

“Love Wakens Love”

Luke 2:1-19

Most dairy farmers begin milking at 4:30 in the morning and 4:30 in the afternoon. I never liked milking cows. I preferred being on a tractor ploughing and discing the ground or raking the hay or straw into windrows. I liked being on the wagons loading and unloading bales of hay and straw.

I was motivated to go to college while my brother stayed home, milked the cows, and had 10 kids with a catholic girl from Parma. I have no idea how many grandchildren they have, but they did just have their first great-grandchild. He's 2 years younger than me.

My last Christmas Eve story at Divinity. . .

He woke suddenly and completely. It was four o'clock, the hour at which his father had always called him to get up and help with the milking. Strange how the habits of his youth clung to him still! His father had been dead for 30 years, and yet he waked up at four o'clock in the morning. He had trained himself to turn over and go to sleep, but this morning, because it was Christmas, he did not try. Yet what was the magic of Christmas now? His own children had grown up and gone. He was left alone with his wife. Yesterday she had said, "Let's not trim the tree until tomorrow, Robert. I'm tired". He had agreed, and so the tree remained out in the back entry.

Why did he feel so awake tonight? For it was still night, clear and starry. No moon, of course, but the stars were extraordinary! Now that he thought of it, the stars seemed always large and clear before the dawn of Christmas Day. There was one star now that was certainly larger and brighter than any of the others. He could even imagine it moving, as it had seemed to him to move one night long ago.

He was 15 years old and still on his father's farm. He loved his father. He had not known it until one day a few days before Christmas, when he had overheard what his father was saying to his mother.

"Mary, I hate to call Rob in the mornings. He's growing so fast, and he needs his sleep. If you could see how he sleeps when I go in to wake him up! I wish I could manage alone".

"Well, you can't, Adam". His mother's voice was brisk. "Besides, he isn't a child anymore. It's time he took his turn".

"Yes," his father said slowly. "But I sure do hate to wake him".

When he heard these words, something in him woke: His father loved him! There would be no more loitering in the mornings and having to be called again. He got up after that, stumbling blind with sleep, and pulled on his clothes, his eyes tightly shut, but he got up.

And then on the night before Christmas, that year when he was 15, he lay for a few minutes thinking about the next day.

He wished he had a better present for his father. As usual, he had gone to the ten-cent store and bought a tie for his father. It had seemed nice enough until he lay thinking, and then he wished that he had heard his father and mother talking in time for him to save for something better.

He lay on his side, his head supported by his elbow, and looked out of his attic window. The stars were bright, much brighter than he ever remembered seeing them, and one star in particular was so bright that he wondered if it were really the Star of Bethlehem.

"Dad," he had once asked when he was a little boy, "what is a stable?"

"It's just a barn," his father had replied, "like ours."

Then Jesus had been born in a barn, and to a barn the shepherds and the Wise Men had come, bringing their Christmas gifts!

The thought struck him. Why should he not give his father a special gift too, out there in the barn? He could get up early, earlier than four o'clock, and creep into the barn and get all the milking done. He'd do it alone, milk and clean up, and then when his father went in to start the milking, he'd see it all done. And he would know who had done it.

He laughed to himself as he gazed at the stars. It was what he would do, and he mustn't sleep too sound.

He must have waked 20 times, scratching a match each time to look at his old watch – midnight, and half-past-one, and then two o'clock.

At a quarter to three he got up and put on his clothes. He crept downstairs, careful of the creaky boards, and let himself out. The big star hung lower over the barn roof, a reddish gold. The cows looked at him, sleepy and surprised. It was early for them, too.

He fetched some hay for each cow and then got the milking pail, and the big milk cans.

He smiled, thinking about his father, and milked steadily, two strong streams rushing into the pail, frothing and fragrant. The task went more easily than he had ever known it to before. Milking for once was not a chore. It was something else, a gift to his father who loved him. He finished, the two milk cans were full, and he covered them and closed the milk house door carefully, making sure of the latch. He put the stool in its place by the door and hung up the clean milk pail. Then he went out of the barn and barred the door behind him.

Back in his room, he had only a minute to pull off his clothes in the darkness and jump into bed, for he heard his father up. He put the covers over his head to silence his quick breathing. The door opened.

“Rob!” his father called. “We have to get up, son, even if it is Christmas.”

“Aw-right,” he said sleepily.

“I’ll go on out,” his father said. “I’ll get things started.”

The door closed and he lay still, laughing to himself. In just a few minutes his father would know.

The minutes were endless – ten, fifteen, he did not know how many – and he heard his father’s footsteps again. The door opened, and he lay still.

“Rob!”

“Yes, Dad --”

“You son of a ---” His father was laughing, a queer sobbing sort of a laugh. “Thought you’d fool me, did you?” His father was standing beside his bed, feeling for him, pulling away the cover.

“It’s for Christmas, Dad!”

He found his father and clutched him in a great hug. He felt his father’s arms go around him. It was dark and they could not see each other’s faces.

“Son, I thank you. Nobody ever did a nicer thing --”

“Oh, Dad, I want you to know --” The words broke from him of their own will. He did not know what to say. His heart was bursting with love.

“Well, I reckon I can go back to bed and sleep,” his father said after a moment. “No – the little ones are waked up. Come to think of it, I’ve never seen you children when you first saw the Christmas tree. I was always in the barn. Come on!”

He got up and pulled on his clothes again, and they went down to the Christmas tree, and soon the sun was creeping up to where the star had been. Oh, what a Christmas, and how his heart had nearly burst again with shyness and pride as his father told his mother and made the younger children listen about how he, Rob, had got up all by himself.

“The best Christmas gift I ever had, and I’ll remember it, son, every year of Christmas morning, so long as I live.”

Outside the window now, the great star slowly sank. He got up, put on his slippers and bathrobe, went softly upstairs to the attic and found the box of Christmas tree decorations. He took them downstairs into the living room. Then he brought in the tree. It was a little one – they had not had a big tree since the children went away – but he set it in the holder. Then carefully he began to trim it. It was done very soon, the time passing as quickly as it had that morning long ago in the barn.

He went to his library and fetched the little box that contained his gift to his wife, a star of diamonds, not large but dainty in design. He tied the gift on the tree and then stood back. It was pretty, very pretty, and she would be surprised.

But he was not satisfied. He wanted to tell her – to tell her how much he loved her. It had been a long time since he had really told her, although he loved her in a special way, much more than he ever had when they were young. That was the true joy of life, the ability to love! He was quite sure that some people were genuinely unable to love anyone. But love was alive in him, it still was.

It occurred to him suddenly that it was alive because long ago it had been born in him when he knew his father loved him. That was it: love alone could waken love.

And he could give the gift again and again. This morning, this blessed Christmas morning, he would give it to his beloved wife. He could write it down in a letter for her to read and keep forever. He went to his desk and began his love letter to his wife: "My dearest love . . ."

Luke 2:1-19 . . . ¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

5 & 7 – Mary Did You Know

9 – O Little Town of Bethlehem