

Christmas Eve of the Living Dead

by Keith West

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Father Barnes opened the doors to the cathedral. He had to remove the boards keeping them closed first. He hadn't performed a Christmas mass for several years, not since the pestilence swept through the countryside. He'd lit the candles, there being no electricity, and prepared the elements. He was as ready as he was going to be.

The sun was setting. It wouldn't be long now. That was if the open doors attracted any attention. Sooner or later they would. He decided he didn't want to wait, so he stood at the top of the steps and began to sing.

He started with "Silent Night." It was appropriate. The night was still, without even a breeze stirring. Father Barnes had a strong baritone voice. It carried across the plaza and echoed off the walls of the remaining buildings.

When he finished "Silent Night" he moved smoothly into "O Little Town of Bethlehem". Father Barnes had just sung "beneath thy deep and dreamless sleep" when he saw the first figures moving out of the darkness and into the light. Only one or two at first, but their numbers began to grow. They moved slowly, some with a shuffling gait, others with more normal movement.

For a moment he faltered, the song dying on his lips. Was this a mistake? He had felt led to proceed with this plan tonight, that it was God's will. Had he been wrong? No, I must have faith, Father Barnes said to himself.

He picked up the hymn where he had left off, singing more strongly than before. The first of them reached the top of the steps, a man of middle age. Father Barnes stepped aside to let him pass into the cathedral. He looked straight ahead as he mounted the steps, but as he passed Father Barnes, he said what sounded like “Thank you.”

Most of the rest didn't say anything as they entered. None made any movement that could be considered hostile. One or two tried to smile, with varying degrees of success.

Finally, the last of them entered the cathedral. There were fewer than Father Barnes had expected, but still, the cathedral was two-thirds full. These would be enough. He was called to minister to all.

He walked to the front and stood beside the altar. Father Barnes was reminded of a story he had read in a long ago history class, how one Christmas Eve the fighting had stopped and the soldiers on both sides had shared Christmas carols and cigarettes and enjoyed a game of soccer. He felt as though something similar was happening. Certainly, a Christmas miracle.

The zombies were all seated quietly, waiting for him to proceed. Father Barnes began the mass.