couple over on the side was actually dancing. It was a great day to be alive in Charleston West Virginia on an unseasonably warm December 22.

As he passed through the concrete park beside the Transit Mall, he couldn't help to notice (nor could anyone else) the police car sitting there next to the curb. The single officer inside was not writing reports; he was keeping a vigilant eye upon all these hibernation awakening street people – just to make sure that their exuberance did not overflow the sensibilities of the “pretty people,” *i.e.* the city's responsible folks.

“Ah, it is what it is,” Walt thought as he crossed the street, smiling at the police officer, who did not look at him, in his suit and clerical collar, for even a second. Now once he crossed the street, the reaction changed. As he walked through the pedestrian-only Fife Street, one fellow approached Walt, with a slightly tipsy walk, and spoke in loud and certain terms:

“Holy Spirit! Yes, you are a man of the cloth. And look at that fine, fine hat. What? Wait? Yes, look! And the boots, as well. Glory be, I must say. Now that's what a man of the cloth should look like, and I'm going to let you come around the corner with me to Giovanni's and buy me some chicken wings, unless they don't have any chicken wings left and then I'm going to let you buy me a slice of pizza. *That* is what I'm going to do.”

Walt just chuckled inside himself, and thought, “My, my, my! What a glorious day. Why not get him some wings? He's been hibernating through the past two weeks of cold weather, and he is hungry.”

He didn't say a word, but the two of them walked side by side, step in step, on the mission the man (who was probably 10 years young than Walt, but looked 20 years older than that) had declared. Whether the man was uncertain of the success of his play or not, he kept walking sometimes side by side, sometimes turning to face Walt and walking backwards, but never stopping his talking.

“Yes, sir! You remind me of that priest down in Florida. He wore a cowboy hat and boots, too, and he would come out and about and spend time with the brothers. Sometimes though, they didn't like it so much when he would take them to rehab, but oh, he was a good man. He liked to be with the brothers.”

“He sent you to rehab, did he?”

“O, Lord, no! Not me. I was just in college then.”

They arrived at the restaurant. No chicken wings, but probably 10-12 different styles of pizza that could be bought by the pie or the slice. After a minute or so of contemplation aloud by this street person of what would be his mid-afternoon delight, Walt pulled out his wallet,

gave the store server a \$5 bill and said, "Give him what he wants that he can get for this." By the time Walt was going out the door, he heard the haggling over what all were his possible selections. Walt regretted that he did not stay for more conversation, but he did have that person he'd promised to meet at the church, and he must move on.

Little did Walt realize, as he left the pizza shop, and headed back to the empty church building that the person had decided to wait until after Christmas to do the task, and that there was no one around to expect Walt's return. In fact, nobody on the church staff would be around, nor expect to see him for another two days, until the Christmas Eve worship.

The AEP Electric company had been doing quite a bit of work in downtown Charleston over the past few month – installing all new, and more secure, lines underground. As part of the project, they had paid his church handsomely for a three-year right of way over their parking lots – enough to put in a new furnace and new energy efficient windows. You could see their trucks all over town, blocking off a lane of traffic here and there, for a week or more at a time.

But Walt hadn't seen any of the underground "mole workers" (as he called them) anywhere along his route on today's *walk-about*. In fact, he was lost in thought about their absence, when he did not see the open hole in the ground where some of those workers had earlier been working, but had failed to mark. Their absence was his last conscious thought before he fell *down, down, down* into that deep underground chasm below the open manhole. And, it just so happened that there wasn't anyone on the sidewalk for a block either way, in that moment to see the cowboy preacher fall out of sight.

He didn't know how long he was out. Unconsciousness has no "real time" clock to alert you of the length of your stay in its land. When he opened his eyes, he wasn't sure they had actually opened, because everything was still dark. Too dark to see. Gradually the memory returned of how he had gotten here. He looked straight up and could not see a thing – not even the opening to the world above. Was it night? Had the manhole cover been replaced? He had no idea. All he knew was that he hurt all over and he didn't know where he was, nor how he would get out.

So, the old preacher, who liked to present a cowboy persona, felt around on the ground until he found his hat, put it on his head, and then immediately took it off his head (placing it

crown down on the ground beside his leg) and began to pray. He wasn't sure of what to pray, but he surely felt like doing it. Praying, after all, was not about making a Wish List for Santa. Rather, it was like crawling up into His lap and feeling the strong, tender assurance of His embrace.

Praying, sometimes -- like unconsciousness -- has no "real time" clock to alert you of the length of your stay. When he thought he'd finished, he simply said Amen. Then he put his hat back on his head and tried to stand up. There was the question of whether or not his sore-all-over body could do it, and there was also the question of whether this underground cavern was tall enough for standing. The answer to both was "yes."

"*Well, now what?*" the old preacher said aloud to no one in particular. He just stood there for awhile, trying to get his eyes accustomed in the darkness to be able to see anything. It was his ears that came to his aid before his eyes. He heard *singing*. In the stillness, he could finally tell from which direction it came, and he carefully walked in that direction. It wasn't long before he arrived at its source.

Before him, about 30 feet away, was an intersection of underground tunnels. Some electric torches had been mounted somehow to the sides of the walls. And there were people laughing and singing and just carrying on – all together in one motley mess. They seemed friendly enough, so Walt went closer. The closer he got, the more the realization began to dawn on him what he was experiencing.

There, in the center of all the people, were a young man and a young woman, and she was holding a newborn baby in her arms. It suddenly dawned on Walt that this was the guy with dreadlocks and the middle-eastern descent young lady that had left Starbucks, only to surreptitiously join together on the escalator. How long ago had that been? Today? Yesterday? He had no sense of time. These three were the center of attention. And, as Walt continued to look around, he saw more and more familiar faces – the people in the Transit Mall, who had been dancing; they were still dancing.

And then Walt turned when he heard one voice speak over the happy din. It said in a strong voice, but he couldn't tell from whence it came:

"The home of God is among mortals. Unto us is born this day – *again* – a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord. Will the people recognize Him this time

around? Will they claim their birthright through Him to be fully human, fully made in God's image. Behold the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand! Alleluia!"

Walt turned and turned to see who was speaking, but he could not find the speaker. Finally he looked *up*, and saw him – hovering overhead, with wings like an angel.

“Yes, up here, man of the cloth. Glory be, I must say. Now I'm going to take you around the corner and let you tell folks what you've seen. Peace on earth, good will to all. Jesus has come again, just like you've been telling them every year. Glory, cowboy preacher, glory!”

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Well, I confess to you that with all the bulletins and sermons and home visitation and all, and my children came to our house for the holiday – I put off writing the Christmas Eve sermon until this morning. But this morning, I got a call from the District Superintendent, telling me that one of our old preachers had been found unconscious over by where the underground power line access tunnel opens up, in the side of the hill, down below Saint Francis Hospital, before you get to Green's Feed and Seed. Some cop found him and transported him by ambulance to Saint Francis Hospital.

The DS asked me if I could go visit him and see what is going on. He'd go, but he has a lot of stuff that he has to get done here at Christmas. Could I do it for him?

Well, I couldn't say no. And I've been at the hospital pretty much all of today visiting with the old coot preacher. Can't tell you how weird it was to see him there in the ER and then up in his room, never without that old Cowboy hat on his head. I guess they had a dickens of a time with him and that hat when they did a CT Scan of his head.

He told me that whole story that I just shared with you. He said it's really important that I tell people all about what he saw – Jesus coming again, and being born to a guy with dreadlocks and a woman from the Middle East, while a bunch of homeless folks party all around them, and a street person was an angel.

He told me that it's more important for me to tell you that story than to write a sermon to preach to you tonight. Well, I didn't have any choice, since being with him at the hospital all day today kept me from actually writing a Christmas Eve sermon.

Hmmmm. Wouldn't it be strange if? In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.