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First Christian Church
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“And the Darkness Did Not Overcome It...”

(John 1:1-5 NRSV) "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

A couple of months ago, Garrison Keilor's long-running radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," was broadcast live from the Springs. If you've never heard the show, one of its features is always a monologue by Mr. Keilor, telling a story from his mythical hometown of Lake Woebegone, Minnesota, and these stories are people by an idiosyncratic cast of characters. The story I am remembering tonight is one he told during the Christmas season a number of years ago. It is about the Lundeen family, one of those mythic families that people that place.¹ And while I could never tell it as well as Mr. Keilor does, I nonetheless want to share it with you for it is oh-so-apt for this night.

Mel Lundeen was the family's father. He was the town's milkman, and he was a known for his punctuality. So punctual that his own family could set their clocks by him; every afternoon at 3:36 he appeared, driving down the country road in his little truck and he would carefully place the family's milk and cheese in the box, wave at the house, and roar off, his route almost done, towards the next house (or roaring, anyway, as much as those little dairy trucks could roar). But one day he didn't come. It seems

¹Should anyone reading this have a citation for when this story was broadcast, we'd be grateful to know. Told from memory.

that during his lunch hour he had stopped at a neighbor's out in the country to help him re-paint his barn. And he was up perched in a high window of that barn when the neighbor yelled to him "Look!" And Mel looked down, but the neighbor was pointing up. So Mel looked up and there was one of those great big helium blimps floating by. Mel, unfortunately and unthinkingly, stepped backwards to get a better look. And he plunged to the hard ground.

And so it was about the time that Velma, Mel's wife, expecting to see her husband delivering the milk that she instead got a phone call. Mel's and Velma's house was a little green house on the road to the lake outside of town, a house full of bunk-beds and their eight children. When the phone rang, it was Velma who answered it. She had been staring to prepare dinner when the call came. And when she heard the news of what had happened to Mel her voice became absolutely, perfectly calm. And that's how those eight children immediately knew that something was wrong. For Velma was, you see, the nervous kind. Having eight kids would tend to make you nervous. And those kids sometimes enjoyed, truth be told, getting on her nerves. One of them would come in from the outside and say "Mom, have you seen my bike light tonight? Oh well, it doesn't matter; I'll ride into town without it." And Velma would follow him out the door saying, "No, no, don't ride without your light." Or one of the kids would say, "Mom, we're going to take the boat out fishing, have you seen the life jackets? Oh, never mind, we won't be out that long." And that would set Velma off again.

But at this moment she was calm, eerily calm, much, much too calm. The kids knew something was terribly wrong. And it was. Velma said, "Your dad's been hurt, I don't know how bad. I'm going over to the hospital in St. Cloud. I'll call you when I

can.” She told their oldest, James, who was 16, to call the neighbor and tell them what had happened. She grabbed her coat and she got in the car and she was gone. And there they sat, eight stunned children around the table anticipating dinner, all the preparations left on the counter in mid-stream. They were unable to say a word. There had been an accident and for all they knew their father was dead. It was terrible. And even when the neighbor arrived to look after them there was nothing she could do to comfort them. Even when Velma finally came home, very late that night, all she could tell them was that he was alive but she turned around and left again and spent pretty much every moment at the hospital.

Mel ended up being there for four long weeks. The accident had happened in late November. It was now mid-December and Velma proceeded to take each of her children aside, one by one, and tell them not to get their hopes up for Christmas. She just didn't know if they could afford Christmas this year. The little ones didn't understand. They didn't realize that Christmas was something you had to “afford.” They just knew that presents appeared under the tree with your name on them. But James, the oldest, knew, he understood. And when she told him his face burned because he just didn't think it would be possible for him to keep his hopes down; you see, his hopes were already so high that they might never come down. For he had spent the last six months hinting, campaigning for a new Lionel Model Train set from the Sears catalog. You know, the one with the locomotive, four cars, a caboose, two switches, a lighted train depot with a little station master who would automatically come out and raise the semaphore just as the train was approaching, and the little livestock loader that, when the cattle car would stop by it, the little tiny cows would move up the little ramp into the

little cattle car. It was amazing. And he wanted it so bad that he could not imagine not getting it for Christmas!

As the days went on, James began to think that perhaps some rich person would have read about his dad's accident in the newspaper and would decide that by golly he would see that those kids would get the best Christmas ever. And James even wonder if he ought to write a letter to the newspaper, letting that rich person know, if there were such a person, how he could make it the best Christmas ever by giving James Lundeen a Lionel Model Train Set from the Sears catalog. It was a hard time. One night James heard his little sister in bed, crying; she was saying "Daddy's going to die, and we'll all be adopted." Now, if the truth be told, James had considered being adopted in the past – perhaps by a rich person who liked model trains. But his sister's words scared him.

Mel did come home, two days before Christmas. He was weak and he was thin and he spent most of his time on the couch. And the family had a little Christmas. They had a tiny tree on the coffee table with a few presents. James got a pair of new boots and a hunting knife and a checkers game. And Mel, weak as he still was, did manage to carry out the family tradition of handing out the presents as he always did. But the whole family knew, they knew, that **he** was the real gift, **he** was the real gift that cold and snowy Christmas morning.

That night, James decided to take a walk. It was a very cold and snowy night. He put on his new boots, his hat and his coat, and headed out for the lake. The lake was frozen hard with six foot high drifts of snow looking like giant waves. Those drifts had frozen so hard that there was a crust on top of them that you could walk on. And James walked and walked. And then, all of a sudden, the snow stopped, and the

clouds parted, and the stars broke through and the moon shone down. James turned around and looked towards his now-tiny looking house off in the distance, lit up there with the lights from the kitchen and the living room and the bedrooms and with the lights on that tiny tip of that tiny tree visible in the window. It all looked to James like a wonderful model train layout with realistic snow and little trees made out of sponge and the tiny lit up building. He could imagine putting his face down to that layout as if it were real and the train whistle blowing in the distance....

And in that moment, all of a sudden, he knew, he knew – that in the midst of that storm, in the moment of calm and silence that had overtaken him, he knew that Christmas was indeed in that tiny green house full of bunk-beds and children and a nervous mother and a miraculously alive and recovering dad. And he knew, he knew that no matter what else happened, whatever else did or didn't come to pass, he knew that they had all they needed for it to be Christmas. For it may have been a long way from Bethlehem and a whole lot colder, but the story this night was finally not that different from that night so long ago – for emanating from that house in the distance was also, through the power of God healing and God's hope, a light that shone in the darkness and nothing, nothing, nothing could or would overcome it, no matter what, no matter what.

Immanuel, God with us. Merry Christmas.