

## Expecting the Unexpected

### Christmas Eve, Luke 2

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, December 24, 2013*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

The soldier's hollow eyes scanned the farmyard in the dusk. A broken chimney bowed over the smoking ruins like some kind of mourner. Before the artillery shelling, a tidy white farmhouse had graced the countryside. Now there lay only rubble and charred timbers. A splintered pony cart caught his eye. One of the shells had exploded nearby and overturned it. He stared at the cart a moment, thinking that the whole thing should look somehow more scenic.

The barn was still standing. Perhaps because there had been little wind, and perhaps because the hundred yards distance between house and barn, no spark had jumped the gap. All the livestock had long ago escaped or been killed, for food, or just war-wasted. There *may* have been life on the farm until very recently. On the path from the house to the barn lay an old hound, its chest blown open. A dead chicken lay nearby in a puddle of mud a blood, along with the not quite recognizable remains of what had *probably* been a young goat. Now, *nothing* moved, *nothing* lived. The soldier picked up the dead chicken by its feet and held it at arm's length. Just another casualty in a long, long *list* of casualties. He tossed the chicken carcass aside. Some Christmas.

Something moved. Barn door. With no thought, just a soldier's instinct, he dropped to the ground, rifle aimed, finger on the trigger, and waited for the enemy to step out. He held his breath as his heartbeat pounded fast and hard in his ears. A kitten. A white *kitten*. As it pushed past the door, the hollow-eyed soldier felt his muscles relax and his breath exhale in a rush. Then his finger tightened on the trigger again as he realized there could *still* be someone inside.

Christmas Eve in the thick of war. Separated from his unit, the soldier wasn't even sure what *country* he was in. It was dusk, and he was tired, so tired he felt it in his bones. He needed to sleep, and it was either this barn, or the woods. When nothing moved for five minutes, and then ten, he got up into a crouch and slowly, *slowly* worked his way around to the back of the barn. Didn't trust the front. Too risky. At the back he discovered a broken-fenced stock pen with a low door leading inside.

He entered cautiously, aching slow, the business end of his rifle leading the way. The barn was silent, and dark. The stalls were empty except for some loose bedding straw scattered around. The soldier looked past his rifle sights up into the rafters. The roof wasn't intact, but it would keep out the weather. Two lofts, one on each end of the barn. Good shelter, but dangerous. He moved from one side to the other, sweeping the area carefully. All clear. Fatigue suddenly overruling even his hard-learned caution, he climbed the ladder to one of the lofts, moved back into the far corner and pulled off his pack.

He sat dazed a moment, then inventoried his pack, everything he had. A can of beans. Some powdered milk. Two chocolate bars. And the beautiful knitted shawl he had bought in that little village, the last bit of civilization he had seen, what seemed a lifetime ago. He had bought it thinking to send it home to his mother. But he hadn't. He had decided to hold onto it, hoping he might get home alive to wrap it around her neck himself. He opened the can of beans and ate them quickly. Cold, but the first food he had had all day. They were almost as good as the chocolate bar, saving the other one for "breakfast." Then pulling his coat tight, and his rifle tighter, the soldier half sat and half lay on the loose straw and let his eyes close.

His eyes snapped open as a noise woke him. Carefully, silently, he sat up, rifle ready at his cheek. He had no idea how long he'd slept. Not sure if it was night or day. A dim light. Was it dawn? After a moment his eyes adjusted and he saw that the light was flickering. Lantern light. Inch by inch, he pulled himself silently to the edge of the loft to peer down to the stall below. The lantern's light bathed a young

woman, hardly more than a child. No traveling companion in sight, the girl sat on a bed of straw, singing softly, as her nursing baby cooed contentedly.

The soldier kept silent watch for five minutes, maybe ten. The young mother lay back on the straw, lifting the child above her head. The baby gurgled and giggled each time she lowered him to her face and kissed his belly. She sat up and lay the baby across her lap and stroked his back and hair. The child flailed his arms and legs without crying, but didn't fall asleep.

When the baby tried to turn over and look up, the young mother stood, placing one hand behind the baby's head and another under his bottom. Then the two of them began to dance, swirling and dipping around the dirt floor together. The mother's long skirt kicked up tiny whirlwinds of straw and dust. And that little white kitten swiped at the girl's skirts with its paw. The nearly breathless young mother slowed to a waltz, and within minutes, the baby fell asleep in her arms. She walked back to the stall, spread a tattered linen cloth on the straw, and laid the sleeping baby on it. Then she covered him with a second linen cloth, then bowed her head, and silently prayed.

Another movement. From the other loft. The soldier's eyes darted quickly back and forth, searching the darkness there, until they locked onto *another* pair of hollow eyes. The enemy. Each had apparently been intent on the mother and child. Now they were frozen like ice onto one another. For a long time neither moved, not even to raise their weapons. Then, as if by some call, both men looked down again, to see the mother still bowed over her sleeping child.

The enemy moved first, and the soldier watched as his counterpart cautiously slung the rifle over his shoulder and slowly began to climb down from the loft. The sound of boots on the ladder startled the mother, and she looked up and turned to shield her sleeping child from sight. The lantern light clearly exposed her expression of fear. But when the soldier smiled and nodded respectfully, her face relaxed, as she acknowledged him with a nod of her own. He knelt near the child and her baby, and reached a hand into his pack. He drew out a raggedly wrapped parcel and opened it to reveal a small carved wooden box. He lifted its lid, and a tinkling waltz began to play. The mother smiled as the man laid the music box near the sleeping baby's feet. After a long moment, the soldier stood, slipped on his pack again, and stepped out the door and into the night.

In the other loft, the soldier waited to see if his enemy would return. When nothing happened after five minutes, then ten, he swung his feet onto the ladder and climbed down quietly, while the young mother watched. As his boots touched the floor he turned to face her, unsure what to do next. His uncertainty gave way and he slipped off his pack to kneel where his enemy had knelt. His hand slid into the pack and he drew out the powdered milk and the remaining candy bar, and placed them beside his enemy's music box. The mother nodded and smiled, and the soldier rose and turned to leave. Then he stopped and looked down again, uncertain for a moment. The music box had run down and the waltz had stopped. He knelt again, picked up the box and turned it over in his callused hands. Solid yet delicate, obviously the work of a master. He wound the key, opened the lid, and the waltz began again.

The girl smiled, and when she saw the soldier looking down toward her sleeping infant, she drew back the cloth to reveal his peaceful face. The young mother bowed her head, eyes closing softly. The soldier closed his eyes, as well, and bowed his head, and, with tears smudging tracks through the dirt and grime of fatigue and battle, he said the first prayer he had *thought* to say in a long, *long* time. It was only a moment, one short moment in the brutal march of an incredibly long war. But when the mother looked up, the soldier was gone. And where he had knelt, draped across the open lid of a beautiful wooden music box, was a delicate knitted shawl. And a waltz played on through a silent night as a baby slept.

Jesus, the child proclaimed by angels. Jesus, the child adored by shepherds. Jesus, the child sought by wise men. Jesus, born in a stable, to impoverished parents. Jesus, an itinerant teacher, executed as a criminal to preserve the religious and political status quo. Jesus, exalted, lifted up – on a cross. Jesus was, *and is, not* what was expected. Jesus calls *you*, and he calls *me*, to join him in the unexpected. To be love in the face of hate. To be peace in the face of violence. To be tolerance in the face of prejudice, justice in the face of *in*justice, mercy and grace in the face of suspicion and judgment. Like a baby born

into a world of darkness and war, we are called to bring God into *our* world. This night, let us resolve to do the unexpected. Let us resolve to hail the King of Kings even as he lays helpless in the manger. Let us resolve to lift up the incarnate Light of Life once again in our hearts. Let the unexpected love of God fill us, to transform our lives, and to transform our *world*.

*based on "Christmas 1944" by Steve Burt in A Christmas Dozen: Christmas Stories from the Heart (Norwich, Conn: Burt Creations, 2001).*