



Christmas Eve Stories

Worship Stories
Combined with Music

MICHAEL HALFHILL

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And thanks to you for reading these stories. I hope they inspired and blessed you, made you smile and added to your holiday joy. Please share them with others. May all your Christmases be blessed.




INTRODUCTION



CHRISTMAS IS one of the best times of the year. A time when families and friends gather. A time when people remember hope being born in a manger. But lately the world has attempted to change Christmas. Materialism has become the theme over the message of Jesus. *Christmas Eve Stories* seeks to capture the wonder of Christmas time and direct people back to the amazing truth that God has worked and is still working in our world.

Christmas Eve Stories combines story with music to bring the reader/hearer closer to the heart of God at Christmas time. Many Christmas books for children are focused on Santa and elves. This book provides families with fun, exciting, and touching fiction stories to rediscover the joy and wonder of the real reason for Christmas—Jesus. The stories are fiction but they tackle real life situations and share spiritual truths. Parents can read the stories with their children while listening to the listed Christmas songs that help tell the story.

Christmas Eve Stories can also be used by pastors and churches. The author has presented these stories at Christmas time at church services using musicians to perform the songs live in between the reading. The result has been unique worship experiences that church members have loved.

Play suggested song when you see the .
You can find our YouTube playlist here:







THE CHRISTMAS DIFFERENCE

WITH A sigh, he looked away from the screen. He shook his head slowly as he began to pace. Thoughts raced through his mind.

It's like nothing ever changes. Every day it's the same thing again and again. Constant fighting. And not just between nations. Even families are war zones now. Family! Home should be the one safe place—not a battleground!

There's so much pain and suffering. Disease is rampant. Every day hunger takes more and more, he thought, glancing back at the screen.

Are we doing any good? What He did—does it even help? Is it making any difference whatsoever?

“You're pacing again,” came a voice breaking through his musings.

“I guess it's become a habit,” he said, grinning at the Individual who had interrupted his thoughts.

“It tends to happen when you spend so much time watching that screen.”

“I suppose it does. But doesn't all of this bother You? After everything that's been done, I mean just look for Yourself.” He waved angrily at the screen.

“Yes. The world is growing old like a garment.”

“But now it's not just nations,” he said through clenched teeth. “It's the people. Even the families.”

“I know. You are right. Humanity's love is growing cold.”

He asked his question again. Not to himself this time, but to his Friend.

“Are we doing any good? Does it make any difference?” he looked at his Friend with pleading eyes.

“I think a lot of people are asking that same question. Gabe, maybe you should go down again and see.”



O COME, O COME EMMANUEL

The song drifted through the living room. Lauren gazed at the Christmas tree sparkling red, green, blue, and gold as her dad walked into the room.

“You don’t usually hear that old carol on TV Christmas programs,” her father commented. “I always thought it was so sober for a Christmas carol. I think most people prefer the happy songs.”

“I suppose so,” Lauren said, sounding rather sober herself.

“You okay?” her dad asked, tousling her hair before realizing she might be too old for that.

“I’m fine.” She replied by instinct, though she was pretty sure it was a lie.

“I’ve never known you to look so serious on Christmas Eve,” her dad said. “You love this time of year,” he added with a smile.

“I’m not a kid anymore, Dad,” she said evenly.

He took a long look at his daughter. She was right of course. He sometimes forgot. Or maybe he just didn’t like the thought of her growing up.

Lauren stood and walked to the bookcase where their nativity sat. He watched as she fingered the shiny angel then let her hand drop to her side. A thought slammed into his mind: *She knows!* He quickly buried the thought, forcing a cheerful voice. “We’ll be leaving soon; hopefully there’ll be a good turnout tonight.”

She didn’t answer, but focused on the familiar figures in front of her. The ceramic figures were beautiful, each one painted by her mom years ago. As she gazed at the scene before her, a song drifted to her ears again from the TV as two young girls began singing on the Christmas special.



O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

Lauren watched the snow falling as they drove to church, her sister chatting away in the seat next to her. Emily’s questions came at such a rapid pace her parents barely had a chance to answer.

“I wonder what Madison is wearing tonight,” she wondered aloud. “What do you think we’re gonna sing?”

When are Grandma and Grandpa coming over again? What’s the *earliest* we can wake you up tomorrow?”

Emily finally took a breath and their mom took the opportunity to ask a question of her own. “Well, Emily is certainly excited for tomorrow,” she said, “Lauren, what are you most looking forward to about Christmas?”

“I dunno.” Lauren kept staring out the window.

A mother usually has the ability to hear what is not said, and the tone in her oldest daughter’s voice caused a lump to form in this mama’s throat.

When she could talk again she asked another question, though not entirely sure she wanted to know the answer.

“What’s wrong? You haven’t seemed yourself today.” As she asked the question, another question echoed in her mind: *Does she know? We’ve tried so hard to keep it from her.*

Before Lauren could answer, another song came on the radio, and Emily bounced in her seat. “Oh! I love this song!” she cried. “Daddy, turn it up!”



LITTLE DRUMMER BOY

The church was full. So full they weren’t sure they would find seats until an old man with a long gray coat stood up from his aisle seat and invited them into the pew beside him. Dad did a double take, wondering how the man knew they were behind him without turning around to see them searching for a place.

Mom frowned. “I don’t think we’ll all fit,” she whispered.

“Nonsense,” said the old man with a wink. “Plenty of room at *this* inn.”

As it turned out there *was* plenty of room for all of them including the kind old man. They settled into their seats and the choir began to sing.



ANGELS FROM THE REALMS OF GLORY

Lauren glanced over at her parents. It was just as she expected. No hand-holding like Christmases past. Even in cramped quarters, they still made space between themselves that never used to be there before at church. Her mom sat with arms folded, staring straight ahead. If anyone caught her eye, she’d break into a broad smile and wave. But the smile faded too quickly.

Her dad slumped into the pew, looking down at his feet.

I can’t believe this is happening! Lauren’s thoughts raged. *How can they do this? What is going on?!?*

She wanted to scream her questions, but this was church, and it was Christmas Eve. So instead of screaming she listened to the pastor as he spoke about the power of the Christmas story to change lives.

She almost laughed out loud. Everything inside of her wanted to cry out. *If this Jesus' story could change lives then why—why—is mine falling apart? What good is faith if stuff like this still happens?*

The questions crammed in her mind so she hardly heard the pastor say amen. Her head jerked up as the closing song began.



O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL

Lauren watched her mom and dad visiting with the other churchgoers in the foyer. *How can they talk to everyone like nothing is happening? How come no one else notices? Doesn't anyone care!?!*

Lauren looked for Emily. That was her job after church, keeping an eye on her sister. This was no easy task. Emily and her friends were zipping around playing tag or some other game. She sighed as she spotted Emily twirling and laughing with Madison.

Lauren was surrounded by people, but she felt all alone. She crossed her arms in front of her as if they could hold her together.

“You don’t like to sing at church?” A voice near her side caused her to jump. She turned and saw the old man who’d shared his pew with them. He smiled through his white beard. “Is it just Christmas songs you don’t sing, or all church songs?”

“Wha—” Lauren began; “no, I sing at church.”

“Then why didn’t you sing tonight?”

Lauren decided to chance it, but she had no idea why. She didn’t take it for courage—maybe desperation.

“I guess I didn’t feel like singing.”

“Tis a shame. Christmas songs are some of the best,” the old man replied. “I enjoy ‘Angels We Have Heard on High.’ Do you have a favorite?”

“I don’t know,” Lauren said with a sigh. “Look sir, I don’t feel much like *talking* tonight either.”

“I understand. I find it hard to talk too, when I’m upset.”

Lauren blinked. “What makes you think I’m upset?”

“You told me as much. You normally sing at church, but not tonight. Don’t feel like talking. Now I’m old, young lady, but I know that most teenage girls love to talk. So I don’t need to read minds, I just listen. Care to tell someone why you’re upset this Christmas Eve?”

She stared at her parents now across the room from each other in separate conversations. She decided she’d come this far, so she might as well keep going.

“It says in the Bible that Jesus helps people, right?”

“I’ve read that,” replied the old man.

“And people who believe in Jesus are supposed to love and forgive, right?”

“Yes, that’s in there, too.”

“Then I guess I either don’t believe the Bible or I don’t trust people who say they believe the Bible,” she sighed looking back and forth from her mom to her dad.

A deep sadness washed over the old man’s face.

“It’s just not fair,” Lauren spoke in a voice barely a whisper, then cleared her throat and spoke again. “Look, I gotta get going. My parents are leaving. Thanks for...well, just thanks. Sorry if I ruined your night.”

“No, my dear. My night’s not ruined,” the man replied. Then he continued as Lauren walked away; “It is only beginning.”

Lauren reached out to stop Emily who happened to be zooming by. “Come on! It’s time to go.”

Emily groaned in disappointment, but she waved goodbye to her friends as Lauren dragged her to the door.

Lauren forced a smile. “The sooner we get home and in bed the sooner it’s Christmas.”

“Wahoo!” shouted Emily. “Let’s go!” Then she faked a yawn. “I sure am getting tired.”

It wasn’t a quiet car ride home. That wasn’t possible with Emily. The other three passengers let her fill in the silence, but eventually even she quieted down to watch the snow gently falling. The only sound was the song on the radio.



O HOLY NIGHT

She closed their bedroom door and turned to her husband. “I think Lauren knows.”

“Why do you say that?” he asked though he had been thinking the same thing.

“She’s just not herself. When she looks at me, it’s like she can see right through me, through us,” she added with emphasis. “We may have fooled everyone else, but I think she’s figured it out.”

He waited to see if his wife would say more, before asking, “So what do you want to do? Should we tell her?”

“I suppose we have to. But let’s wait till after Christmas. I don’t want to ruin it for her.”

He sighed, dreading the future conversation.

“I suppose there’s no good day to find out your parents are separating, but you’re right. We should wait,” he said. Then he swallowed hard. “Hey...do...do you think...?”

“Fine,” she said, interrupting. “It’s settled. We’ll wait to tell her.” She walked into the bathroom and shut the door.

He took that as his signal to leave and headed to the guest room. He walked through the halls as quietly as he could, and peeked into Emily’s room. She was already fast asleep. He smiled at his girl who played hard and slept hard. Then he paused outside of Lauren’s room. All he wanted to do was go into her room and tell her everything was going to be okay. But instead, he resumed his path down the hall.

He shut the door to the guest room and finished the sentence he had started in the bedroom. “Do you think that this is a mistake? Maybe we should talk to someone. Maybe we should get help.” He groaned. “Why didn’t I just say that to her? Ugh, what’s the use?” he said, slumping down into a chair. “How did we get here?”

She leaned against the bathroom door and waited for her husband to leave. This had become their uneasy routine for several months. As she began washing her face, she noticed a picture on the wall. It had hung there so long she rarely saw it anymore, but tonight she looked at it for what felt like the first time. It was a picture from their first anniversary. She put her head in her hands trying to hold back tears. “How did we get here?”



MUSIC BOX BLUES

Lauren listened as her dad made his nightly pretense of going into the bedroom he’d always shared with Lauren’s mom, then sneaking out to the guest room.

“Humph. So much for Christmas miracles,” she said as she put her coat back on.

She quietly slipped down the hall to the front door, and moments later she was outside in the cold night air, her boots crunching in the snow. She didn’t know where she was going; she just knew she needed to walk. She always used to stay up late on Christmas Eve, too excited to sleep.

I wish I could go back, she thought. I wish we could all go back.

After walking so long she lost track of time, she finally stopped and brushed some snow off a bench. She sat down.

In the silence, the emotions she’d worked so hard to hold in were threatening to burst forth like water from a dam.

“Sometimes it’s best to let it out,” came a voice behind Lauren. A figure brushed more snow off the bench and sat next to her. She quickly wiped at the tears and tried to compose herself before looking at this intruder. He looked familiar. An old man with a snow white beard. Recognition sprang in her mind. The guy from church!

“Well, you’re not Santa Claus,” Lauren said, in a voice only a teenager can muster.

He smiled. “No, I am not.”

“Not even Santa Claus can bring me what I want for Christmas.”

“I know.” The old man looked at her with caring eyes. Eyes that seemed far too young for someone so old.

Before she knew what was happening, she was telling this man—this stranger who seemed to care—everything in her heart. Everything she’d bottled up for so long sprang forth. Disappointment in her parents. Anger at them, at herself, at everyone.

Then she tried not to say it. She knew she shouldn’t say it, especially not to a guy who was at church tonight, but it exploded out of her anyway.

“Why does God let this happen? If He’s really there, why doesn’t He *do* something? It’s not fair! Doesn’t He care? I just don’t understand.” She slumped on the bench.

The old man waited. Waited to see if there was more. Waited until he knew she could listen.

“People lose their way sometimes,” he said, his voice gentle. “Even parents. You’re right. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. Have you read the Christmas story?”

She brushed the hair out of her eyes to look at him. “Of course I’ve heard it. We’ve gone to church my whole life. Not that it’s doing much good now.”

“I didn’t ask if you had heard it; I asked if you had read it.”


“I suppose so. Everything was perfect that night,” she said, remembering the figures in their nativity.

“Perfect?” The old man shook his head. “You call that perfect? Having an emergency delivery in a stable, surrounded by manure and animals? That night was far from what one might call perfect.”

“But...” Lauren started, and her voice trailed off. She’d never thought of it that way.

She began to think of what that scene must have *really* been like.





“But it all worked out okay,” Lauren said. “The story is so peaceful. Mary and Joseph never separated.”

“Well, no they didn’t,” said the old man. “But peaceful? Hardly. That’s the problem—most people stop reading the story too soon. Jesus’ birth story ends with Mary and Joseph running for their lives down to Egypt. But the part people would rather forget at Christmastime is all the babies around Bethlehem who were murdered by Herod. No my dear, Jesus did not come into a perfect and peaceful world. That is exactly why He came—to fix that which was broken.”

“But what difference does it make?” she asked, though she was beginning to know the answer.

The old man smiled. “I was asking that exact question earlier. But imagine what this world would look like if Jesus hadn’t come. December 24 and 25 would just be like any other day. Think of the songs that would never have been sung. This world would be much different had He not come. But you’re right. This world is still not perfect, and bad things still happen, even to His followers. But do you remember the promise that baby gave the world after growing up? Do you know what Jesus said right before He left?”

Lauren wiped away a tear and found herself holding her breath.

“I am with you always,” the old man quoted, “‘Even to the end of the age.’ That means Jesus is with you even when your world comes crashing down.”

The old man could see it in her even as she began to feel it. It wasn’t a floodlight, but there was a flicker in her. He smiled at her as he saw what he was longing to see. *Hope.*

“Now, ‘tis getting late,” he said. “You better head home.”

“Thank you for listening,” Lauren said, getting to her feet. “Do you think... do you think it’s going to be okay?”

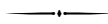
The old man stood with her. “I know this: You are going to be okay.”

“Thanks. Thank you so much for listening and sharing with me.” She extended her hand. “My name’s Lauren, by the way.”

He shook her hand warmly and replied with a smirk, “Hello Lauren Bytheway. Some folks call me Gabe. Merry Christmas, Lauren.”

Lauren looked down the snow-covered road that would take her home. She turned back to Gabe intending to give the old man a hug.

“Merry Christmas—” She stopped short, as no one was there. She looked all around but the old man was gone. And what was even more strange was that she saw no tracks in the snow.



Lauren quietly shut the front door behind her. She slipped down the hallway trying not to wake their dog, Tex. Just then, she heard the door to her parents' room close. She saw the glow of light under the door. She knew she should keep going into her room, but she couldn't help herself; she slipped down the hall and put her ear to their door. She knew she'd get in trouble for eavesdropping, but she just had to listen. Then she put her hand to her mouth as from the other side of the door she heard both her parents' voices say—at the exact same time,

“Can we talk?”

Lauren closed her eyes and smiled. As she got into her bed, she said a prayer. It was a short prayer—a simple prayer. But sometimes those prayers are the best ones we say.

“Thank you, Jesus,” Lauren whispered from her pillow. “Merry Christmas.”

Gabe stood again in the viewing room. He looked over the scenes as they flashed on the screen.

“Fix all the problems?” His Friend asked while entering the room.

“You know the answer to that question,” Gabe replied. “It's not time for everything to be fixed.

But they do have what they need.”

His Friend smiled broadly. “And what is that, Gabriel?”

Gabriel lowered himself to a knee. “They have what You went there to give, my Lord. They have hope.”



JOY TO THE WORLD





EARS TO HEAR

HE LOVED night time. Not that he didn't like the day, but night seemed to afford more chances to walk about. It was also a time when many people opened their hearts to listen. "In the still of the night," as the old saying goes.

So tonight he was walking. Walking on cold sidewalks. Walking through a city that seemed just as awake at night time as it was when the sun shone. He could understand how this city earned its nickname, The City that Never Sleeps.

New York City wasn't his favorite place—he didn't know if he had a favorite city—but this was where he was tonight all the same. Walking past the stores, walking amongst towering buildings that touched the sky. Tonight he was walking but he was also listening.

Now you and I, if we walked through New York, we'd listen to the city sounds: car horns, sirens, conversations of people on the street. But not this walker. Not this night. Sure, he heard all those things you and I hear, but tonight he was listening to hearts. Because not only are people more open with their hearts at night time, this night of all nights causes hearts to open more than any other night of the year.



O HOLY NIGHT

It was Christmas Eve. Our walker wasn't bothered by the cold. He was not even bundled up like the others who passed him on the street. In fact some cast quick glances his way as he passed, noticing his lack of winter coat, hat, and gloves. Shaking their heads, they continued on. After all, they had places to go tonight. And if truth be told, they'd seen stranger things in this city.

As his shoes crunched through the snow he listened to those around him. He heard their joy. He smiled at their laughter and nodded upon hearing their well-wishing.

“Happy Holidays!” said some. Most exchanged a hearty, “Merry Christmas!” paired with handshakes, hugs, and even fist bumps.

Yes, it was a great night to be in New York City. But he was not here just for the holiday cheer. He walked these streets with a purpose, though for you and I to guess that purpose would be challenging. He didn’t walk with the same hurried gait as others. He would pause outside a store, but never seemed interested in the shiny merchandise inside. Instead he’d pause and seem more intent on listening than on what he was seeing. Then he’d continue walking.

He heard the bell before he saw its ringer. As he rounded the corner he could see a red bucket hanging from an iron hook. He smiled at the small figure moving the bell up and down, bundled up with coat, mittens, scarf, and a hat complete with a puff ball on top. He stopped again, not to watch the child or even to listen to the bell. He stopped because several other children were standing around that red bucket. A lady in front of the children snapped her fingers to get their attention. As the woman raised her hands, he closed his eyes and listened, and the song drifted through the air.



SILENT NIGHT

As he continued his journey, the sound of the bell faded into the night. He admired the lights of the city; New York was never at a loss for nighttime lights, but on this night extra lights twinkled, sparkled, and blinked, lighting up the streets and buildings. They cast a colorful glow on the snow as well: reds and greens, blues and yellows.

His pace slowed as he approached a church. He found himself stopping outside its door. People were going in and he wished he could join them, but not tonight. He had another task to attend to. But before he could start off on his walk again his ears, which were always listening, perked up as he heard the choir inside begin to sing.



O BEAUTIFUL STAR OF BETHLEHEM

He looked up at the stars peeking through an opening in the clouds and smiled as he saw a particularly bright one. It was the smile of someone reminded of a fond memory, and joy sparkled in his eyes as he held the memory a moment. Then clouds covered the stars again and he turned down another street. If you and I had been watching this nighttime walker, we might have

thought him lost. He walked down one street then turned down another and sometimes backtracked to where he'd previously been. But to watch his demeanor and mannerisms, he didn't act like someone who was lost. In fact, it was as though he was looking for something.

He stopped in front of a giant store window and admired the dolls and toys inside. He saw a toy train circling its track. Then he noticed an open music box and with his ever-listening ears he was able to hear the song. A familiar tune chimed from the beautifully carved music box, so he stopped to listen, seemingly unaware of a shadowy figure that had been following him through the streets.

Snow began falling gently. The snowflakes glimmered from the glow of the neon toy store sign and the Christmas lights hanging from the street lamps. He listened to the music box's tune as the figure who was following him stopped, slipping into the shadows to watch and wait.



CAROL OF THE BELLS

Our walker appeared to be looking in the store window at all the toys. In reality he was looking at the reflective surface of the glass which revealed the city street behind him. With a nod of satisfaction he began his journey again. The figure slipped out of the shadows and continued following him.

After a while our walker did something he had not done at all this night; he turned down an alley between two buildings. Now I'm not sure about the condition or safety of alleys where you live, but in New York City most people try to avoid alleys at night. It's just safer that way. But our listening walker was apparently not interested in nor concerned about safety. The second figure also slipped down the alley and quickened its pace to catch up.

"Don't move!" said a gruff voice from the shadowy figure.

"Hello," the walker said, turning around slowly. He did not look at the gun pointed directly at him, but instead focused on the young man who held it. The young man's eyes darted this way and that. The hand holding the gun shook slightly.


"Give me your wallet! Hurry up!"

"I will give you everything in my wallet. But only on one condition."

"What?" The robber blinked. He took a step closer and shook the gun angrily. "Condition!?! You don't get to give conditions, old man. I've got the gun! Now quit screwing around and give me your money!"

"I don't think this is a good night to rob someone."

"Well, pal, this night is as good or as bad as any other night," replied the young man "Give me your money NOW!"



“As I said, you can have everything in my wallet, but first, you should come inside this fine dining establishment.” He nodded in the direction behind him to a restaurant.

“We will dine together—on me of course,” the old man said, “and I’ll tell you a tale. If, when I am done, you didn’t like my story and you so choose, you can have everything in my wallet. If you like the story, well, maybe that will be worth more.”

“Have you lost your mind!?! Are you ON something, old-timer? Why would I go and eat with you? Why should I trust you? You’ll probably call the cops! Now just give me your money and I won’t hurt you!”

“No.”

“No!?! Are you crazy? Do you think I’m bluffing?” He took another step closer and pointed the gun at the old man’s face.

The old man seemed not to notice the gun and looked straight into the young man’s eyes.

“My offer stands. I’ll give you everything I have in my wallet after you eat with me and hear my story,” he repeated calmly. “Now as far as calling the cops on you, look for yourself.” He said, nodding toward the street behind the perplexed young man.

The would-be robber turned slightly to snap a quick look behind him. Outside the alley, and across the street he saw a police car. The driver leaned out of the window speaking to a police officer sitting on a horse. The young man’s eyes widened as he realized his victim could have yelled at any time to bring the cops running.

The young man’s resolve began to fade. “Look, man. I...really...I mean, I didn’t...” His voice trailed off as his arm began to lower.

“Think nothing of it, my boy. Now come inside with me out of the cold. There’s no need for us to bother those police officers. They deserve a quiet night on Christmas Eve, don’t you think?”

“I—well. I’m...I don’t.”

“Now just listen to yourself,” said the old man kindly. “You’re so cold you can’t even complete a sentence. Inside we go.”

The young man found himself inside before he knew what was happening. He tucked his gun back into his inner coat, but kept his hand near it. The place was crowded. Conversations danced through the air. Every now and then laughter erupted from a table. The place gave the young man a warm, homey feeling. Everyone seemed so happy. They sat down at a table.

“Well, tell me your story.”

“I will.” The old man replied and said nothing more.

“When?” asked the young man, getting frustrated.

“When you are ready to listen.”

“I’ve had enough of this.” The young man started to stand up when the waitress arrived.

“What can I get you boys tonight?”

Caught in mid-stand the young man turned to the older man and for the first time noticed he was not dressed at all like someone should be this time of year. The young man’s stomach rumbled at the smells of food around him.

“You buying?” he asked.

The old man nodded with a smile.

“All right. Then I’m eating,” he said, sitting back down.

They each placed their order and the waitress left, deftly making her way through the crowd to another table before disappearing into the kitchen. The young man was about to speak when a musician stepped onto a stage with a guitar and began to play and sing. He could not explain why, but the would-be robber swallowed what he was going to say, and instead began to listen.



WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

The song ended and a long moment hung in the air until applause burst through the room. Gradually, conversations began again around the room.

“Okay, so tell me your story,” the young man said again. “You promised if I don’t like it I get everything in that wallet of yours.”

“Indeed I did. And I will keep my promise. Let’s see—where to begin? You said that this night was as good as any to rob someone. Why do you believe that?”

“Look man! I know it’s Christmas Eve. But that don’t make no difference to me. I’m hungry and I need money to eat.”

“And so you are here with me having dinner—just like you wanted.”

“What?” the young man blinked. “Whatever, man.”

“Did you always think this night was just like any other night?”

“No, of course not. When I was a kid, I loved Christmas Eve. But I’m not a kid anymore. All that Christmas stuff don’t mean much when you’re living on the street. Ain’t no one bringing me presents anymore. I don’t have any money to buy...” His voice trailed off.

“I always liked that song,” said the old man, nodding toward the now-empty stage. “A song about a baby born that changed everything. Babies have a way of doing that, don’t they?” The old man looked intently across the table.

“Huh? How? What are you talking about?”

“Babies—they have a way of changing one’s life, don’t they? And that baby that was born in a manger, He changed everything. That baby brought hope.”

The young man looked with far-away eyes for a long moment. A crack appeared in the hardened features of his unshaven face. Sadness washed over his eyes until he noticed the old man's gaze.

"Well maybe that baby brought hope, maybe He didn't. Who knows if the whole Jesus thing is even real? All I know is that babies today bring responsibility."

"You sound like someone who knows."

"What's it to ya? I got a kid. Big deal!"

"When was the last time you saw him?"

The young man stopped his answer as the waitress set down their food. He tried to think. *Had it really been that long?* Then he shook his head angrily.

"They're better off without me."

"Are you?"

"Am I what?" he asked, picking up his fork.

"Are you better off without them?"

Before the young man could answer another singer walked up on stage and music filled the room. As he listened, the song began to fill the young man's heart. Then a thought struck him. *Did I tell him my baby was a boy?*



PRINCE OF PEACE/HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING

"A baby does change everything, my boy," continued the old man when the song was done. "This world needed help—it needed changing. So God sent not an army of angels, not a philosopher, not a politician, nor an old man like me. He sent a baby to change the world."

"It sounds good," said the young man. "But how can we know if it's all true? And if miracles like that used to happen, why don't they happen anymore? Why don't people see miracles today?"

"Perhaps because most are not looking for them and certainly because most are not listening for them."

"But even if it is real, even if Jesus was born, the world is still a mess," the young man insisted. "My son doesn't have any presents from me on Christmas. I'm nothing but a disappointment to him—to all of them."

The old man's gaze was soft as he spoke. "But that baby born in the manger needed a daddy. Babies today need dads too. And *that* is a gift you can give. As far as this world being a mess? On that you are correct, my boy. For hundreds of years people waited for the Messiah to come and when He did, many were not ready. Did you know, the final verse in the Old Testament says God will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers? Jesus came to save people from sin. He came to heal the broken

and to restore families. And maybe that happens one family at a time. Now, hand over that silly firearm of yours. There's no bullets in it anyway."

The young man looked stunned. "How did you...?" He looked into the old man's eyes that seemed younger than his face.

Almost without thinking, his hand reached into his coat. He slid the weapon out and wrapped it in a napkin, and stared in disbelief as he slid the gun across the table.

"Sir, I don't even know your name."

"Well, you can call me Gabe. It appears as if you have heard and enjoyed my story after all. And here's something else to remember: if Jesus came once to save, you can be sure He will return someday."

The young man was lost in thought. His mind twisted and wrestled. The war of hope and doubt began in him, but then another singer took the stage and again the song grabbed him as he absorbed its message.



SENT BY THE FATHER OR JOY TO THE WORLD

"And now if you will excuse me..." Gabe said, rising from the table.

"Sure," the young man replied automatically, assuming Gabe was going to use the restroom. But he watched as Gabe made his way through the tables and the crowd. It was standing-room-only in the restaurant now; Gabe made it to the front door and turned to look back at the young man. He saw the old man nod at him and wink. Then a new group opened the door, bustling in, blocking his view for a moment. When he looked again, Gabe was gone.

What!?! The young man wanted to scream. He left? How could he leave? His thoughts raced. Gabe promised to give me everything in his wallet. Whoa! Did he even pay for our meals? Did that guy just do a dine-and-dash on me?!?

Then a more dreadful thought entered his mind. *He has my gun. Did he just rob me?!?*

Maybe he's going to call the cops now! He saw the waitress making her way through the crowd to his table. She smiled at him, and he saw her carrying something in her hand.

That's probably the bill. I can't pay it. The young man put his hands on the table and started to rise. A voice in his head screamed, "RUN! Get out of there before you get caught! This wasn't your fault anyway. It was the old man's. But no one is going to believe you. Just run and SAVE YOURSELF!"

"No." He said the word out loud. *No more running. I need to be a man. I need to be a father to my boy and a husband to my wife. I will take whatever comes. I just want to see my family again.*

But I don't even know where they live now. If I can just get out of this mess, I will find them somehow and...

The waitress arrived.

"Look ma'am," he began sheepishly trying to explain. "I don't have any money to pay that bill, and the old man..."

"What are you talking about?" she interrupted. "Gabe already paid for your meals."

"What? I never saw him pay you."

"He paid before you guys came in. He also asked me to give this to you."

She handed him a worn and frayed brown wallet. "Merry Christmas," she said as she started to clear the plates.

You and I might have thought the young man was politely waiting for her to leave before opening the wallet, but in reality, as he looked at the worn wallet in his hand, he was too stunned to move at first. When he finally opened it and looked inside, he saw a folded note with *his* name on it, a business card, and—he started counting—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 700 dollars!

He opened the note and saw beautiful handwriting inside.

Dear Alex,

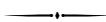
Thank you for indulging an old man and listening tonight. As I promised, here is everything in my wallet. I did not want you to think I stole your gun, so let's say this money is payment. Now go to the address on the card. And may you not just have a Merry Christmas, but may the joy and hope you felt tonight bring you a truly merry life.

*Sincerely,
Gabe.*

Alex stood and, as if in a dream, walked out of the restaurant. The cold winter air snapped him back to reality and he looked at the address on the card, then looked at the street he was on. He had a few blocks to go, but he felt energized. The young man started walking, and his pace quickened. Before long, he was moving as fast as he could through the crowded street, then ducked into the toy store where he had seen Gabe.

He emerged later with a large, wrapped package in his arms, and continued to make his way toward the address on the card. He stopped again upon seeing a perfume store, went inside, and emerged this time with a small package.

Alex finally made it to the noted address and swallowed hard as he looked up at the building. With snow falling all around, he felt like he was standing in a child's snow globe. He hesitated a moment, then sighed. If you and I had been there and if we'd been listening carefully, we might have heard the faintest prayer escape his lips as he asked for help. Then he walked up to the door and knocked. The door opened, and he went inside.



The sun shone brightly on new-fallen snow as Alex walked the streets again. This time not at night, and not in the shadows. And this time not alone. One hand held his wife's, and in his other arm he carried their son. Smiling from ear to ear, he retraced his steps. He wanted to show his wife the restaurant he'd been at the night before. He even hoped they would bump into Gabe. But when they arrived, he stopped in his tracks.

"Are you sure this is the place?" his wife asked.

It was a restaurant—or had been at one time. He looked at the street sign, then looked up and down the street. He was sure this was it. Then he began to hear music. A group of musicians had set up down the street and were getting ready to play. He walked over to one of the guitar players and asked him about the restaurant.

The musician looked up from tuning his guitar, looking first at Alex, and then at the restaurant.

"Naw man, that place been closed for years," he replied. "Used to be a real happenin' place, though. People from the neighborhood would eat there and listen to music. But man, people stopped comin'. People these days, I don't know, maybe they too busy to listen. It closed down years ago. I used to play there in my younger years. So now, me and the gang, well we just play and sing on the street corner for anyone who wants to hear."

Alex walked back to his family.

"But...I was sure," he said quietly. "I—I don't understand."

"It's a big city," his wife said. "Maybe it was on a different street. The important thing is that you're home. That's what matters. Let's go back. We have so much to do."

"Thanks. We will. But first, let's listen. Let's slow down and just...listen."



GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN