

## Awry in a Manger

### A St. John's Christmas Eve

Steve Charles

Near the end of the first St. John's Christmas Eve service in Larry Baumgartner's barn, and not long after Larry's cows started fighting behind the altar, Father Todd dragged Jim Suren off a hay bale.

It wasn't what anyone expected at a Christmas Eve service, least of all Jim, a kind, gentle, and thoughtful man. Father Todd seemed equally surprised. It was supposed to be a visual aid illustrating the main point of his homily, but at first, I'm not sure anybody got it.

Even the cows seemed confused. Larry had brought them inside this big metal barn to create a sort of manger scene, but it turned out to be more like a stampede.

Instead of lowing or keeping time with the ox or the lamb, three of the cows were teaming up and beating up on a fourth smaller one. Nature at its nastiest. They were head butting and hoofing the yearling like crazed wise men going after the baby Jesus.

And they were fighting right behind the worktable that was serving as our altar, too, so you couldn't miss them. They got especially worked up during Silent Night.

For the teenaged Green twins, the cattle were the life of the service.

"Cage fight," Joe said to Ben. I'd never seen them so happy in church.

I may have had something to do with the beasts' foul mood. I was playing guitar for the service, and I'd practiced all the carols with Father Todd to make sure I had the key and tempo just right for the congregation, all seated on hay bales in the chilly barn. I even miked my guitar to make sure they could hear me. Episcopalians are used to having their voices covered by an organ; they can freak when they actually hear themselves sing.

It was going great through the first five carols, the prelude we'd designed so that people could get warmed up and get to sing a lot of their favorites. I'm always nervous leading music, but this time it felt better. In the spiritual counseling Todd had done with me over the years—the hours of listening and encouragement that had helped pull me out of an emotional tailspin—he'd promised he'd not ask more of me than I was ready for. So he volunteered to lead the singing; all I had to do was play along.

It was actually fun. And 120 people singing carols in a barn is a beautiful sound. These are songs they've known most of their lives. Some even know the harmonies. And when they sing, the notes and the words bring up memories—of childhood Christmases, of a father or mother they've lost, of their first Christmas with their beloved, or their

children, or the last Christmas with a grandparent. Their voices are filled with emotion, and the sound of all those souls singing comes right at you when you're playing guitar in front of them.

I remembered the times I played and sang these songs with my family, my brother leading the singing, me playing along—how Mom's voice sounded when she was young, how it changed as she got older; the way Dad would shift from bass to tenor to try to stay with the modulations of the song.

I was riding those same waves singing with these people, many of them strangers to me, maybe getting a little lost in it all, a little cocky. And then we tried "Lo A Rose Ere Blooming." It's one of my favorites, but it can be the devil to lead. The syncopations throw people off. And though I'd practiced this over and over, even had a friend who reads music practice with me so I got the rests and rhythm just right, we butchered it.

And that's when the cattle, never fond of butchers, started getting restless. Music may soothe the savage beast, but our version of it was really pissing off the cows.

Actually, we could have handled the cage-fighting cattle. It was Todd's yanking Jim off the hay bale that really got things stirred up. He was trying to illustrate the main point of his sermon—that God would lift us up, that God was with us in more ways than we can imagine, that you never know how he might show up.

It seemed a good place for a dramatic flourish.

"God will lift you up," Father Todd boomed, the sleeves from his vestments flowing as he reached down to grab Jim by the hand.

That's when he pulled Jim off his hay bale.

I was sitting five bales over, and I could tell something was wrong the minute Todd gave Jim a yank. Jim's not the youngest guy in the barn, weighs 200 pounds or so, and—now we know—has trouble with his knees. So when Todd as God tried to lift him up, he teetered sideways, tried to stop his fall by clasping Todd's forearm, then slumped to his left and onto the barn floor.

God will lift you up looked more like God will knock you over.

The cows went berserk.

I thought Jim might have had a heart attack (New theme: God will lift you up and strike you dead.)

Todd looked startled but wouldn't let go. He almost fell onto the ground beside Jim (God will knock you over but you can take Him down with you.)

But he bent his right knee, braced himself, clasped Jim's arm with his left hand, and pulled.

Jim looked like a giant toddler about to swing from a favorite uncle's outstretched arms. But somehow he got his knees to work, his booted feet found purchase on the

slippery concrete floor, he was able to right himself and pulled himself up with Todd as God's help.

All through this the cows were jumping around in their pen. My guitar playing and watching the priest wrestle a parishioner to the ground were putting them over the brink.

But when Jim finally stood up, they stopped their fighting.

The world in quiet stillness lay for just a second as all of us wondered if Jim was okay, if Todd would lose his composure and train of thought, if the cattle would leap over the pen and turn Christmas Eve into the St. John's version of the running of the bulls.

Todd smiled.

"God WILL lift you up," he shouted, putting an arm around Jim. And we laughed. 120 people on hay bales in a metal pole barn on Christmas Eve laughing like jackasses in a manger. Jim smiled, he and Todd hugged each other, and we applauded, relieved that Jim was alright, appreciative of his being a good sport about being pulled off his hay bale by God, thanking him for adding an even more dramatic touch to a Christmas Eve sermon whose main point we'll not forget—that God is with us in more ways than we can imagine, that you never know how he might show up.

And for the first time all night, the fighting cows remained silent.

After the service, Larry seemed a little embarrassed. He told me that those cows had never been together before, that if he'd known they were going to go after one another like that, he'd have chosen different animals.

But that would have been shame.

Not just for Joe and Ben Green and their newfound interest in the liturgy of livestock, but for all of us—and especially all those folks who had come for first time to a St. John's Christmas Eve.

It was a perfect introduction: There was a path through the darkness lit by luminarios. Larry and his family and place welcomed everyone in from the cold. Todd proved once again that he'd do practically anything to get through our heads and hearts how much God loves us, how that love can heal us, how we really can take that love into the world.

There was heartfelt singing, a little bit of slapstick.

And there was laughter—sweet laughter.

So often after we've done all we can in the liturgy to worship and reach for God, he comes in through the back door. Or in this case, the barn door.

I wonder how he'll show up on Larry's farm this Christmas.