Singing in the dark: Reflections on John Updike

by John Buchanan in the December 13, 2003 issue

The reflections on John Updike's work in this issue sent me to my shelves in search of a particular Updike story that I read long ago and have never forgotten. I am an unabashed fan of Updike. He writes thoughtfully and provocatively about ordinary American lives. My fondness for Updike has gotten me in trouble on occasion. After hearing me quote Updike in a sermon, some people have taken up one of his novels and been shocked by his fascination with and detailed scrutiny of human sexuality.

I've read most of his novels, most of his short stories and some of his criticism. I've come to appreciate his poetry. The volume of poems titled *Facing Nature* is particularly good for men over 50. But the best of Updike is in the short stories. Because they are compact and dense, they are valuable models for sermons. There are no wasted words in a good short story, nor should there be in a 20-minute sermon.

I especially like "The Wallet," about a man who loses his—and in his frantic search for it reveals that his identity is in that wallet. That's the best illustration for a stewardship sermon I've ever discovered.

I have women friends who take me to task for what they regard as Updike's less-than-respectful portrayal of women. But I'm happy to report I also have feminist friends who share my appreciation.

The story I was remembering is "The Carol Sing," published in *Museums and Women* (1972). I thought about it, I suppose, because it's a seasonal piece, about an annual caroling event at the town hall in Updike's fictional Massachusetts village of Tarbox.

No one can describe an ordinary event quite as eloquently and lovingly as Updike. The wonder of the carol singing is Mr. Burley, who "jubilates" and "God-rests those merry gentlemen" and booms "Good King Wenceslas" with his "God-given bass." Updike's eyes take in the aging singers, the Vietnam vet's wife who smiles nervously

over her cup of punch, and the old upright Pickering piano standing beneath the town zoning map. Then, two-thirds of the way through, Updike tells us that Mr. Burley, of Exeter, Dartmouth and the Sorbonne, didn't do much of anything for 30 years after his family's mill closed, and died after a "long illness" which wasn't a long illness at all, but a suicide.

Why do we come for the caroling? Updike asks—"come every year sure as the solstice to carol these antiquities that if you listened to the words would break your heart. Silence, darkness, Jesus, angels. Better, I suppose, to sing than to listen."

Updike is a self-described Christian. He comes to carol the antiquities as we all do, aware of the many ways and places in which life is violated, oppressed and negated. The words not only break your heart, but remind you that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.