

# Under New Management

“Keep your eyes open wide.”

Luke 1:46-55

*Fourth in the Advent series, “Wishin’ and Hopin’”*

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## A Cry in the Darkness

In another time and another Michigan town far away there was a young woman who seemed to be drawn to church. She acted like she loved it and even had plans to be a pastor one day. She was good at singing and Bible study and speaking her mind. And when she saw people in need, she had a special knack for going beyond *caring about* them. She cared for them. On a couple of occasions that empathy of hers started ministries in the church that got left in the hands of other church members when she'd go on back to school.

There was another side to her life. Her family, for a few different reasons, was conflicted and troubled. She constantly doted on her sister's child, a nephew, who was constantly in-and-out of the hospital. He finally contracted AIDS from a bad blood transfusion in the early days of the pandemic, when there wasn't much at all that could be done. Her health was a constant challenge, too. And it seemed like life was taking one bad turn after another. Tough stuff.

You kind of wonder why life seems to be harder for some people or families than other. She did. Even though she had been drawn to church and said she loved God and wanted that love to be at the center of everything she did, she got discouraged. She got to the point that her question *why* led to a sad conclusion.

She told me that she thought that God must just not care. God must just be far off, leaving her without any help. If not that, it must be that God had something against her that she couldn't figure out and that she was just being punished.

It was like she was out in the darkness, looking for a bit of light; looking for some indication that God really did love her; that God would be there for her. But all she could see was darkness.

It seems like there are a lot of people wandering in that kind of darkness. And while some hope that Christmas this year will mean an ideal family gathering or a hoped-for gift, there are a lot of people who just hope for some sign that there's a light at the end of the endless tunnel they seem to be in. They are in trouble and it seems like they are all alone and they need help. They need to find out that it's not that God has it in for them or that God just maybe doesn't care.

You might know what I mean. When the insurance is lost and a major illness comes, who's going to give the needed treatment? And what's going to happen to the people of Pontiac when there are no Pontiacs to be made?

When it doesn't seem like there's going to be any help in time and discouragement seems like the only option, these very economic and medical questions quickly become spiritual questions. Left without hope, it seems like the only honest question comes from people like Job, who asks the God question. Doesn't God care? Isn't God out there somewhere in the darkness and isn't God going to make things right?

That's the question that people of Israel were asking. And they asked it for hundreds of years. So when the Prophet Isaiah spoke up, his hope that on the one hand addressed everybody's political and economic hopes still fundamentally the spiritual hope. A Messiah would come – a prophet and a king – who would make everything right. And this prophet and king would be sent by God. He said:

*The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light ...For a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.<sup>1</sup>*

### **Connection**

Hundreds of years later, that's what they were looking for when Mary was confronted by an angel: they were still a people walking in darkness, still looking for the great light.

Betrothed and not fully married, a little girl of 12 or 14 and pregnant, now facing what certainly must be, among other things, her own darkness, Mary makes her way to old, world-wise cousin Elizabeth who is with child herself. Then, instead of a 70-year-old fretting about the medical dangers of childbirth for an older mother, or a young teenager worrying about the doubts of Joseph her betrothed or the social dilemma this has created for both of them Mary and Elizabeth rejoice.

In the midst of their personal and awkward, dangerous darkness and the darkness their people continued to walk: the two of them rejoice.

They rejoice because in the midst of all this drama and dilemma, they see the hopes and fears of all the years *met right here, right now*. Political despair? Yes. Economic despair? Yes. Personal disaster? You bet. But all of this pales before the promise that is played out right within them. God will finally be with them face-to-face. 'Til now they have tried to manage life on their own and failed. They have been managed by foreign powers and been abused. Now, with the birth of Mary's baby, they will be under the new management of God. Finally redeemed.

Under new management: no matter what they will ever face, Mary and Elizabeth know they will face it with God right with them.

What the young woman I knew hadn't figured out yet was that her problems were not a sign that God wasn't there. Instead were reasons to ever keep her eyes open-wide in the dark.

Young Mary's eyes are open-wide. So she raises her voice in song; and the first thing she sings is *my soul magnifies the Lord*.

So here are two things to do as Christmas approaches and it feels like we are lost in this Twenty-first Century night. Under old management, God is kept small. No wonder it seems like God is far away. The advent of God's Messiah called Mary to make God big in her life.

Keep your eyes wide-open and magnify God.

Under old management, you're trained to consider yourself as disregarded. Like God is far-off. Like God doesn't care. Like God is even punishing you. The advent of God's Messiah called Mary to see how God regarded her. "God looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."

Keep your eyes wide-open and claim that God has regarded you.

## Presence

One of my favorite Christmas stories was a story told by Browne Barr about a Christmas pageant that took place in the 1920's and a third-grade boy who played the part of a Christmas angel. His name was Henry.

Henry was the son of a warm, generous, strict man who had a distinctive way of clearing his throat. It was a little staccato rolling sound that sometimes served as notice that he was going to say something. Even when there was nothing more to come, it seemed to say, I AM. It was both word and action; it didn't express any certain meaning, it was Henry's father's meaning. It was just his sound.

As I was saying, Henry was given the part of the Christmas angel in his church's pageant. The class went and rehearsed it like our children rehearsed theirs in our big sanctuary yesterday. They had been taught to stand in a line, file in walking hand-in-hand with the children next to them, passing the ranks of organ pipes and the massive organ and high pulpit. And during rehearsal, having practiced at home, Henry was able to say his lines perfectly.

Then came the night of Christmas Eve. Henry had rehearsed his lines every morning and every evening. He was ready. The class lined up behind the sanctuary doors and, obedient to their teacher, assumed the unusual-for-third-graders' posture of silence. The doors suddenly swung open and Henry, taking Emily's hand, led the way down the aisle into the shadows of a sanctuary that was now, aside from the candles at the front of the chancel, very dark. They got to the platform and stopped; they turned toward the congregation. It was so very dark. Henry couldn't make out anything familiar and he faced a clouding sea of dark, faceless forms. No one was saying anything. It was time for him to speak...but where, now, were the words? The silence engulfed him. He squeezed Emily's hand tighter, but that made her pull away and he was alone. There was silence everywhere and he was now, without words, before an impersonal void.

Then from out of somewhere in this shadowy void in which he stood, out of somewhere in that fearful, mysterious darkness he heard that beautiful sound: that little staccato rolling sound of a person clearing his throat. No one else noticed it; but Henry knew. And that which was without form and void began to fill with love and care. His whole being came together again, and the words poured forth clear and unwavering in the clean soprano voice of an eight-year-old boy: "...And the angel said unto them, Fear

not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy.”<sup>2</sup>

My soul doth magnify the Lord...for he has regarded...me.

And the real hope amid all the discouragements and hopes we've got in this darkness is a spiritual hope.

We want to know, *where is God in all this?* And the answer is given in a child born of a very young mother who sang about God, then wrapped him in swaddling clothes. So keep your eyes open-wide.

The answer is given in Jesus, Emmanuel – God with us – face-to-face. Jesus, the distinctive sound of God

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 9:2, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Browne Barr, “The Angel Came Through: A Christmas Story,” *The Christian Century*. Cited by permission from the December 24, 1980 issue of *The Christian Century*. Subscriptions: \$49/yr. from P.O. Box 700, Mt. Morris, IL 61054. (800) 208-4097. © 1980.