

CHANGED BY SEEING

Luke 2:1-20

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TEXT: Luke 2:15 “when 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.’”

Mike grabbed a beer and a cigarette and walked out onto the little porch of his apartment. Lucy had never allowed him to smoke inside, so, even though they weren't together anymore, he had kept up the practice. Besides, the kids were coming tomorrow afternoon for Christmas, and he didn't want the house smelling of smoke. He took in the brisk afternoon air between drags on the cigarette and pondered how much his life had changed in one year. Last Christmas, they were all together, Lucy and him and the kids, living in a nice house, no sign of the coming disaster. Now, here he was in this very un-homey apartment. Lucy and the kids were living with her parents, and their house was being sold at a price that would be a huge loss for them.

It started when Lucy was laid off right when their mortgage's adjustable rate adjusted. It seemed like there was always something to argue about after that. He kept working, thank goodness, but his income alone wasn't enough. Searching for a job and being at home drove Lucy crazy, and when she finally resorted to getting food from a food pantry, that was more than she could take. They decided to sell before the house went into foreclosure, but by then, there was little of a marriage left. So Mike ended up alone in this apartment, which was more a symbol of failure than a place to call home. He'd done a fair job fixing up the kids' rooms, but boxes still cluttered his bedroom and the living room. Last weekend, he and the kids had dug out their tree and decorated it, but that was all he'd done for Christmas. Since then, he hadn't even bothered to turn on the lights.

He was going to get the kids tomorrow afternoon. Lucy's parents had always had a big shindig on Christmas Eve, and they all had agreed it would be best for them to stay there through Christmas morning. He got to keep them through the weekend. Even so, he dreaded having them showing up with all the presents Santa delivered them at Lucy's folks' house, and him having little to show for his valiant effort at getting them some things. He'd have to make a point of being happy for them.

Back inside, Mike figured he'd better check on his menu for Christmas dinner. He'd never tackled such a project on his own. Luckily, he'd already bought the smallest ham he could find. At seven and four, Jeremy and Erin weren't the biggest eaters. But what else? He opened the freezer. Good. There was a bag of that corn and beans mix that the kids liked. Potatoes, he'd need potatoes. Ugh. The potatoes in the drawer were spoiled enough to smell. Besides, sweet potatoes would be better for Christmas. What about dessert? Nothing for dessert. The kids had brought some cookies they'd baked with Lucy and their grandmother, but that was no dessert fit for Christmas dinner. So, he'd have to make a trip to the grocery store.

The store wasn't too crowded. He found the potatoes right off, and then decided on adding some applesauce, which he knew the kids would eat. It was slim pickings on the dessert tables. He was checking out the pies when he heard a voice call his name. "Mike! Merry Christmas!" It was Linda Hargrove, from church. The church that Mike and Lucy went to was Lucy's parents' church. Not that they had been all that involved, but the kids liked the Sunday School. Once Mike and Lucy had split up, he hadn't been back. He vaguely recalled that Linda was a friend of Lucy's mom, and he felt a tinge of guilt.

"What brings you out on Christmas Eve?" Linda asked. Wasn't it obvious? Mike thought. "The kids will be with me for Christmas dinner, and I still haven't gotten the hang of cooking. I just realized what I was missing. Just in time, I guess." Mike thought that would be it, that he'd escape with some small talk about the Christmas menu. But Linda moved to face him head on, and looked him square in the eye. "Makes for a rather difficult Christmas, doesn't it?" Mike had expected her to stay away from THE issue, but she'd gone right to it. And then, she stayed with it. The look in her eyes and the tone of her voice made him realize that he was more important to her than whatever had brought her on a last-minute mission to the grocery store.

For once, being honest appeared to be the best choice. "It's miserable, really," he said. "I don't know what to do with myself. Lucy's parents have their big Christmas thing tonight, and Santa will come to their house for Jeremy and Erin, and I have to figure out how to make their time with me special tomorrow. But what I feel like is an afterthought."

“Mike,” Linda said. “You’re their father. Be their dad, and you’ll never be an afterthought.” “I want that to be true, and sometimes it works, but on Christmas, it’s more than I can handle.” Mike had no idea why he was saying what he was saying to someone who was nearly a stranger, just someone he knew from church.

“So what are you going to do tonight?” Linda asked. “Nothing, I guess. Some friends invited me to come to their open house, but I’m not sure I feel like going.” “Why don’t you come to the Christmas Eve service at church?” Linda asked. “I don’t know,” Mike answered. “I hate the thought of showing up when I’ve been away so long.” “Nonsense,” Linda said. “It will be so crowded that no one will notice. And you already know that Bob and Shirley and Lucy and the kids won’t be there. Paul and I will wait in the lobby for you, and you can sit with us. Now, let me be so presumptuous as to make a suggestion. Get rid of the fresh sweet potatoes and go get some canned candied yams. The kids will love them, and you won’t have to work at making them nice.”

They parted, and Mike headed home, where he still couldn’t make up his mind about Linda’s invitation. He microwaved some hot pockets and turned on the radio while he munched on them. Christmas carols were playing. He sort of hummed along through mouthfuls of food. What did he have to lose? He thought. He called Linda and told her to expect him.

There were lots of people in the church. He’d never been to the service, because they’d always been at Lucy’s parents on Christmas Eve. The opening songs were nice enough, but Mike was still feeling uncomfortable. Then, the minister called the kids over to the manger scene, and told them the story of Jesus’ birth, of the visits from the shepherds and the wise men. Mike thought of his own kids, and wished they were here. He found himself feeling more love for them, pure love, uncompetitive love, than he had since before the troubles began. While the kids were running back to their parents, Mike choked up while he was trying to sing, “Away in a Manger.” Ridiculous, he thought, but he stole a glance at Linda, and even she seemed not to notice.

The rest of the service was lovely. During the candlelighting, Mike

thought,

I wonder how I could get the kids here next year. They need to see this. Afterwards, Linda invited Mike to come back to their house for some socializing. “No, but thanks. I’ve got something I need to do,” Mike answered. “Oh, and thanks a whole lot for getting me to come here. It was really special for me.”

Back home, Mike rooted through the unopened boxes in his bedroom. Where’s the Christmas stuff? He wondered. He found the box, opened it, and pulled out the shoebox with the nativity set his parents had given them early in their marriage. He cleared the coffee table and set it up. He lit the tree lights and turned on the radio. Carols, again. And he sat there, staring at the creche, content for the first time in his own home. The phone rang. The jangling startled him. It was Jeremy and Erin. “Merry Christmas, daddy!” they called out in unison. “Merry Christmas, Jeremy; Merry Christmas, Erin,” Mike answered, with a genuineness in his voice that surprised him. “Have you had a nice night with Grammy and Grandpa?” They had lots to say.

Then Lucy came on. “I thought you’d like to hear from them.” “Thanks,” Mike said, “that was really nice.” “How are you?” Lucy asked. “Pretty well, actually. I went to the Christmas Eve service. I came home and got out the manger scene my parents gave me. Tomorrow, when the kids are here, I think I’ll read the Christmas story from the Bible to them. I brought home the bulletin, so I suppose I’ll be able to find it.”

Lucy was quiet for just a second longer than Mike expected. Her voice was quiet, gentle, the tone that had made him love her. “Oh, Mike, that will be so special for them. What a great idea!” They wished each other a Merry Christmas, and it was okay. Mike sat back down in the light of his tree. The carol on the radio was, “Good Christian men, rejoice!” And Mike thought, I guess I will.