

# THE NEW CHURCH: A SHORT STORY

By Roy Claflin

Published by Roy Claflin at Smashwords

Copyright 2015 Roy Claflin

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to [Smashwords.com](http://Smashwords.com) and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

\*\*\*\*\*

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

\*\*\*\*\*

“It’s important to remember,” the man on the screen said, “that whatever the end result might have been, these people, these believers, they did what they did because they knew it to be the right thing to do.”

Jonathan listened to the sermon playing on the vid-screen while he looked over the ship’s status readouts, half-ignoring both, sitting in the cockpit of the *Elishama* with his feet up on the console.

He’d heard the sermon before many times, and had even seen this particular preacher speak as a guest at his church back in Iowa. Jonathan was a teenager at the time, and the sermon wasn’t the same, but the preacher, Father Eliot, was well-known among the followers of the New Church.

“They sent their missionaries into these hostile lands, bringing their truth and light to the natives,” Father Eliot continued. “They showed them that they, too, could be saved, in spite of their surroundings and their lineage. In doing this, their numbers grew, their reach expanded. It was a glorious time indeed.”

“Indeed,” agreed Jonathan, and smiled. He turned away from the readouts to watch Father Eliot. He was an old man when the recording was made, with thinning white hair and a slow, grandfatherly way of speaking. He wore the standard white robes of the preachers and stood at a plain altar under the pristine white sphere that was the symbol for the New Church. The sphere floated motionlessly in the air, held suspended by magnets, and symbolized the whole of the Universe.

“But when sickness came, it hit these backwater places the hardest. Man’s medicine was all but non-existent, and survival was low. In some places, entire populations fell, leaving nothing behind.”

Father Eliot paused here, and Jonathan knew exactly when he would start speaking, the interval ingrained in his memory. “We know, of course, that the more civilized parts of the world fared almost as badly. Certainly the old religions were of little help against the sickness. Millions fell, crippling nations, destroying economies, leaving behind a horrendous aftermath, a sea of lifeless bodies to be sifted through by the horrified survivors.”

Jonathan stood and walked to the windows. The stars stretched out in all directions. The view never changed. He rested his forehead against the glass that wasn’t glass at all. Some kind of plastic, they’d told him.

“People had no time for religion,” Father Eliot said. “Or rather, they had no use for a religion that could not sufficiently explain the level of death and destruction they were seeing. The old religions were all but abandoned.”

“And thus,” Jonathan said in unison with Father Eliot, “the New Church was born.”

Jonathan had been a deacon at his church in Iowa. Like the deacons of the old religions, Jonathan assisted the preachers of the church, of which they had three. He worked as a pilot when he wasn’t at the church, operating a shuttle between Des Moines and Chicago. He’d never married, and led a simple, quiet life. These things had made him a candidate for the *Elishama* mission.

One of the preachers had called him into his office one day. Mother Gail was the highest-ranking preacher in their area of Iowa, and Jonathan considered it an honor to serve her while she herself served their modest church. To be called upon for anything personally by her was overwhelming.

“Son,” she began, “we have watched you. Your faith is simple, but strong.”

Jonathan could only nod.

“There’s been a call from the High Church for special followers. Their criteria were specific and their standards high, but we have chosen you as a potential candidate.”

Jonathan nodded again, wondered if he might be dreaming.

“It won’t be easy,” Mother Gail said. “God’s work rarely is.”

“What will I be doing?” Jonathan asked.

Mother Gail smiled. “You will be saving us all,” she said.

The *Elishama* was a big ship, but Jonathan spent almost all of his time in the cockpit and living quarters, two circular rooms roughly three meters across each. The rest of the half-kilometer long, cylindrical ship was composed of the massive engines, the fuel cells, and the payload. Everything about the ship was automated, and Jonathan only needed to be there to make sure it all worked as expected.

The ship had a library’s worth of video and audio recordings, as well as thousands of digital books. His days were filled with reading, listening to music, and watching old movies. And, of course, the sermons.

Sometimes he stared out the windows, watching the unchanging starfield. He knew he was, in fact, moving quite rapidly through space, though it was impossible to tell. There were windows all around the cockpit, along with a glass dome above. In the living quarters, directly

below the cockpit, there were no windows at all. Below the living quarters, in tiny crawlspaces, was the food storage and life-support systems.

Jonathan stood at the windows, listening to Father Eliot finish his sermon. The New Church had been founded on the idea that it was possible to reconcile what man already believed about God and spirituality with what man had learned about the Universe and science. Followers of the New Church believed that God was among them all the time, in the form of the very matter that made up everything. The parts of God that made Him omniscient and sentient were not visible, were not measurable. The scientists of the early twenty-first century could clearly see the effect that these parts of God were having on the Universe, and called this invisible, immeasurable substance ‘dark matter.’

“We know God favors us,” Father Eliot was saying. “He sent pieces of His essence, the first two souls, to live here on Earth in the bodies of two of nature’s recently evolved intelligent primates. We know these creatures as Adam and Eve, and they were one of many of God’s experiments here on Earth. Could a creature defy God’s will? Certainly the beasts of the world could not. They lived as He expected, they died as He expected. Only with a piece of Himself would these creatures have enough free will to defy His expectations.

“And we did not disappoint,” Father Eliot said. “We did not.”

Jonathan switched off the sermon. He checked the ship’s clock. Time for sleep. The following day would be a big one.

After he’d been chosen, they sent Jonathan to Florida for tests and training. The Church’s own scientists oversaw the entire process, encouraging Jonathan and pushing him to keep going. The tests were hard, the training harder, but the support of the Church gave him strength.

Eventually they flew him up to Sydney Station, a space station in high-orbit around Earth owned by the Church. Jonathan had never left Earth before. They were being very secretive, in their evocative way, but he’d figured his ultimate mission would have something to do with space. But Jonathan wasn’t scared. It only made him more excited, more thrilled to be part of such a huge Church venture.

As they approached the giant, spinning, double-ring structure of Sydney Station, the scientists pointed out to Jonathan the massive ship docked there, and they called it the *Elishama*.

“That’s your ship,” they said with a smile.

Jonathan woke up and ate breakfast, then checked the ship’s readouts. The countdown timers were approaching zero, just another few hours to go. The *Elishama* had been accelerating ever since leaving Earth’s orbit, just slightly over three years earlier, by the ship’s clock. To an observer on Earth, according to the scientists, Jonathan had been gone several times that amount. They called it ‘time dilation.’ This method of travel, they said, is heavy on math and hard for someone like Jonathan to understand, but it meant that a traveler could reach a planet that was thirty-five light-years away in just over six years.

Jonathan, upon hearing that, considered it one of God’s miracles.

Jonathan waited patiently for the countdown timer to reach zero. At the ten minute mark, an alarm sounded, and in a polite, calming voice, the computer warned Jonathan to strap into his chair.

Jonathan did as instructed, and looked up through the dome. That was the actual direction of the travel. The constant acceleration provided Jonathan with gravity, a fraction above the gravity on Earth. He waited, keeping an eye on the timer.

At zero, the alarm sounded again, and the engines stopped. The dull vibration that Jonathan had long been ignoring suddenly stopped, and Jonathan's stomach heaved as his artificially-created gravity was taken away. He heard the ship creak and shudder, then all was perfectly silent. He checked the readouts, then looked back up through the dome.

The ship was turning. The stars through the dome were slowly moving to the side. He watched them, elated, looking from the dome to the cockpit windows all around him. The stars were all moving.

And then, after a half-hour of slow turning, the ship shook again, and the stars were still. Looking up through the dome, he knew that he was looking back towards Earth, or at least in that general direction. He had no idea which of those stars was his Sun. There were star charts in the ship's library, but he didn't really know how to read them, and he was fairly certain they'd do him no good way out here anyway. These were different stars.

Jonathan checked the readouts again. The engines hadn't yet started back up, and this was the part of the journey that was most troubling for the scientists. While the engines were designed for this, they knew that there was a remote possibility that they wouldn't start again. If that happened, the ship would eventually lose power, and the air would eventually become toxic without the scrubbers. The ship would drift at its current breakneck speed, possibly smashing into the distant planet Jonathan was supposed to be going to, though it was more likely the ship would drift forever.

Jonathan waited, and finally the engines started, first with jarring, hesitant pulses, then the full-on burn they were designed for. The engines were now facing the direction of travel, and were working to slow the ship down. For the rest of the journey, the *Elishama* would be decelerating at the same rate it had been accelerating. This meant that Jonathan had his gravity back, along with the unchanging stars through the windows.

After checking his readouts, he was satisfied that the ship was operating normally, so he unstrapped himself and went back to the living quarters to eat lunch.

On Sydney Station, Jonathan met with some of the highest-ranking Church officials he'd even heard of. They explained his mission, which involved travelling to one of the solar systems nearest neighboring stars, to a planet that had been confirmed to contain life, possibly intelligent life. It was made clear to Jonathan that he would be venturing out farther than any human before him, and that his mission was of the utmost importance to the future of human society. They were sending him alone, because the Church trusted him, and him alone, to carry out the mission.

Jonathan felt nothing but honored.

The ship's library had many books, but most were not very interesting. He'd watched all the old movies, and listened to all the music. He'd heard every sermon dozens of times. The days seemed harder and harder to get through. After five years, he was beginning to lose faith in the mission.

He'd ignored his exercise routine. He didn't bathe. He didn't groom. His face in the mirror was haggard and unkempt. He took the mirror down and stowed it. He didn't sleep when he was supposed to, and ate very little.

The stars never changed. There were no asteroids, no comets, although the scientists had told him to expect them. He would occasionally switch on the radio and get nothing but popping static. He looked through space in every direction for proof of life, of something living. There was nothing.

He talked to God, through the radio and toward the bulkhead, but He never answered.

Several times Jonathan crawled through the access tunnels back to the engine and payload compartments. There was no room to explore back there, but it was a welcomed change of scenery. He studied the payload as best he could, all the while thinking about what the scientists said these things would do to that planet he was going to.

“We fear man has lost his way.” Father Lowell wore a suit instead of the robes. By trade he was a professor, and held a prestigious post in the hierarchy of the New Church. “You must understand that it is only by God’s own influence that we have survived this long. Followers of pure science would attribute our survival to the marvels of nature and biology, and nothing more. The old religions would tell us that God is merely testing us.”

“Is God testing us?” Jonathan asked, though he felt like he knew the answer.

“No, my son.” Father Lowell put his hand on Jonathan’s shoulder. “He protects us, because we are all He has. We are not only His children. We are His legacy. We are His works of art, if you like.”

Jonathan nodded. There were no windows on Sydney Station, for fear that the constant spinning would disorient its inhabitants. Instead, there were high-resolution vid-screens mounted on the walls, displaying a static but pleasing view of the Earth.

“This new planet contains the seeds of a new civilization,” Father Lowell said. “Given time, there may well be creatures on that planet worthy of God’s attention.”

“And He would abandon us.”

“He would,” Father Lowell said. “Why wouldn’t He? We’ve been on the brink of extinction for centuries. That’s not much of a legacy, I think you’d agree. We were given pieces of Him once we attained the proper amount of intelligence. There is no reason to think He would not start again somewhere else, with another species.” Father Lowell stared at the vid-screen. “He would indeed abandon us.”

Jonathan waited a moment, then broke the silence. “This planet, it has life on it. Wouldn’t God be angry at us for destroying it?”

“Life ends. It’s what He expects. Think of His pride at our accomplishment. At *your* accomplishment. Your victory.”

Jonathan nodded, and smiled.

The ship’s countdown timers were approaching zero again.

Jonathan was nearing the end of his journey. With the ship facing backwards, he had no idea how close he was. His anxiety grew by the minute. He’d had the radio on for several days, sweeping the frequencies, even transmitting occasional greetings, but he received no reply, and heard no sounds except for the popping static.

He wanted there to be life on that planet. He wanted them to be intelligent, to have radios and space travel and language and art and music. He wanted desperately to hear another voice, no matter how alien. He’d even shaved and cleaned up, in anticipation of a meeting. God would be pleased with whoever was down there, he was sure, and maybe He would abandon the human race. Jonathan was not among the human race anymore. He’d never again be among the human race.

The alarm sounded. The computer’s polite voice asked him to strap himself in. Jonathan ignored the voice, and instead stood at the windows. He could still see nothing.

Eventually he made his way to his chair, and had just enough time to fasten his restraints before the ship's engines stopped. He was again plunged into weightlessness, and the ship was silent, except for the static on the radio. He felt movement as the ship made small course adjustments. The stars were moving again.

And soon light flooded the cockpit as one incredibly bright star came into view. Jonathan looked away, noticed that strange green tint to the light as it fell on the floor and the consoles. The ship continued to turn, and soon the star was out of view.

There it was. A planet, a brown rock below him. The ship steadied, and Jonathan felt safe to remove his restraints. He floated away from his chair and towards the windows. The ship had started to roll, very slowly, so the planet seemed to move across the windows of the cockpit. He studied the planet's surface, but saw nothing that looked like civilization. There was no green, nothing that looked like water or ice. It did not even appear to have an atmosphere, though Jonathan wasn't sure what that would look like anyway.

It looked like a massive, dead rock.

When Jonathan left Sydney Station on board the *Elishama*, he was sent off with great fanfare, and much secrecy. There was no media coverage, and Jonathan was forbidden to talk about any of it. The New Church had control of most of the world's media outlets anyway, and all of the world's telescopes. No one on Earth knew about Jonathan's mission.

The *Elishama* undocked from Sydney Station and drifted out to a safe distance. In the minutes between leaving Sydney and the first pulsing bursts from the engines that would shoot him out of the Solar System, Jonathan got a good view of the whole station. On the other side, he spotted the steel skeleton of another ship, the same size and shape of the *Elishama*. Next to it was a second steel skeleton, thought this one was not nearly as completed, but it was clearly beginning to take the same shape as the first.

Work appeared to be starting on a third as well.

Jonathan was sure this was the wrong planet. This dead-looking rock may have been orbiting the same star as the planet he was supposed to go to, but this wasn't it. There was no life here. The Church would never send him to a rock with no life. Still, he had no way of knowing for sure. But there wasn't enough fuel to reach another planet anyway.

He checked the readouts. The ship was supposed to insert itself into orbit around the planet and make three complete revolutions, which it was in the process of doing. On the fourth orbit, the ship would begin sending its payload down to the surface in a carefully calculated pattern, ensuring widespread coverage and maximizing the destruction.

Jonathan didn't want that to happen. This planet wasn't worth it. He felt sick with disappointment.

He drifted through the cockpit and down into the living quarters, then opened the hatch into the access tunnels. He knew, just inside the tunnels, there was an panel with a manual payload release, just in case the computer failed. He also knew that beyond that were the maintenance panels for the ship's electrical systems.

He pried open the maintenance panels one by one and began pulling cables and anything else that would come loose. Alarms began to sound, and were almost immediately silenced. Lights went out and emergency lights came on. All around him the ship became more silent, and sounds he didn't realize he'd been ignoring were suddenly gone.

It took several minutes, but he'd pulled absolutely everything he could from the maintenance panels. Bits of wire floated around him in the small space. Jonathan caught his breath, floating in the silence, then pulled himself back along the access tunnel and out into the cockpit.

Nothing in the cockpit was working. Jonathan smiled. He was sure he'd prevented the payload from dropping. He knew he didn't have long before the air would be toxic with carbon dioxide. He floated into the living quarters and dug out the art supplies they'd sent with him. He wasn't much of an artist, and everything was still packaged, untouched. If anyone ever found the ship, Jonathan wanted them to know that he tried.

He found a pencil and a large piece of vellum and began writing.

###

Connect with the author:

Twitter: [@RoyClaflin](https://twitter.com/RoyClaflin)

Website: [www.RoyClaflin.com](http://www.RoyClaflin.com)