

# The Christmas Wish

By Andrew Sharp



The wet snow seeped into George's socks. He leaned on the bridge railing and stared down at the dark river. It was too dark to admire the scenery, the black bare trees hunched under loads of dripping snow. Anyway, he was too angry to appreciate such an uplifting landscape. Instead, he shuffled through memories of the ugly scenes over the past few months. As his congregation had splintered in a dispute over how to celebrate communion, the fragments had whispered about his leadership as pastor, and some had led a failed attempt to have him removed. And he was supposed to be writing joyous Advent sermons. He spat bitterly down into the indifferent, icy water.

His frustration had been building since before the squabbling started, and he had finally had enough. Other people didn't seem to notice the emptiness in the Christian self-help books that passed for literature. They babbled about joy and transformation and new life, but he couldn't buy it any more. He was willing to look past the shining light in his eyes to the black shadows beyond, the real world that so few Christians would admit existed. One leader after another falling into sexual disaster, taking many lives down with them. The so-called church of love torn apart by hate and anger. Worse, the spectre of history pointing at the church with a steady, accusing hand. The murder and rape of Muslims in the name of faith. The beheadings. The thumbscrews, the rack, and the stake. The marriage with political power, with offspring of wealth and greed. The constant division into thousands of competing sects, like an aggressive cancer. All so people could pretend to have a bubbly feel-good social club that left the real, painful questions about life up to the dissolute novelists, the ones they try to get banned from schools.

Is *this* the kingdom? he asked himself. Then I want nothing to do with it.

It would have been better if Jesus had not come. If he were only a deluded man, George could have forgiven

him, but to inflict this mess on humanity intentionally was criminal. He was startled at the thoughts, and for a second felt guilty for thinking them. But then he knew they were true, as much as he had ever known anything. His fury burst out in a shout. "You brought misery on us! Religion is death!"

His voice shocked the silence, banished it. It came washing back as his voice echoed away.

He was being honest with himself for the first time since he had become a pastor 15 years ago, and that meant he could be viciously honest with God. "If you can hear me, I wish you had never come!"

Put that in your Christmas sermon, he told himself. But he knew there would be no Christmas sermon.

There was a despairing yell, and a dark form hurtled down into the water. George was startled. Instinct taking over, he dived in after the splashing figure below.

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Inside the police station, George tried to dry his hair with a towel and glared at the man sitting across from him. He was short, with a square jaw covered in stubble. He would have looked natural carrying a tommy gun and wearing a fedora. He seemed completely untroubled by his fall into the river, almost amused. George had difficulty imagining him jumping from a bridge for any reason.

"What do you think you were doing out there?" George snapped. "You could have gotten us both killed."

The police officer standing beside them nodded. "You're lucky this guy gave you a second chance," he told the little man.

"Why, I was just saving your life," the man said.

"My life?" George gaped.

"Sure, instead of jumping in and drowning, you jumped in to save me," the man said. "Very touching. You see, I'm an angel sent to help you." He grinned.

"But that's —" George started to protest, then he

narrowed his eyes. "Hey, wait a minute. Is this a joke? You think you're going to pull some *It's a Wonderful Life* stunt and show me what the world would be like without me, and then afterward I'll rush home to my wife Mary and we'll all cry together and sing Auld Lang Syne." He snorted. "My wife is named Sarah, so you're out of luck."

The police officer looked lost. "What ..."

"Yeah, right," the angel said. "The world would get by OK without you. It gets by without a lot of people all the time."

George was offended. "Say what?"

"Your wife could have married any number of fine people," the angel explained. "Lots of good pastors out there too." He reflected. "Bad luck for your kids though, I guess." He took out a pipe and filled it with tobacco. "Why look," he said. "My tobacco is still dry. It's a miracle!" He winked.

George hated smoking. "Since when do angels smoke?" he demanded.

"Since when do we NOT smoke?" the angel said, puffing unconcernedly. "Spirits can't get lung cancer you know."

The policeman was edging toward the door. The angel saw him. "Hey, don't get excited. Come back here and sit down."

The policeman found his legs walking back and sitting down. He stared at the angel with wide eyes.

"Besides the whole saving your life thing," the angel told George, "I am here to grant you your wish."

"What wish?"

"Jesus has never been born," the angel said calmly. "No Christianity. Happy day, right?"

George's anger came back. "I suppose you think I'll be upset about that. Well, I don't feel any different."

"I don't doubt that," the angel said. George did not appreciate his tone.

"I think you know the drill," the angel said. "Let's go around and look at some scenes depicting life without Jesus, shall we?" The room faded away and George found himself standing on a crowded city street. He blinked up at the Greek structure nearby and recognized the Supreme Court Building. A large crowd of protesters milled around, half holding signs with religious mottoes in magic marker, and the other half waving messages demanding the separation of religion and state. Police officers scuffled with two of them as they screamed at each other.

George was bewildered. "I thought you said Jesus was never born," he bawled over the crowd noise at the angel.

"He wasn't," the angel yelled back. "They're still mad about the 10 commandments being taken down though. I didn't say *religion* never happened."

George was upset. "That's not fair," he yelled. "You're telling me this happens without Christianity?"

The angel shrugged. "People are still people. They

crave religion. And they hate each other for being different. You can't ask me to change the fabric of the universe."

"Still," George insisted, "think of all the horrible things Christianity brought. The crusades!" he shouted triumphantly.

"Funny you should mention that," the angel said. The mob faded and was replaced by a dusty square in a village that George guessed was somewhere in the Middle East. Women were drawing water out of a well and chatting with each other. An old man was sitting on the edge of the square, snoozing in the afternoon sun.

Suddenly the old man coughed violently and pitched limply forward off the bench onto his face. A crossbow bolt stuck out of his side. A group of horsemen covered in steel from head to toe clattered into the square and began running the screaming villagers down, hacking at them with broadswords.

"NO!!!" George screamed.

The angel touched him gently on the arm and the scene faded. They stood in darkness. "You don't have to watch that," he said sadly. "You know what happens anyway."

George threw up. As he wiped his mouth, he stammered, "It's not possible. Without the church, why would they ..."

"People find plenty of reasons," the angel's voice came out of the dark. "You know that. Oil. Democracy. Saving the motherland. Revenge. Surely a critical thinker such as yourself saw through all that religious veneer."

"Fine," George said, a little stung. "But at least people don't have to waste their time bickering over theological minutiae and despising each other because they disagree about mysteries they will never really understand."

"You forgot there's still religion," the angel said. The darkness brightened and George found himself standing in the back of a seminary classroom.

"Hey, that's Professor Reid," George whispered. "I hated this class! We spent hours discussing stuff that no one in the real world cares about. How many angels can dance on the head of a pin kind of stuff."

". . . and so the concept of God's personhood underwent a subtle, but important shift . . ." Professor Reid droned.

"One hundred thirty-four," the angel said.

"Say what?" George asked.

"Angels. That can dance on the head of a pin."

George looked at him blankly.

"Only if you're trying to set the record. Thirty or so is really the comfortable limit," the angel explained.

George opened his mouth to say something, but the scene changed again and he was standing at a podium in the front of a sanctuary.

Music played as people swayed, eyes closed in rapture.

The music didn't have that bouncy, sappy feel that George had come to hate. There was something wrong about it. It was fearful, maybe even just a little angry.

George's throat felt hoarse and he realized he was shouting at them, haranguing them about their sins. He put his hand over his mouth.

People began to file forward and kneel at the altar. George recognized old Mrs. Nelson. Of course. She was never one to miss an altar call. She looked up at the ceiling now, tears streaming down her face. Then something flashed in her hand. George leaned forward to look. He almost passed out as he saw she was cutting herself. So were most of the rest of them.

"WAIT! STOP!" he shouted, running forward. "Don't do this! You can never atone. The only one who . . ." And then he stopped.

"They have to prove their devotion," the angel said. "Prove how radical and committed they are, hoping God will be easier on them. Rumor has it the most devoted can win God's favor and love."

"Can they?" George asked. But he knew the answer already. He felt sick.

"No," the angel said, looking away.

"But surely God won't send them to . . ."

The angel looked at him. "They're already in it," he said shortly. He had lost his casual, half-amused attitude and stood with his arms folded, soberly watching the worshippers.

George felt an emptiness that was almost beyond pain. It was hope, he realized. There wasn't any. The ancient pagans could handle life because they didn't know, didn't understand yet how hopeless it all was. But he knew too much.

"All right," he gasped. "I was all wrong. Take me back now."

"That only happens in the movies," the angel said testily. "This is real. Jesus never came. There is no plan B. This is what you wanted."

George tried to suck in air but couldn't.

"For you, anyway," the angel explained. "Changing history, you see, creates a parallel time stream and then . . . never mind. Too hard to explain."

George began to weep. "But I love him. I miss him. I need the life he gives like I need water." He reached for a shred of hope. "He might never have come, but he exists. You said yourself that God exists. That means the Jesus I knew still exists!"

The angel sighed. "You don't get it, do you? Of course he does. But not the man who was tempted

like you. That man never existed. The Son of God can't have anything to do with you. It would kill you."

George snatched a knife from one of the pews, but the angel grabbed his wrist. George fought him wildly but the angel held him with no trouble.

"Let me go!" George shrieked. "Why do you care? I'm dead anyway!"

Then they were sitting in the police station again. "I lied," the angel said. "You had to really believe it to really understand."



George gripped the edge of the podium and looked out over the small congregation.

"This is the first Sunday of Advent, when we light the candle of hope," he began, as he had so many times before. Then he began to cry.

*Andrew Sharp lives in Greenwood, Delaware, with his wife Stephanie and their sons Michael and Eliot. He loves his job working at a small-town newspaper and enjoys creative writing on the side. He graduated from RBC with an associate degree in 2004 and from Ohio State with a bachelor's degree in journalism in 2008.*

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