

PREPARE HIM ROOM: A CHRISTMAS STORY

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

December 29, 2019; Non-Lectionary sermon

Isaiah 63:7-9, 16; Hebrews 1:1-14

***“Are not all angels spirits in the divine service,
sent to serve for the sake of those
who are to inherit salvation?”***

Hebrews 1:14

Dot took the gray rag in her red-knuckled fingers and squeezed the soapy water into the sink. Then she dropped it onto the counter and began rotating it in ever-increasing circles, as she'd done nearly every night at the diner for the past six years.

Dot wasn't a “server.” She wasn't a “customer service professional.” She was a waitress, plain and simple. That was the label she herself used. Fifty-six years old, divorced mother of two (her sons grown up and living halfway across the country), Dot considered herself a simple, straight-up kind of person.

Nobody paid much attention to her late-night counter-wiping. She found it almost therapeutic: the mindless rhythm of those circular motions. But this night, Dot was aware she wasn't alone. A set of eyes was watching her intently: brilliant, blue eyes. They belonged to that peculiar old woman, the one who'd trudged in about seven o'clock for a bowl of soup. There she'd stayed, parked in the corner booth, ever since. It was Christmas Eve, ten p.m.: all the other customers had

cleared out. All except her.

Her soup bowl was empty. Had been for a couple hours. Ever since then, she'd nursed a cup of tea, ever so slowly: cradling it in her crooked fingers, as if to warm them. On her hands she wore those half-gloves that allowed the fingertips to protrude. Dot had poured her cup after cup of hot water, drawing from the single teabag a progressively paler brew.

Dot knew perfectly well what the woman was up to. Just stretching out the time. God knows, in that neighborhood there were enough like her: poor souls who lived nowhere — and everywhere. This one wore a threadbare, gray coat, that might once have been elegant. A few curls of snowy-white hair escaped from under her red stocking cap. Beside her on the linoleum floor sat the obligatory shopping bag, stuffed with articles of clothing. God, Dot thought to herself: the woman's a walking stereotype!

Back in the kitchen, Jamal the night cook was loudly putting pots back on the shelves. He'd be shutting off the kitchen lights in a moment, Dot knew. It was Jamal's job to lock the place up. Normally, he'd be there till midnight — but tonight was Christmas Eve. "Close early," the boss had said, in a gruff display of benevolence, before heading off to his suburban Christmas.

Dot finished her counter-wiping, and came over with the check. Those blue

eyes met hers, and looked back steadily. “It’s time, isn’t it” the woman said, matter-of-factly — more a statement than a question. Then, with a Mona Lisa smile at the corners of her mouth, she spilled out a handful of coins onto the table.

“So... where you going tonight?” asked Dot, eyeing her customer as she picked up the coins. Why had she said it? Why did she care? The words had escaped her before she had time to worry about crossing the line between professional and personal. She wondered if she’d regret that later.

The customer shrugged, smiling sweetly. “Same place I go every night.”

“I mean, do you have a place to stay? A *real* place? A roof over your head? It’s Christmas Eve: tonight of all nights, everybody ought to have a place to go.”

Dot began to regret the direction this conversation had taken. She’d lived in the city a long time. She was nobody’s fool. She knew people like this could take advantage, and often did. But as she met this old woman’s steady gaze, somehow she knew this one was different from most others. She was cleaner and tidier: but it was more than that. She had a kind of presence about her that was... well, comforting.

“I’ll be all right,” the old woman said, rising to her feet and reaching for her bag of clothing.

“No,” said Dot. “Wait a minute. Do you... I mean, would you...”

“Would I what?”

“Would you like to come home with me tonight? I’ve got a couch in my living room. You could leave first thing in the morning and go wherever you want. I just hate to think of you out on the streets on Christmas Eve.”

Back in the kitchen, the head and shoulders of the eavesdropping Jamal were visible. He was slowly shaking his head in amazement. “Crazy Dot,” he muttered, under his breath. “If it’s not a stray kitten, it’s a bag lady.... You OK out there?” he called. Dot waved him off.

“So. You’re Dot,” said the old woman, squinting at her plastic nametag. “Dorothy... gift of God... you know, that’s what your name means.”

Dorothy nodded her head.

“My name’s Althea. It means, ‘the healer.’ I’m grateful for your offer, Dorothy. You’re a dear to make room for me. I accept.”

It wasn’t long before the two women were out in the parking lot. Snowflakes floated through the air, but none were sticking to the ground. Dorothy led Althea to her car: the aging Buick with the rusted fenders and bald tires. “I know it doesn’t look like much, but it does run — I promise.”

She settled Althea into the front passenger seat. She would have tossed the bag of clothes into the back, but the old woman hugged it tightly to her chest.

They set off down the road. The night wasn't all that cold, but the streets were deserted — except for the corner taverns, of course, with their neon beer signs and half-open doorways discharging golden beams of light. Dorothy remarked to Althea that she couldn't believe so many of those places stayed open on Christmas Eve, but the old woman said nothing, only nodded.

Dorothy said a good deal more, too, during the car ride. Funny, but this bent-over woman with the snowy hair and the ridiculous red ski cap made her feel comfortable. It had been a long time since someone had listened to her, about anything other than the list of daily specials. Dorothy spoke matter-of-factly about her life, the kids she'd raised, her work in the diner. Althea just sat there, nodding slightly and looking over from time to time with that odd half-smile of hers.

A little further on, they stopped at a traffic light next to a church: an imposing, brick Colonial edifice, set high on a hill, its majestic white steeple illuminated by floodlights. Dorothy's eyes were instinctively drawn upward to its peak, where there was a golden cross. Groups of well-dressed people were streaming up the several footpaths leading to the church doors. "Must be a midnight service," Dorothy remarked.

Her mind went back in a flash to the Christmas Eve services she'd attended as a child. Candlelight... carols... her mother's hand clasping hers... people packed

into every available space. She'd thought, earlier that day, about going to church herself, just as she'd toyed with the idea the last few Christmas Eves. But she never did get beyond the thinking stage, then or now. It had been so long: too long, really. That idyllic, churchgoing life of hers seemed so far away. And besides, she was still wearing her pink waitress uniform, complete with the plastic nametag reading, "Dot."

That's about all she'd be to those church people, Dorothy mused. A dot. A period. A tiny, inconsequential punctuation in the midst of their lavish holiday story — someone these well-heeled worshipers, with their elegant clothes and perfect-seeming families, would probably look straight through.

"The baby Jesus!" Althea called out. "Stop the car! Let's go see him!"

"Oh no," thought Dorothy. "I really *have* done it this time. I've got a crazy woman in my car!"

Althea must have picked up on Dorothy's alarm. "No, silly," she said, chuckling and pointing at something at the side of the road, "it's not like that. Don't you see? There's the baby Jesus!"

Dorothy looked over. It *was* the baby Jesus. There, on the edge of the church property — not high up where all the people were walking, but down where they were, at street level — was a nativity scene. It was supplied with the

usual cast of characters: holy family, farm animals, wise men, shepherds.

“Can you stop here?” asked Althea, with childlike glee. “Please, *can* we go see the baby Jesus?”

The light changed, and Dorothy guided the old Buick over to the curb. Amazed at how spry the old girl was, Dorothy watched Althea open the door, bound out of the car, and take her place in front of the crèche. She let go of her bag of clothing, letting it fall to the ground at her feet. She removed her woolen cap and clasped her hands together in a childlike expression of reverence. Dorothy turned off the engine, got out, and walked over to stand beside her.

There on the old woman’s face was an expression of such unrestrained delight, such childlike innocence, that Dorothy could think of nothing to say. With the beams from the floodlights streaming through her silvery hair, Althea looked both aged and ageless. The skin on her face seemed to grow taut. Her hair seemed, suddenly, not so much white as golden. She straightened up out of her stooped posture, seeming almost to grow taller. On her face was an expression of perfect peace, as well as a kind of determination.

She turned to Dorothy, and her eyes shone. “To you,” she said, sounding at first like she was making some kind of toast. “To *you*, Dorothy, is born this night, in the city of David, a savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

Dorothy turned her eyes back to the little sculpted babe in the manger: lying there in the straw with arms extended, half in embrace and half in blessing. From the expression on his face, he seemed to be chortling in joy. She looked into those glazed-ceramic eyes, and they seemed for a moment to have depth beyond imagining. God, how she missed it — that faith of her youth!

It's a pity, Dorothy thought to herself, that they would be taking this display down so soon. Someone would unscrew the bolts holding the plywood stable together, take back the gifts of the Magi, lift up the kneeling shepherds and return the Christ-child to his storage crate — cushioned this time not by straw, but bubble-wrap. What a pity, that a vision such as this could be so fleeting!

Dorothy looked over, to try to discern from Althea's face what she was thinking, but found her no longer there. Quickly she scanned the church grounds: and saw her mysterious guest nowhere. How had she managed to slip away so stealthily — and why?

There's no accounting for the comings and goings of people like her, Dorothy reflected. They live by their own code, well under the radar of most everyone else. They enter and depart as they please. They mingle in the crowd, but are rarely a part of it. They stand for a time off to one side, regarding the world from an acute angle. Their perspective is always slightly askew: but oftentimes

they do see truth that busy people miss.

It was hard to explain, but something about Dorothy's brief encounter with this homeless woman made her feel overwhelmingly grateful. "I tried to make room for you, my angel," she said aloud, to no one in particular, "but you made room for me."

Dorothy turned from the nativity scene, and headed back toward her car. But when she came to the place where the concrete pathway forked, she paused for a moment, then took the path leading upward to the church. As she crossed the threshold into the candlelit sanctuary, she could hear the congregation singing:

Let every heart prepare him room,

and heaven and nature sing,

and heaven and nature sing...

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