

**"What God Has Done for Us"**

**Luke 1:47-55**

**Christmas Eve (7:30)**

*And Mary said,  
I'm bursting with God-news;  
I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.  
God took one good look at me, and look what happened—  
I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!  
What God has done for me will never be forgotten,  
the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.  
His mercy flows in wave after wave  
on those who are in awe before him.  
He bared his arm and showed his strength,  
scattered the bluffing braggarts.  
He knocked tyrants off their high horses,  
pulled victims out of the mud.  
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;  
the callous rich were left out in the cold.  
He embraced his chosen child, Israel;  
he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.  
It's exactly what he promised,  
beginning with Abraham and right up to now.*

A young man sits on the hard bench outside the courtroom, waiting for the Bailiff to come get him. He is aware of a thin bead of sweat dripping in a single line down underneath the back of his shirt. Across from him on another bench, he recognizes a sheriff's deputy sitting cross-legged and talking on her cellphone. He recalls the night a few months ago when she broke into his life in a dramatic and unfriendly way.

The Christmas tree in the hallway outside the courtroom sparkles with colored lights and ornaments showing the pictures of local heroes. There is a picture of a firefighter holding the baby he saved from a fire. There is a teacher holding up a certificate showing the Master's degree she has just earned. There is a soldier, a teenager standing in front of a mountain, and a police detective standing with a family of newborn triplets.

The young man gets up off the bench and walks over to the tree. One by one, he pulls the ornaments close so he can get a better look at the pictures on them. Turning one over, he notes a brief explanation typed on the back of the ornament. He reads it:

*"Joseph Ojawe is an immigrant from Nigeria. Together with his sister and mother, he escaped terror and poverty. Settling in our city, he attends school and works nights and weekends. Joseph has started a food bank at his school, and in just six months has helped collect over 6000 cans of food for needy families in the area. Joseph is a local hero!"*

The young man is impressed. He turns over more of the ornaments, carefully reading each and every story. The firefighter risked his own safety to pull the infant pictured with him from a burning car. The soldier suffered the loss of his leg when he fell on a grenade so as to protect local school children walking home in Kabul, Afghanistan.

The teacher is deaf, and she teaches AP Math at the local high school. Her Master's project was to develop a curriculum for gifted mathematics students with hearing losses so that they could study for and pass the AP exam.

The young man cannot get enough of the stories he is experiencing. He has lost track of all time and place, so immersed is he in the ornament heroes' gallery. Though there is noise and activity all around him, he cannot hear nor sense any of it. These ornament stories are all so big!

The young man steps back from the tree for a moment, overwhelmed. He wipes a tear from his eye, hoping that no one will notice him. He is known on the streets as a tough guy; the last thing he wants is to look weak or vulnerable.

He has used his toughness to get through life. From the year he was old enough to defend himself against the attacks of his brothers, he made sure that nobody messed with him. From the first day he was able to be away from home, he made himself scarce, not wanting to antagonize his father. Though his mother worried about where he was, she was not strong enough herself to protect him.

He is smart and he is strong; the combination keeps him safe out in the 'hood. He has learned where to be at what hours of the day to get meals from church food pantries, to get clothes from neighborhood free closets, and to meet his friends for entertainment and the small-

crime life. He has never done anything all that bad yet- just some shoplifting and some tagging of buildings and some strong- arming of weaker and younger street kids. You have to make a name out on the streets; you have to show some swagger or you are "dead meat."

The young man is proud of himself that he is self-sufficient, but not entirely proud of the way he has been conducting himself. He never has used a weapon personally, but when his friend, Jimmy, had been stabbed recently in a fight, he was charged with assault for attacking in retaliation those who had seriously injured his friend.

Now it is his day in court, and he is nervous about what might happen to him. "Why can't I be on a hero's ornament?" he muses to himself. "Why hasn't God done anything to help me?" he asks the tree. His hands shoved down deep into his pockets, the tears start freely now to flow, and he does nothing to stop them.

After a few seconds, he hears someone come and stand near him, looking at the tree and its ornaments. Embarrassed by his tears, he wipes his eyes and his nose with his coat sleeve and looks down and away, not wanting to be seen in his weakness.

"These are pretty amazing stories, aren't they?" she asks quietly. The young man recognizes the voice, but doesn't want to look at the person who is speaking. "Guess so," he chokes out.

"Do you have anywhere to go after court today?" she asks. He just shrugs his shoulders. "It's Christmas Eve," she reminds him. "The

courthouse closes at 2. I heard you asking why God hasn't done anything to help you? When we get done here, I'm going to go down the street to a church to hear a Christmas concert. Would you like to go?"

The young man thinks for a few seconds and then replies, "I don't think I'm getting out of here today. I'm likely going to jail once the judge gets through with me. Thanks anyway."

The police officer then says, "You know, I probably have something to say about that in there. The judge is going to want my opinion on whether to give you a second chance."

It occurs to the young man that he probably doesn't deserve a second chance, but if given one, he might just be able to turn things around. He takes the risk and looks at her, expecting to hear a, "Just kidding! You're going down, you punk!" But instead, he sees something he hasn't seen before in the face of an authority figure. He sees a gentle smile and eyes that show they care.

"We have a program here in the City for young people such as yourself who have been arrested for serious offenses, but who have the potential to straighten themselves out and make something of their lives. It's a mentoring sponsored by the police department. We pair you with a senior officer who helps you stay in school and stay on the right track. Are you interested? You could be your own hero, you know."

The young man immediately thinks, "No, this a trap; I can't trust a cop," but before he can sass the officer with a flip blow-off, he hears a voice come from the top of the courthouse Christmas tree. The voice seems to come from the angel sitting atop the highest branch! He could swear that the angel is bending down to him, whispering, "Look what God has done for you!"

In the torrent of emotion that follows, the young man sees a vision of himself in a classroom, raising his hand eagerly to answer the question the teacher had asked of the class. He sees another vision of himself getting his diploma. He sees himself leaving on a bus for college, full of promise and anticipation. He sees himself as the hero of his own story, just as the police officer suggested he could be.

"Is this what Christmas is all about?" he tentatively asks her. "I mean, is this what the birth of Jesus means? That the world gets a second chance?"

"Yes, I guess you could say that," she answers him. The angel leans a little closer to him, delightedly saying,

"Yes! Yes! Hallelujah! Yes! Look what God has done for you!"

Just then, the Bailiff sticks her head out of the courtroom announcing, "Your case is being called." The young man starts to turn around, head down, shuffling his feet off to meet his fate. The officer grabs him by the coat sleeve, stops him, and turns him around to face her.

"Well?" she asks, looking into his face.

With the big knot that is in his throat, all he can do is nod his head. He looks into the eyes of the deputy, and he sees care. He looks up at the angel, who is smiling, and he sees grace. He looks at the ornaments of the ordinary people God has called to be heroes, and he sees hope. He thinks he sees a glimpse of himself on a hero's ornament tucked back into the branches.

Turning back to face the deputy, he says in a tentative voice barely above a whisper, "I think God has just spoken to me, if that doesn't seem too weird.... I hope you can help me with the judge. I want to do better and make something of my life." She nods, and he chokes out, "I feel so blessed right now. I feel like the whole world, the world who wakes up on Christmas morning to a second chance."

*Look everywhere for what God has done for you.*

*May It Be a Merry*