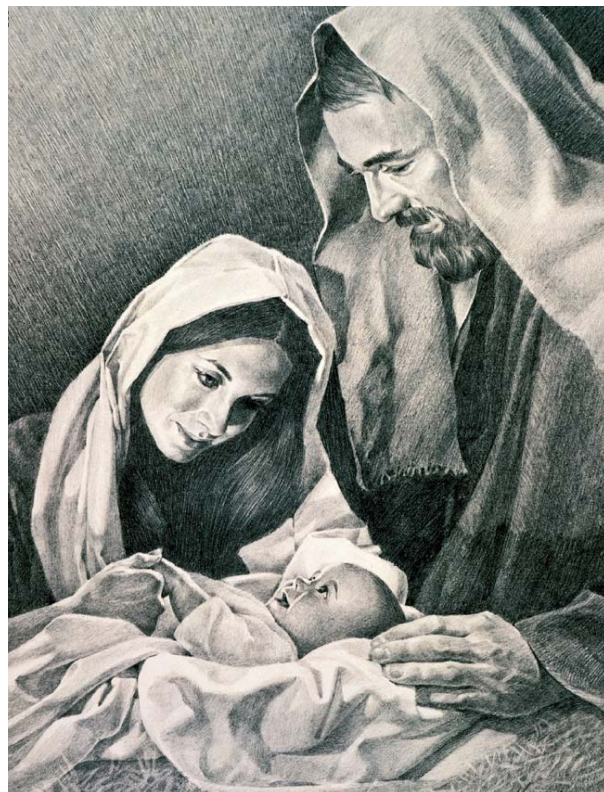


Advent Storybook



If you read one story each night, beginning the evening after Thanksgiving, you will read the last story on Christmas.

May these stories help you and your family keep Christ in Christmas this year and in the years to come.



My Thoughts Turn to Bethlehem

President Spencer W. Kimball

It is Christmastime and again my thoughts turn to Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, and to the first Christmas.

It was a dream come true for Sister Kimball and me to be in Bethlehem one Christmas Eve some years ago. December 24th was a beautiful Sunday there and early that morning we held a sacrament meeting in Baghdad, Iraq, with a family in whose home we were guests. Afterward we flew to Damascus in Syria and then went on to Jerusalem. People from many lands were gathered there on that sacred night, waiting to be taken over the 18-kilometer winding hill road to Bethlehem.

Arriving in Jerusalem, we found the square so crowded with people that it was easy for our thoughts to go back to that first Christmas when Joseph and Mary were told "There was no room for them in the inn."

To add to the confusion of the milling throng, Christmas carols blared out from a sound truck, and bells rang from the cupolas of the Church of the Nativity that had been built back in the fourth century. The church is built on the square over a grotto that many believe to be the true site of the manger where the Christ Child was born.

A low door and narrow steps lead into the grotto. With difficulty we made our way there. It was lighted by many candles and hung with rich drapes. With the eager crowd, we tried to meditate and relive, in contemplation, the story of that most important of all births.

Afterwards we were fortunate to find a taxi to take us about 3 km down the hillside to the Shepherd Fields where at last we found a quiet peace on that crisp, clear night. There were only four of us there on the hillside where the shepherds had been watching their flocks on that first Christmas Eve.

The moon shone with unusual brilliance, and the sky was studded with stars. In imagination, we could almost hear the "multitude of heavenly hosts praising God, and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.' "

We looked up the hill to the twinkling lights of Bethlehem and felt impressed to softly sing,

*O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie . . .
How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.*

Afterwards I offered a prayer of thanksgiving for the privilege of that Bethlehem Christmas and for my knowledge of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. My heart was filled with joy to know that He marked for us the plan, the way of life, whereby if we are faithful we may someday see Him and express our gratitude personally for His perfect life and His sacrifice for us.





Trouble at the Inn

Dina Donahue

For many years now, whenever Christmas pageants are talked about in a certain little town in the Midwest, someone is sure to mention the name of Wallace Purling. Wally's performance in one annual production of the nativity play has slipped onto the realm of legend. But the old-timers who were in the audience that night never tire of recalling exactly what happened.

Wally was nine that year and in the second grade, though he should have been in the fourth. Most people in town knew that he had difficulty in keeping up. He was big and clumsy, slow in movement and mind. Still, his class, all of whom were smaller than he, had trouble hiding their irritation when Wally would ask to play ball with them or any game, for that matter, in which winning was important.

Most often they'd find a way to keep him out but Wally would hang around anyway not sulking, just hoping. He was always a helpful boy, a willing and smiling one, and the natural protector of the underdog. Sometimes if the older boys chased the younger ones away, it would always be Wally who'd say, "can' they stay? They're no bother"

Wally fancied the ideal of being a shepherd with a flute in the Christmas pageant that year, but the play's director, Miss Lumbar, assigned him to a more important role. After all, she reasoned, the Innkeeper did not have too many lines and Wally's size would make his refusal of lodging to Joseph more forceful.

And so it happened that the usual large, partisan audience gathered for the town's yearly extravaganza of beard, crown, halos and a whole stage full of squeaky voices. No one on stage or off was more caught up on the magic of the night than Wallace Purling. They said later that he stood in the wings and watched the performance with such fascination that from time to time Miss Lumbar had to make sure he didn't wander on stage before his cue.

Then the time came when Joseph appeared, slowly, tenderly guiding Mary to the door of the Inn. Joseph knocked hard on the wooden door sat into the painted backdrop. Wally the innkeeper was there, waiting.

"What do you want?" Wally said, swinging the door open with a brusque gesture.

"We seek lodging."

"Seek it elsewhere," Wally looked straight ahead but spoke vigorously. "The Inn is filled."

"Sir, we have asked everywhere in vain. We have traveled far and are very weary."

"There is no room in this Inn for you." Wally looked properly stern.

"Please, good Innkeeper, this is my wife, Mary. She is heavy with child hand needs a place to rest. Surely you must have some small corner for her. She is so tired."

Now, for the first time, the Innkeeper relaxed his still stance and looked down at Mary. With that, there was a long pause, long enough to make the audience a bit tense with embarrassment.

"No! Be gone!" the prompter whispered from the wings.



"No!" Wally repeated automatically, "Be gone!"

Joseph sadly placed his arm around Mary and Mary laid her head upon her husband's shoulder and the two of them started to move away. The Innkeeper did not return inside his Inn, however.

Wally stood there in the doorway, watching the forlorn couple. His mouth was open, his brow creased with concern, his eyes filling unmistakable with tears.

And suddenly the Christmas pageant became different from all the others.

"Don't go, Joseph," Wally called out. "Bring Mary back." And Wallace Purling's face grew into a bright smile. "You can have my room!"

Some people in town thought that the pageant had been ruined. Yet there were others.... many, many others...who considered it the most "Christmasy" of all Christmas pageants they had ever seen.





The Gifts of Christmas

Elder John A. Widtsoe

Christmas gifts should be in memory of the divine gift, the life of Jesus Christ. His gift gave us eternal life; our gifts should enliven with joy those who receive. His gift was the sacrifice of his earthly life; our gifts should represent personal sacrifices on our part.

It is easy to give to our own, those whom we love. Their gladness becomes our joy. We are not quite so ready to give to others, even if they are in need, for their happiness does not seem so necessary to our happiness. It appears yet more difficult to give to the Lord, for we are prone to believe that he must give and ask nothing in return.

We have foolishly reversed the proper order. Our first gift at Christmas should be to the Lord; next to the friend or stranger by our gate; then, surcharged with the effulgence from such giving, we would enhance the value of our gifts to our very own. A selfish gift leaves a scar upon the soul, and it is but half a gift.

How can we give to the Lord? What shall we give to him? Every kind word to our own, every help given them, is as a gift to God, whose chief concern is the welfare of his children. Every gentle deed to our neighbor, every kindness to the poor and suffering, is a gift to the Lord, before whom all mankind are equal. Every conformity to the Lord's plan of salvation—and this is of first importance—is a direct gift to God, for thereby we fit ourselves more nearly for our divinely planned destiny.

The desire and the effort to give to the Lord, born of the surrender of man to the plan of salvation, stamp every Christmas gift with genuine value. They who identify themselves with the plan, who do not resist it, who earnestly seek to tread the path of the plan, are true givers to the Lord, and their gifts to men come with the flavor of heaven. The Lord and his plan must have place in our Christmas celebration.

Do we give intelligent obedience to the laws of the gospel obedience based upon sober study and trial of the practices of the Church? If our giving is without such obedience, it is away from the Lord, not toward him. Do we stand ready to sacrifice for the cause of the Lord in the unpaid services of the Church? That is, are our time, talents, and means at the disposal of those who administer the Lord's work? Great is the gift from such a hand.

Do we look upon the progress of the purposes of the Lord, by feeble human instruments, through eyes of love? Love looks deep into the soul, beyond superficialities; the loving husband does not sense that age is stealing upon the sweetheart of his youth; the member who loves the Church dwells upon the likeness of man to God, forgets human imperfections, and does not find fault. These are tests of the higher, richer giving at Christmas. Obedience, sacrifice, love—once these tests have been met, the gifts of Christmas, small or great, become more pleasing to the Lord, by a subtle, spiritual sense, more acceptable to the recipient, and leave permanent joy with the giver.

Would it not be well this Christmas to give first to the Lord, directly through obedience, sacrifice, and love, and then to give to him indirectly through gifts to friends and those in need as well as to our own? Should we do this, perhaps many of us would discover a new Christmas joy.





We Didn't Have a Tree, Until...

Janet W. Sorensen

The Christmas Eve I remember best began with a glorious snowstorm that filled the streets so that even the streetcars had a hard time making it over the icy rails. It was great sledding weather, and when Mother asked my teenage brother to run an errand for her, I gladly accompanied him. I was nine, and sledding at that time was a life of ease for me, for Grant either had to pull me on the sled or run along behind while pushing me, hoping to jump on for a ride while we coasted.

The happy years of my childhood came during the great Depression. For me, it was a time of learning and sharing. I was even encouraged to accompany Grant on his daily rounds after school while he sold cottage cheese from door to door to supplement the family income. You see, Dad was having a rough time of it. Our new store, which had been doing well right up to 1929, was closed now, and Dad found it difficult to keep a job as store after store, and factories, too, closed their doors.

We were gliding now, laughing as we went, to deliver some reports to the Relief Society president from our mother, who was her secretary. We were welcomed into a gaily decorated, warm house, and before we left we were each rewarded with a lovely big orange. What a treat! Before the age of transportation as we know it today, oranges were scarce where we lived, and to receive one in your Christmas stocking was something special. But to get one for doing practically nothing was an unexpected joy, and we traveled home with light hearts. Christmas was already a success!

Yet, at home, it was a bit hard to tell it was Christmas. For the first time in our lives no brightly lighted Christmas tree stood in the corner between the piano and the colonnades. Our family had talked it over and decided we could dispense with a tree this year. The tiny gifts I had made for Mom and Dad in school, wrapped in white tissue paper, rested uncomfortably on the sewing machine, alongside the small packages my brothers had managed to acquire with carefully hoarded pennies.

After a supper of hot soup and crusty bread, we lingered at the table awhile, then washed up the supper dishes. And then we sat. What do you do on Christmas Eve when there are no presents to be wrapped, no pies to be made, no tree in the front room? We played a game. And then we sat some more. Finally Dad could stand it no longer. Jumping to his feet, he almost shouted, "I've got 50 cents in my pocket. Let's go see if we can get a tree!" Fifty cents! And no payday in sight. What love and devotion must have determined that sudden decision!

Yet, at the very moment, before we could say anything, the doorbell rang. My brother and I ran to the door, and to our surprise no one was there. We looked around in disappointment, and then we saw it—a glorious tree! We looked in every direction but could find no one to claim the tree. It had to be ours!

I can still feel the thrill, the excitement. I can still see the tears on my dad's cheeks as he helped us decorate it. We hadn't told anyone that we didn't have a tree, and we had been very careful not to invite friends to our home for them to discover it. Later the bishop of our ward disclaimed any knowledge of it; the Relief Society thought it was a wonderful gesture but refused any credit for it; the neighbors were no more friendly than usual—so, we never knew where the tree came from. But the road seemed brighter for us as a family because some good soul had brought us a Christmas tree—and love—on our darkest Christmas Eve.





Keeping Baby Warm

Lynda H. Laughlin

It was an inexpensive dime store Nativity set, and he was only three years old. His back was toward me, but I could see that his chubby little hands were busily working on something at the old table.

"What are you doing?" I asked him impatiently, annoyed at him for touching the decorations after he had been told not to.

As I started toward the scene of this latest mischief, he turned toward me with wide blue eyes filling and a single tear starting down his cherubic cheek. Then I saw it. A carefully folded tissue had been tenderly placed over the small ceramic infant.

"Baby Jesus was cold, Mommy," he whispered.

Ten years have passed, and the tiny Nativity has been replaced by a much larger one. But this year, as every year, I found a carefully folded tissue covering the baby Jesus. I think I know who did it, and I hope he never stops.





Christmas with a Minister

Blaine K. Gehring

It was 1967, and I was serving as a missionary in Hildesheim, Germany. Christmas was fast approaching, and I was excited because Christmas Eve was a Sunday, and a wonderful meeting and other appropriate and special celebrations were planned.

Two weeks before Christmas, however, I received a transfer to Rendsburg. My companion, Elder Fadel, and I would be new there, and I wondered what the members would be like and how we would celebrate Christmas.

We soon came to know that the Rendsburg Branch had few members and little was being planned for Christmas Eve other than a special sacrament meeting. Our landlady, a Church member, invited us to join her for dinner on Christmas Day. I thought that would be the extent of my Christmas. But things soon changed.

The preceding missionaries had left us a tracting book including the names of several people who said they would like the missionaries to call back. Because people were so busy, finding new contacts at Christmastime was not very successful, so we thought these names might be a good place to start. We began visiting people on the list. When we visited the home of Frau Lübbert, we were greeted by a wonderful, cheery lady. She invited us in, and we learned that she was the widow of a Lutheran minister, who had passed away earlier that year. Her son was also a minister. He would be home for Christmas, and it would be just the two of them sharing their first Christmas without their husband and father. Then, with a sparkle in her eyes, she asked if we would join them for Christmas Eve. Having no other plans, we consented.

Christmas Eve arrived, and we had a lovely sacrament meeting in which we talked about the Savior and listened to the Christmas story. As my companion and I helped administer the sacrament, we pondered on the life the Savior had given for us.

After the meeting we were to meet the Lübberts at the Lutheran church. As we walked through the park, the snow was just beginning to fall, and we stopped to watch children and parents skating on a frozen pond. We saw Christmas lights here and there and heard church bells announcing the Christmas Eve service.

The Lübberts were waiting for us at their church. We enjoyed a wonderful spirit as we listened to the minister and as we sang Christmas carols in a church older than some of the carols. Singing "Silent Night" in its original language made the occasion even more special.

After the service, we got into Reverend Lübbert's car and drove to their home. Frau Lübbert had prepared a goose for dinner, and as she put the finishing touches on the meal, my companion and I sat with Reverend Lübbert and asked him about his ministry. He talked of how he was active in a movement trying to bring Christian churches together. Many shared that dream, but others were antagonistic and fought the movement.

We then talked about our ministry. We told him of the Book of Mormon and how the Church had been restored. We told him of living prophets, and we talked about Jesus Christ and bore witness of Him as our Savior. No animosity existed among us. There was no belittling of one another's beliefs. As I think upon it now, the words of 2 Nephi 25:26 come to mind. We literally "talk[ed] of Christ,



we rejoice[d] in Christ” on that Christmas Eve. He was the center of our attention. He was the purpose of our being together.

As we bowed our heads for a prayer on the food, Reverend Lübbert asked a blessing on his fellow servants in Christ, that we would be led to those who sought Jesus. The meal was wonderful—roasted goose with all the trimmings and special German desserts.

German tradition is for parents to retire to a separate room where the tree has been newly decorated and to light the candles on the tree. The children are then allowed to enter and see the tree and their presents. So Frau Lübbert retired to the living room and closed the large sliding doors. In a moment she opened the doors and invited her “sons” to come in.

As we entered the room, where the only light was the soft light coming from the candles on the Christmas tree, Frau Lübbert handed my companion and me our gifts: some candies and a souvenir book about Rendsburg. She then gave her son his presents, and they paused a moment to remember their husband and father. We then opened the Bible to Luke and read the Christmas story. The Spirit touched each of us and witnessed again of the divine message in those verses. As we sang Christmas carols, the words bore testimony to each of us of the love we shared for Jesus Christ, His life, His teachings, and the most precious of gifts—His atoning sacrifice.

I don't believe my feet touched the ground that night as we made our way to the bus stop. Santa Claus hadn't come. I hadn't been rushing around buying presents. I hadn't attended any concerts or seen the traditional Christmas movies. My family was far away, and my packages from home were delayed because of the transfer. But I was the happiest I had ever been on Christmas Eve. For the first time in my life, Christmas had been totally focused on Christ. And the only gift I had given was my witness of Him.





Christmas Is Christmas

Sherrie Johnson

Francoise watched quietly as her friend Hilda marched in the St. Nicholas parade. Hilda wore a large miter-shaped hat with a design of stars and snowflakes cut out in it. She carried a big horn that she blew often and loud.

Hilda waved as she passed Francoise, but Francoise did not wave back. Instead she frowned at Hilda and the other children in the parade.

Unhappy thoughts tumbled through Francoise's mind as the St. Nicholas parade came to an end. Why did my father have to come here to Switzerland? Why didn't he stay in France? They don't celebrate Christmas here in this country the way they should!

Hilda ran to meet Francoise. "Didn't I tell you it would be fun?" she exclaimed, speaking very fast in German. "You should have worn the hat I made for you and marched in the parade with us." Francoise didn't say anything.

"Well," Hilda asked after a few silent moments had passed, "didn't you like the parade?"

"It is not how we celebrate Christmas in France," Francoise mumbled.

"I know. But I wanted you to see how we celebrate here in Switzerland." Silently the two girls walked to the bus stop. Hilda put her big hat and her horn on the bench and sat down.

"You know," Hilda said at last in French, trying to make Francoise feel better, "I'm glad there are so many ways to celebrate Christmas. In our country we have many customs from Germany, Italy, and France."

Francoise sat down beside Hilda. "I think there should be only one way to celebrate Christmas, and I like our way best," she insisted. "All of this about St. Nicholas is wrong. It is Christkindli who brings gifts."

"He may bring gifts to your house, but it is St. Nicholas who comes to my house," Hilda replied. "Anyway it doesn't really matter. Christmas is Christmas!"

A big gray bus soon sputtered to a stop and the girls climbed into it. Neither of them spoke during the ride home, but mixed-up thoughts kept turning around in Francoise's mind. What did Hilda mean by "Christmas is Christmas"? Of course Christmas is Christmas, and that is exactly why it should be celebrated in the right way as we've always done.

When Francoise arrived home, she sat in front of the Christmas tree and stared at Christkindli on top. "Now this is how Christmas should be," she said out loud.

"What do you mean?" a voice asked.

"Oh, Mama," Francoise gasped as she turned and saw her mother in the doorway. "You frightened me. I thought I was alone."

"What were you talking about when you said, 'This is how Christmas should be?'"



"I was talking to myself about Christmas. Hilda has a star on top of her tree, and St. Nicholas comes to her house instead of Christkindli. They don't recite Christmas poems when they open their presents. And—well, they just do everything wrong."

"Wrong?" Mother questioned.

"Yes. Everyone should celebrate Christmas the way we did when we were home in France," Francoise insisted.

"But Francoise," her mother explained, "although we still speak French, our home is here now. We are Swiss people. And besides from the stories my father used to tell me, we do not celebrate Christmas at all as they used to do in France. Christkindli isn't even a French word, you know. Many Swiss people have Christkindli in their homes at Christmas."

Francoise felt bewildered. She stared at the tree for a moment and then spoke, "Well, maybe our way of celebrating is different from the old French way, but still I think it's the right way."

"Why should our way be right and Hilda's way be wrong?"

Francoise started to answer, but she couldn't think of anything to say. A big lump formed in her throat. She felt there must be some reason for her beliefs, but she couldn't think of a single one..

"Well, we all celebrate the birth of Jesus; so shouldn't we celebrate it in the same way?" Francoise asked.

"Why?"

Again Francoise couldn't answer. She only shook her head and shrugged her shoulders.

"Christmas should be a time of love, and love can be shown in many different ways," Mother said gently as she patted Francoise and left her alone to think about the events of the day.

Maybe it is I who have been wrong and not Hilda, Francoise decided.

Just then the doorbell rang, and Francoise went to answer it. But when Francoise opened the door, no one was there. Instead, on the step was a colorful box filled with tirggel, a delicious Christmas cookie. A tiny blue card tucked between the tirggel said, "Froehliche Weihnachten! (Merry Christmas!) From whoever brings presents!"

Francoise looked all around, but she could not see who had left the cookies.

"Who is it?" Mother called.

"Only a box of tirggel," Francoise answered.

"That is my favorite Christmas treat," Mother said as she entered the room. "Do you know who left it?"

"It must have been Hilda."

"How nice," Mother smiled as she tasted the cookie.



Francoise wanted to smile, but she couldn't. She thought about the way she had acted at the parade and on the way home. She must have made her friend sad by not marching in the parade with the hat Hilda had made for her.

Then Francoise remembered what her mother had said about Christmas being a time to show love. And that was just what Hilda had been trying to do.

Slowly Francoise tasted a cookie. It was delicious.

"These are good," she said.

"If we were still in France, we might never have tasted tירggel. And you'd never have had a friend like Hilda either," Mother replied.

Francoise thought very hard. She had been selfish and she felt awful. "Christmas is Christmas," Hilda had said, and looking at the cookies, Francoise knew exactly what she could do.

"I'm going to celebrate Christmas the right way," Francoise decided, and she hurried to her room. She took colored pencils and paper and wrote out her favorite Christmas poem. Then she drew pictures around the edges of the poem and framed it neatly in heavy colored paper.

Her legs couldn't carry her fast enough to Hilda's house, but soon she found herself knocking at the front door. When Hilda answered the door, Francoise handed her the poem.

"Thank you for the tירggel," Francoise said. "And now here is something from our Christmas tradition. We always read our favorite Christmas poems when we exchange gifts. I guess if we put the tירggel, Christkindli, St. Nicholas, poems, and parades all together, we'd have a lot of Swiss Christmas traditions."

Hilda laughed. "Yes, after all, Christmas is Christmas!"

"I know what that means now," Francoise said softly. "Christmas isn't German or French or Italian or English or even Swiss. Christmas is Christmas, and Christmas is love no matter where you are."





Christmas in St. Petersburg

Greg Nelson

It was Christmas Eve around the world, but just another frosty December night in St. Petersburg, Russia. This country celebrated no such holiday.

Our zone had just presented a Christmas program in the huge Kazanski Cathedral, where we sang Christmas songs and read from the book of Luke. It seemed as if our words and notes drifted up to the lofty ceiling and were swallowed by the darkness. But the sparse audience, mostly members and investigators, had partaken of the Spirit.

Our missionary work hadn't been going well. People didn't want to listen to two humble young men give them a message of redeeming love. Perhaps because of my discouragement, the Christmas celebration planned for later that evening didn't hold much appeal for me.

My boots kicked up some new fallen snow and I shoved my bare hands deeper into my pockets. My gloves had been misplaced at a hotel a few days earlier. In this country, you don't just walk into a store and buy gloves. You need to search.

Suddenly, Elder Redd sat down on a bench in the small park in front of the cathedral. I thought, Oh, now what? I just want to go home where it's warmer.

Home was not the right thing to think about. It brought a flood of memories I really didn't want to ponder right then. This was my first Christmas away, and I was feeling down. Where were all the decorations and the hustle and bustle of the holiday season? What about stockings, Christmas trees, and nativity scenes?

We hadn't been able to get through to the international operator, so it looked as if I couldn't make my phone call home either.

Tears welled in my eyes. I turned around so my back was to the wind. As I faced the cathedral, everything began to grow quiet. I looked at the majestic structure in front of me, bathed in pale, green light. The stars above were pin dots on a black shade, radiating calmness and peace. "Silent night, holy night; all is calm, all is bright . . ." The phrases softly entered my mind and drifted in whispers from my lips. "Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace." Elder Redd heard me and joined in a little bit louder. There was a feeling of reverence.

As we sang the second and third verses, a warm realization came to me. The joy, happiness, and peace at Christmas come from within. The material things and outward symbols of celebration bring sweet feelings, but only for a short moment.

Instantly, the thought of sharing Christmas with the other elders became appealing. It would be a gathering of friendship and love. We missionaries all needed to strengthen each other.

Christmas is what you make of it. It doesn't matter if you're with family and friends or halfway around the world. The real gifts at Christmastime are the fruits of the Spirit. Paul said, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith" (Gal. 5:22). Could one ask for anything more during the celebration of Christ's birth?





Christmas Every Day

Elder F. Enzo Busche

When I was a child growing up and learning about life, I did not have the security of my father and mother telling me who I was, how I could find lasting happiness, and what would happen to me if I were to die. My parents did not have the gospel of Jesus Christ, so my childhood was very uncertain in many ways and I was often full of fear.

But in all the memories of my childhood, there is at least one of peace and joy. This memory is of Christmas. Christmastime was celebrated in the traditions and customs of my home country of Germany, and it was specifically for the children.

Four Sundays before Christmas Day, preparations for something holy and beautiful could be felt in our home. A little wreath with four candles on it was placed on the family table.

On the first Sunday, the first candle was lit. As a family we sat around the table, singing Christmas songs and preparing little gifts that each of us would give to each member of the family.

On the fourth Sunday, the last candle was lit, and expectations for the coming joyous events grew intense.

A Christmas tree did not appear in our home until 24 December. On that day, we children had to stay outside, go on errands, and play by ourselves. I still remember how time seemed not to pass at all.

We children were taught that the Christmas tree and all of its glory and beauty, along with presents and food and cookies, came from the little Christ child.

This lack of logic did not bother us children. We believed that there was a Christ-child person of a supernatural existence who cared for us in such a way that once a year He would come in person to fulfill all of our hopes and dreams.

In preparation, we cleaned the rooms where we slept. We put on our best clothes. We had our gifts ready to give. When the sun started to set on that special day, we were invited to get ready to enter the living room.

As was the custom, the doors to the living room had been locked because we children were not to go into that room. It became a place of great mystery. Once in a while we heard some rustling of papers, and once in a while the more courageous of us tried to peek in the keyhole—only to learn that the key was in it from the inside and the door was locked.

When Mother finally decided that we were clean, orderly, dressed, our hair groomed, and had our rooms in order, we were asked to listen carefully. Suddenly we heard a little bell ringing, and our hearts beat close to explosion. This was it! This was the moment when the doors were unlocked and we were allowed to go into the living room. And there it was—a Christmas tree standing from the floor to the ceiling! We became aware of its beautiful, fresh-cut smell and that it was glowing with candles. Our father, who happened to be already inside the room when we walked in, was watching it carefully so that nothing caught on fire.

The Christmas tree had many decorations that we as children would see only at Christmastime. In the



center of the tree was a wax sculpture of a little Christ child surrounded by glowing angels of gold paper and silk.

Our family gathered around the tree and sang four or five Christmas songs. Then we children were invited to find our own corner of presents, which had been covered by a blanket. This Christmas Eve tradition developed in us powerful feelings of holiness, joy, love, gratitude, and security. These feelings, radiating from the symbols of the little wax figure of the Christ child, which we saw only at Christmastime, had a great influence on all of us.

Many years later, when I was grown up and had my own family, we heard the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ when the missionaries knocked on our door. There was something in these missionaries—a glow of trust, a glow of hope, a glow of security, and a glow of love—that looked in the beginning to us like a fairy tale.

Could it be true? Could it really be true that we are all children of a loving Heavenly Father and that through the Spirit of Jesus Christ I could come to an understanding of the feelings I had had at Christmastime in my childhood? Because this door opened, the understanding that led to our conversion and baptism helped us see that we could experience Christmas every day when we focus always on Him, listen to Him, and embrace Him with a loving, grateful heart. What joy came to my family when we opened our souls to the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ!

As Christmastime is nearing, I know that by always remembering Jesus Christ, always being focused on Him, always being faithful to Him, and always loving Him, we can feel like Christmas every day of our lives just as I felt it in my childhood on 24 December. This is my hope for all children—that you may be blessed with these same feelings in your family at this Christmastime.





A "Sunshine" Christmas

Elder L. Tom Perry

Many years ago I found myself as part of occupation troops in a foreign land just at the end of a terrible war. It was not long after we arrived in this country before we developed a great love and concern for the people we were there to watch over. This was especially true of the young people, the children. Many times we would find them scavenging in our garbage cans looking for food to keep themselves alive. This deeply touched us, and we wanted to make a more substantial contribution to them. We raised what money we could and found a local religious group that was willing to open an orphanage for them. We donated as much time as possible to improve the facilities and provided them with the operating funds they needed.

As Christmas approached, we sent letters home to our families asking that, instead of sending gifts to us, they send toys for the children in the orphanage. The response of our families was overwhelming! Toys arrived daily from our homes.

We found a tree suitable to use as a Christmas tree, but we had no traditional decorations for it. A lady taught us how to make little birds by folding square pieces of paper, and these became the major part of the decorations for the tree. The presents were wrapped mostly in discarded Stars and Stripes newspapers. I'll never forget Christmas Eve with those children. I am sure many of them had never seen a Christmas tree in their lives.

We sang Christmas carols to them, but we weren't very good at this. They had been rehearsing for weeks so they could sing a song to us in English. It was not a Christmas carol, but it was beautiful. They sang, "You Are My Sunshine." We were deeply touched with the spirit of the children that Christmas Eve, especially as they opened the presents sent from our families. I suppose some of them had not had a toy in many, many years.

This is a Christmas I'll never forget because we were learning the true meaning of this great holiday season. The greatest joy we can receive in life is giving—to bring into the life of someone else a little joy and happiness.





A Season for Gratitude

President Gordon B. Hinckley

What a wonderful season this is, this Christmas season. All of the Christian world, while not understanding the things that we understand, pauses for a moment and remembers with gratitude the birth of the Son of God.

To quote the words of Phillips Brooks:

*Everywhere, everywhere, Christmas tonight!
Christmas in lands of the fir-tree and pine,
Christmas in lands of the palm-tree and vine,
Christmas where snow peaks stand solemn and white,
Christmas where cornfields stand sunny and bright.
Everywhere, everywhere, Christmas tonight!
For the Christ-child who comes is the Master of all;
No palace too great, no cottage too small.*

In that spirit we reach out to embrace one and all with that love which is of the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We Latter-day Saints are a vast concourse of people bound together in a oneness of love and faith. Our blessing is great, as a people and as individuals. We carry in our hearts a firm and unshakable conviction of the divine mission of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was the great Jehovah of the Old Testament, the Creator who, under the direction of His Father, made all things, "and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3). He was the promised Messiah, who came with healing in His wings. He was the worker of miracles, the great healer, the resurrection and the life. His is the only name under heaven whereby we must be saved.

He was with His Father in the beginning. He was made flesh and dwelt among us, "and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, . . . full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

As many as received Him, to them He gave power to become the sons and daughters of God, "even to them that believe on his name" (John 1:12).

He came as a gift of His Eternal Father. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

He condescended to leave His throne on high and come to earth to be born in a manger, in a conquered nation. He walked the dusty roads of Palestine, healing the sick, teaching the doctrine, blessing all who would accept Him.

He came "into the world [not] to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved" (John 3:17).

Not too long ago we walked where He walked, in Shepherd's Field, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Cana, Galilee, Jerusalem, Gethsemane, Golgotha, the empty tomb. We sensed the majesty and the wonder of this man called Jesus.

He taught us the wondrous things of God. He opened the eyes of understanding to all who would listen. He was the fulfillment of the law, the sacrifice that would thereafter do away with every other sacrifice.



"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6).

"And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots:

"And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord;

"And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears:

"But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked.

"And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins" (Isa. 11:1-5).

On Calvary's hill He gave His life for each of us. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Cor. 15:55).

We honor His birth. But without His death that birth would have been but one more birth. It was the redemption which He worked out in the Garden of Gethsemane and upon the cross of Calvary which made His gift immortal, universal, and everlasting. His was a great Atonement for the sins of all mankind. He was the resurrection and the life, "the first fruits of them that slept" (1 Cor. 15:20). Because of Him all men will be raised from the grave.

But beyond this He taught us the way, the truth, and the life. He gave the keys through which we may go on to immortality and eternal life.

We love Him. We honor Him. We thank Him. We worship Him. He has done for each of us and for all mankind that which none other could have done. God be thanked for the gift of His Beloved Son, our Savior, the Redeemer of the world, the Lamb without blemish who was offered as a sacrifice for all mankind.

He it was who directed the restoration of this, His work, in this the dispensation of the fullness of time. This is His Church, which bears His Holy Name.

Christmas is more than trees and twinkling lights, more than toys and gifts and baubles of a hundred varieties. It is love. It is the love of the Son of God for all mankind. It reaches out beyond our power to comprehend. It is magnificent and beautiful.

It is peace. It is the peace which comforts, which sustains, which blesses all who accept it. It is faith. It is faith in God and His Eternal Son. It is faith in His wondrous ways and message. It is faith in Him as our Redeemer and our Lord.

We testify of His living reality. We testify of the divinity of His nature. In our times of grateful meditation, we acknowledge His priceless gift to us and pledge our love and faith. This is what Christmas is really about.





What is Christmas?

President Thomas S. Monson

This is a glorious time of the year, simple in origin, deep in meaning, beautiful in tradition and custom, rich in memories, and charitable in spirit. It has an attraction to which our hearts are readily drawn. This joyful season brings to each of us a measure of happiness that corresponds to the degree in which we have turned our mind, feelings, and actions to the spirit of Christmas.

*There's Christmas in the home and church,
There's Christmas in the mart;
But you'll not know what Christmas is
Unless it's in your heart.
The bells may call across the snow,
And carols search the air;
But, oh, the heart will miss the thrill
Unless it's Christmas there.*

Christmas is children. As a young elder, I had been called to the old Primary Children's Hospital that once stood on North Temple Street in Salt Lake City. There were children to be blessed. It was the Christmas season. I had never been in a children's hospital before.

As our group entered the foyer, we noticed an attractively decorated Christmas tree, with beautifully wrapped gifts beneath its boughs.

A feeling of sympathy welled up within me as I noticed these tiny children, many with legs or arms in large plaster casts. Some were ever so weak and pale.

A young lad called out to us, "Will you give me a blessing?" Of course the blessing was given. I shall ever remember placing my hands on the tousled head of that faithful boy who was desperately ill. As we left his side, he looked up into my eyes and said, "Thank you, Brother Monson." We walked away, only to hear him call out, "Oh, Brother Monson, merry Christmas to you." I could scarcely see him for the tears in my eyes. He had that glow about him that comes only at Christmastime. That boy trusted in his Heavenly Father. He acknowledged the priesthood of God. His faith was unwavering. I felt I was on holy ground.

What made the glow emanate from the presence of this faithful boy? It was the Christmas spirit. Why does peace come closer to reality at this season than at any other? Why is it that more friends are remembered and more enemies forgiven at the Christmas season than at any other time? It is the Christmas spirit.

Christmas is remembering. A year ago our thoughts turned to the celebration of the sesquicentennial of the arrival of the pioneers in the valley of the Great Salt Lake in 1847. What was Christmas like that year?

From an entry in the diary of Mrs. Rebecca Riter, dated December 25, 1847, we read: "The winter was cold. Christmas came and the children were hungry. I had brought a peck of wheat across the plains and hid it under a pile of wood. I thought I would cook a handful of wheat for the baby. Then I thought how we would need wheat for seed in the spring, so I left it alone."



Christmas is giving. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the poet, wrote: "Rings and jewels are not gifts, but apologies for gifts. The only [true] gift is a portion of thyself."

President David O. McKay said: "True happiness comes only by making others happy—the practical application of the Savior's doctrine of losing one's life to gain it. In short, the Christmas spirit is the Christ spirit, that makes our hearts glow in brotherly love and friendship and prompts us to kind deeds of service.

"It is the spirit of the gospel of Jesus Christ, obedience to which will bring 'peace on earth,' because it means—good will toward all men."

A few years ago I received an anonymous letter from a kindhearted dentist who demonstrated brotherly love and goodwill. I'd like to share it with you:

"Dear President Monson:

"I feel remiss in that I should have sent you a thank-you note sooner. Last December I listened to your talk given during the Christmas devotional. You spoke of an older woman who could not afford to pay for the registration for an automobile she had recently purchased. Others came to her aid. All involved were touched.

"I am a dentist by profession. Not long after the devotional, my receptionist informed me that an acquaintance of hers was coming into my office. She had problems with two of her teeth. She knew this woman and told me of her circumstances. The woman carried many burdens. The family business, which she ran, was doing poorly and the family was three months behind in paying rent. They had five children, many grown into adulthood, but all had moved back home because of difficult personal circumstances. By sheer force of will, she had kept her family together for some time. Now two teeth were broken.

"The woman arrived for her appointment and explained about her dental problem. She asked if I would allow her to pay her bill over time. She explained to me that her family had experienced several financial reversals and were just recently starting to pay some overdue bills.

"I assured her that her credit was good with me. She asked if I could repair just one of the two broken teeth at that time. I assured her that I could, and we began.

"Since I had the time, I repaired both teeth, for which she was grateful. When the work was completed, thinking of your talk, I told her that if she would not be offended, I should like to make a Christmas present of the dental work, for which there would be no bill. She was astonished. I could sense the depth of the stress and strain she had carried, as uncontrollable tears of gratitude gushed forth due to a small, simple act of kindness. It must have been years since someone showed her some little favor. Not able to speak, she made her way out.

"Both my assistant and receptionist were so moved by her reaction that they also sprouted tears and could hardly speak. I, on the other hand, was doubly glad. One part, in seeing such a simple act have such a happy



effect on another. And the second part, for once in my life having a patient in my office crying for joy, and not for pain!

"To you, my very best wishes.

"Sincerely,

"A brother in the gospel"

Christmas is prophecy fulfilled. On the eve of His birth, the voice of the Lord came unto Nephi, saying, "Lift up your head and be of good cheer; for behold, the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given, and on the morrow come I into the world, to show unto the world that I will fulfill all that which I have caused to be spoken by the mouth of my holy prophets."

What did the holy prophets of old declare? Isaiah, more than 700 years before the birth of Christ, prophesied, "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

On the American continent, King Benjamin said, "For behold, the time cometh, and is not far distant, that with power, the Lord Omnipotent shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay. He shall suffer temptations, and pain. And he shall be called Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning; and his mother shall be called Mary."

Then came that night of nights when the shepherds were abiding in the fields and the angel of the Lord appeared to them, announcing: "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

The shepherds with haste went to the manger to pay honor to Christ the Lord. Later, wise men journeyed from the East to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh."

Since that time, the spirit of giving gifts has been present in the mind of each Christian as he or she commemorates the Christmas season. Our Heavenly Father gave to us His Son, Jesus Christ. That precious Son gave to us His life, the Atonement, and victory over the grave.

What will you and I give for Christmas this year? Let us in our lives give to our Lord and Savior the gift of gratitude by living His teachings and following in His footsteps. It was said of Him that He "went about doing good." As we do likewise, the Christmas spirit will be ours.





A Christmas with No Presents

President James E. Faust

I have been thinking about what makes Christmas such a great time in our lives. I am old enough to remember many Christmases. They have all been glorious. But I have learned that it isn't just the presents that make them great.

When I was a young boy, our family was terribly poor. Father had no job because he was going through law school at the University of Utah. He had a wife and three young sons. Grandfather and Grandmother knew that we would have no Christmas if we did not come down to the farm in Millard County. So all of our family took the train from Salt Lake to Leamington, Utah. Where the money came for the tickets, I will never know.

Grandfather and Uncle Esdras met us at the railroad crossing in Leamington with a team of big horses to pull the open sleigh through the deep snow to Oak City. It was so cold that the huge horses had icy chin whiskers, and you could see their breath. I remember how old Jack Frost nipped my nose, and the extreme cold made it hard to breathe. Grandmother had heated some rocks and put them in the bottom of the sleigh to help keep us warm. We were wrapped and tucked into some heavy camp quilts with just our noses sticking out. Accompanied by the tinkle of bells on leather straps on the harnesses of the horses, we musically traveled from Leamington over the 10 miles to Oak City, where our beloved grandfather and grandmother lived. So many dear ones were there that we could hardly wait to arrive. When we got there it was warm and wonderful and exciting.

In the corner of the living room was the Christmas tree, a cedar cut from the hillside pasture. It was already partially decorated by Mother Nature with little berries that helped give it a strong smell. Our decorations were popcorn strings made by pushing a needle and thread through popcorn. The strings had to be handled carefully or they would break and strew popcorn all over the floor.

We also had paper chains to put on the tree, made by cutting up old Sears and Montgomery Ward catalogs with the paper links pasted together with flour paste. The sticky flour paste got all over our hands, faces, and clothes. I wonder why they didn't put sugar in it! With cream it could also have been served for mush.

I do not remember any presents under the tree. Under the tree were popcorn balls made with strong, homemade molasses. When we bit into the popcorn balls, it felt like they were biting back.

On Christmas Eve we all gathered around the woodstove, enjoying the warm comfort of the fire and the pleasant aroma of the burning cedar wood. One of the uncles gave the opening prayer. We sang carols and hymns. One of our aunts read of the birth of Jesus and of the "good tidings of great joy" (Luke 2:10). "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). Grandfather and Grandmother then told us how much they loved us.

The next day was Christmas, and we had a glorious dinner. But before we ate, we all got down on our knees for family prayer. I was so hungry. Grandfather prayed for the longest time. You see, he had much to pray for. He prayed for moisture because there was a drought in the land, and the crops had been meager. The fall grain had been planted in the dusty ground. What harvest there was could not be sold for much because of the low prices caused by the Great Depression. The taxes on the farm were delinquent because there was no money to pay them. He also prayed for our large family, his cattle and horses, pigs and chickens, turkeys—he prayed over everything.



During Grandfather's long prayer, my youngest uncle became restless and gave me an irreverent pinch, hoping that I would shout to make things more exciting.

For dinner we had a huge tom turkey stuffed with delicious dressing. There was no celery in the dressing because we had only the ingredients that could be produced on the farm. But the dressing had plenty of bread, sage, sausage, and onions. There was an abundance of potatoes and gravy and pickles, beets, beans, and corn. Because Grandfather could trade wheat to the miller for flour, there was always fresh baked bread. To stretch the food, we were encouraged to take one bite of bread for every bite of other kinds of food. We had chokecherry jelly and ground-cherry jam. For dessert we had pumpkin and gooseberry pie. It was all delicious.

As I look back on that special Christmas over a lifetime, the most memorable part was that we did not think about presents. There may have been some handmade mittens or a scarf given, but I do not recall any presents. Presents are wonderful, but I found that they are not essential to our happiness. I could not have been happier. There were no presents that could be held and fondled and played with, but there were many wonderful gifts that could not be seen but could be felt.

There was the gift of boundless love. We knew God loved us. We all loved each other. We did not miss the presents because we had all these glorious gifts. It made me feel so wonderful and secure to belong and to be part of all that went on. We wanted nothing else. We did not miss the presents at all. I never remember a happier Christmas in my childhood.

We all enjoy giving and receiving presents. But there is a difference between presents and gifts. The true gifts may be part of ourselves—giving of the riches of the heart and mind—and therefore more enduring and of far greater worth than presents bought at the store.

Among these true gifts are some our family shared on that boyhood Christmas . . . : the gift of peace, the gift of love, the gift of service, the gift of self, and the gift of faith.

All of us enjoy wonderful gifts from God, which, if developed, can be enjoyed by others. At this Christmas season, so many of us have enjoyed the musical and literary gifts of Handel, Dickens, and many others. The sharing of these natural gifts blesses both the giver and the receiver.

This Christmas and every Christmas will be richer by sharing and enjoying gifts that cannot be held but only felt.





Bethlehem of Judea

Author Unknown

A little child,
A shining star.
A stable rude,
The door ajar.
Yet in that place,
So crude, forlorn,
The Hope of all
The world was born.

Long, Long Ago

Author Unknown

Winds thro' the olive trees
Softly did blow,
Round little Bethlehem
Long, long ago.
Sheep on the hillside lay
Whiter than snow;
Shepherds were watching them,
Long, long ago.
Then from the happy sky,
Angels bent low,
Singing their songs of joy,
long, long ago.
For in a manger bed,
Cradled we know,
Christ came to Bethlehem,
Long, long ago.

What Can I Give Him?

by Christina Rossetti

"What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man
I would do my part
Yet what can I give Him?
Give my heart."





The Voice on the Phone

D. M. Brown

The fragrance of gingerbread always makes me think of Suzie* and the year I was going to have a perfect Christmas.

During past Christmas seasons, I had always been too busy to create the Christmas traditions I felt would build a lifetime of memories for my family. But that Christmas was going to be different. That year my time was my own, and I meant to make every minute of the holiday season count. I would make hand painted ornaments, home-sewn gifts, beautiful decorations, artistically wrapped packages, and baked goods to fill a freezer. I was baking gingerbread men for the tree the day my nine-year-old daughter brought Suzie home from school.

"Mama, this is my new friend, Suzie," Debbie announced, presenting a rather chubby, cheerful-looking little girl. Suzie reminded me of a California poppy, with her red-gold mop of curly hair and a freckled nose that twitched eagerly as she breathed in the spicy fragrance.

I took two warm gingerbread men from a pan and gave them to Suzie and Debbie. Soon the two girls were helping my seven-year-old son, Mark, hang gingerbread men on the tree. (Of course, the cookies never stayed long on the tree. The children and their friends ate all of them every few days, and we replenished the supply weekly. As a result, our house smelled gingery from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day.)

Later, Suzie's mother telephoned, and in a tired-sounding voice, she asked me to send Suzie home. The Sunday after Thanksgiving, I was still working on my perfect Christmas. I had decided to mail my Christmas cards early, and so I had spread the dining room table with Christmas cards, address books, stamps, and green- and red-ink pens with which to address the envelopes. I was all set to start when Mark came in.

"Mama, we talked in Primary today about helping other people," he told me. "Our Primary teacher said a lonely lady in our ward needs help."

"Oh? What's the lady's name?" I asked, wondering if I had met her.

"I can't remember something long and hard to say," Mark said, "but Sister Jones wrote it on the blackboard, and I'd remember it if I saw it."

He went to the desk drawer and pulled out the ward list. After a moment he gave a shout of triumph. "Here it is!" he cried. He thrust the page under my nose, and I glanced at the name by his finger before turning back to address my Christmas cards. The name was difficult to pronounce. Mark borrowed my pen and drew a green circle around the name in the ward list before putting it back in the drawer.

"I want to go visit that lonely lady and take something to her. Can we make something for her now?" Mark wanted to know.

"Not today, Mark. It's Sunday, and I don't bake on Sundays. Besides, this lady doesn't even know us. Surely she wouldn't want a visit from strangers," I explained. "Today we are going to start addressing our Christmas cards. For once I'm going to get our cards mailed before December twenty-third. If you want to help someone, you can help me."



In the days that followed, Mark persisted in reminding me about the lonely lady. Twice he asked to make something for the woman, but both times I was involved in other projects.

One Tuesday afternoon Suzie again came home with Debbie. That day I was putting together my specialty: a gingerbread train. Each car carried tempting cargo such as breadsticks, candy canes, and cinnamon bears. Suzie's eyes sparkled when I gave her a few chocolate-chip cookie wheels to "glue" into place with frosting. She ate one of them.

"I wish my Mom made gingerbread trains," she said. "Last year she made a neat gingerbread house, but this year she said it was too much work."

"It is a lot of work," I agreed, remembering the year I had been too busy with church and community duties to make my gingerbread train. The children had been very disappointed that year, but not this year. This year everything would be perfect.

A week later Debbie came home from school just as I was taking a fresh batch of gingerbread men from the oven.

"Too bad Suzie isn't here," she said, biting off one cookie foot. "Suzie loves our gingerbread men. She wasn't in school today, though."

Debbie set down her cookie, suddenly serious. "They said Suzie's mama took too many pills, and she's in the hospital. She might die."

"Oh, Debbie, are you sure?" I asked in dismay.

Debbie nodded. "Sally Miller told me Sister Miller was at the hospital with Suzie's mama all night," she said. Sister Miller was our Relief Society president.

"I didn't know Suzie was a member of the Church," I said, surprised. "I've never seen her at meetings." "Suzie said they used to come all the time before her dad died," Debbie said. "He got killed in a car accident this summer."

"Poor Suzie!" I said. "Her poor mother! And I don't even know her name."

I called Sister Miller to see if I could be of any help in caring for Suzie during the crisis. I also asked for Suzie's mother's name. When she told me, it sounded vaguely familiar. I hung up the phone repeating the name when a devastating thought struck me. With a sinking feeling, I took the ward list from the desk drawer and turned some pages. Yes, there it was, circled in green ink—the name of Suzie's mother, the name of Mark's lonely lady whom I had never found time to help.

Suzie was with us that night when we received word that her mother had died.

I asked myself over and over: What if we had gone to visit her when Mark first wanted to? Would it have mattered that we were strangers? Would she have been a little less lonely, a little less desperate? I thought of the tired voice on the telephone, asking me to send Suzie home that first day we made gingerbread.

When Suzie went away a week later to live with her grandparents, we gave her our gingerbread train. The bright eyes that had sparkled as she helped make the train had lost some of their glow, but Suzie managed a little smile and a thank-you.



A gingerbread train. A very small gift. Too little. Too late. As Suzie took a half hearted nibble from a breadstick, I saw more than a saddened little girl holding a cookie train. I saw myself with painful clarity: a woman so involved with the things of Christmas that I had lost touch with the very spirit of Christmas, without which there can never be a "perfect Christmas." I would never again forget. Every holiday season since then, the fragrance of gingerbread reminds me of Suzie ... and I cry.





Mother's Homemade Christmas

Ruth M. Ostegar

"It snowed! It snowed!" shouted my sister. We jumped out of bed and ran to the window. Snow was rare in our little town of Thatcher, in southern Arizona, and on that Christmas morning in 1908, our excitement knew no bounds.

Awakened by our chatter, Mother joined us. Together we stared at the beautiful sight, knowing that we would remember it for a long time. The full moon sat low in the west. Only a few clouds remained from the night's storm that had clothed the earth in a beautiful white robe for Christmas.

"You know," Mother said, "I think Heavenly Father knew that Santa wasn't coming to our house this Christmas, and he sent the snow to make this day special."

Each of us knew in our hearts that Mother was right. Our father, known to all of Thatcher as Bishop Moody, was far across the Pacific Ocean serving as a mission president. Of course, we had wanted to go with him, but because of the lack of schools, the primitive conditions, and the heat, our parents had decided that we should remain in Thatcher.

This was our first Christmas without Father. In order not to let his absence cast gloom on our holiday, we had planned a very special Christmas just by ourselves. Not even Santa would be a part of our celebration. For weeks, secrets, whispering, and sometimes a "Don't you dare open my dresser drawer" had permeated the house as we had made gifts for each other.

Since a Christmas tree was out of the question, Mother had designated a special chair for each of us where our gifts would be placed. Accordingly, on Christmas Eve we each decorated our chair with strings of popcorn, paper chains, bright red bells, and other homemade decorations.

On Christmas morning, Mother shooed us back into our beds while she made the fire and tended the babies. She told us to stay there until she called, but we eventually climbed out of bed, got dressed, and waited.

What a sight met our eyes when Mother finally called us to come downstairs to the parlor! The chairs were arranged in a semicircle around our high-topped parlor organ and were loaded with exciting gifts and packages. Mother had placed a beautiful star on each chair with a name on it: Mama, Hazel, Ruth, Delia, Flora, Mabel, and Rupert.

Mother must have worked for months. She had crocheted a cap and mittens with a matching scarf for each daughter, had renewed our last year's doll and made it a new dress, and had even made each of the girls a rag doll with a painted face and yarn hair and a few baubles for baby Rupert. Somehow she had also managed to budget enough money to include an orange and a bag of candy and nuts for each of us. Along with Mother's gifts, we had the simple gifts we had made for each other. Christmas had never been lovelier!

We were so excited playing, trying on, and comparing that only with great reluctance did we leave our gifts when Mother called for family prayer. As usual, we began with a song. Mother sat at the organ, which she pumped with her feet, and we crowded around her. Our young voices sang out "Away in a Manger," followed by "Silent Night." Then Mother read the Christmas story to us from our big family Bible. She was a wonderful reader, and we could almost see the shepherds abiding in the field, the babe lying in the manger, and the angel. Then, as was our custom, we knelt around the



organ stool, each placing our hand in the center of the stool, one hand on top of another. Mother thanked Heavenly Father for the peace and happiness that abounded in our home, for Christ's birth, and for the love we shared. She prayed for Father and, as usual, ended with the words, "and bring him home in due time in safety." There were tears in our eyes as we arose.

After a warm breakfast of cereal with sugar and rich cream from our own cows, we went outside to play in the snow, wearing our new crocheted wraps. It was truly an inspiring Christmas, and all because of the courage, determination, and ingenuity of a dedicated mother.





Reluctant Scouts

Sims W. Lowry

Each year the rescue mission in our town provides a Christmas Eve dinner for needy families and those who have no families with which to share a meal. I had become acquainted with the director of the mission and greatly admired his work. He was a nondenominational minister who had devoted his life to building and maintaining a shelter for transients and for local people in need.

One holiday season, as my thoughts turned to service to our fellowmen, I approached this director with a plan. I was serving as Scoutmaster at the time and wanted the boys to have an opportunity to give service to the disadvantaged within our community. Perhaps, I thought, the Scouts could help prepare and serve the Christmas Eve dinner.

The director was delighted to have our help. The overworked mission staff needed a boost. For my part, I was happy that the Scouts would have an unusual opportunity to help those in need. I convinced five of them—and their parents—that this would be a worthwhile and rewarding activity, and a few hours before the dinner I began picking them up.

But my excitement waned as we journeyed to the mission. The materialism of the season had a perceptible hold on most of the boys; they were not overjoyed to interrupt their holiday festivities for another service project. Because I had been looking forward to spending time with my own family as well, I couldn't really blame them.

As we approached the mission, driving past bars, abandoned railcars, and junkyards, I began to question my decision. Was it wise to expose our young boys to the company of these men, some of whom might be criminals and drug abusers? As we walked to the front door, I noticed a number of very rough looking characters hanging about, no doubt waiting for dinner to begin. Their haggard faces made me a little nervous.

When we entered the dining room, the delicious smell of roast turkey was in the air. The mission cooks, most of whom had been "down and out" themselves at one time, were busy putting the finishing touches on the dinner. The boys and I began setting tables, filling water pitchers, and assisting the cooks.

As we were busy with these chores, the director came into the room and announced that, because the dining room was large enough to serve only thirty at a time, the dinner would be served in shifts. Families with children would be served first.

"Families with children?" I thought. "Surely there won't be many in that category."

But when the doors to the dining hall were opened, a little crowd of disheveled children scrambled in and raced to the tables to find seats. Most of them were accompanied only by their mothers.

After the blessing, we began to serve the crowd. We were surprised to serve three or four shifts of mostly women and children before the men had their turn. The men and women, the young and old polished off their helpings almost as fast as we served them. They were obviously unaccustomed to such a well-prepared and delicious meal.

As the meal progressed, I noticed a very real change in the attitudes of my Scouts. One or two had been reluctant about participating in this project; now their hearts were noticeably softened as they



served these hungry people. They seemed delighted to go out of their way to help clean up a spill, or to refill an empty water glass. They felt comfortable, even eager, in serving dinner and talking to some of the roughest-looking men there.

Then I felt the Spirit speak to my heart, and a scripture I had often heard came into mind: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." (Matt. 25:40.)

There, among a group of individuals that some of us would have preferred to avoid, I felt the Spirit as strong as I have felt in any testimony meeting. I knew that the boys felt this same spirit, too. As the mission staff expressed their gratitude for our help, we were sure that we had come away with much more than we had given.

I have a hunch that the boys' Christmas that year was different from any other they had experienced before. "Let's do it again next year," they commented as we drove away. Of one thing I am certain: Their Scoutmaster will never be the same.





The Christmas We Gave Away

Anonymous

What a year we had had! A new baby daughter, a job promotion for my husband, and a brand-new home were among many blessings we had received and for which my husband and I were grateful. We wanted no gifts for Christmas, because our cups were running over. But we knew our children still anticipated Christmas morning and gifts from Santa. We were concerned about giving the children too much. How could they learn to appreciate what they had if they just kept receiving more?

At family home evening we talked about doing something special for someone else at Christmas. Our oldest son said, "Why don't we find a family who needs help and give them presents?"

Soon all of us were excited about the idea. We decided to do our project anonymously. We didn't know exactly how we would find our "Christmas family," but we did know we wanted to help.

The next morning I made calls to friends who might know of someone in need. That evening at dinner I described the family I had found. The father was a carpenter and out of work. They had three children, one the same age as our new baby. Their baby had been undergoing many tests as doctors tried to determine why she wasn't developing properly. Because the family had no insurance, their savings were gone, and with those savings had gone the prospect of having gifts at Christmas.

"Can we give them some of our clothes?" asked our daughter. We all agreed that her idea was good, and so the children ran to their bedrooms and began sorting out the clothes they had outgrown. But my husband and I knew that clothes were not enough.

The following day my husband asked the children if they would like to buy a special present for each member of our Christmas family. Excitement reigned as we departed for an evening of holiday shopping.

By family home evening the following week, we were ready to deliver gifts, clothing, and oranges to our Christmas family. But before we left, my husband gathered the children and said, "It sure is great to see all of you so excited to share your Christmas. Do you realize that by buying these gifts and this food, you are giving up part of your own Christmas?"

The children had not thought of their project that way before. Their eyes widened as their father took out a crisp, 100-dollar bill.

"Do you think we should give this money to the parents so they can buy other things they need?" he asked. "And do you understand that your Christmas will be very small this year because you are sharing it?"

Each of the children grinned and nodded. We tucked the money into a Christmas card and addressed the envelope to "Our Friends." Then we were off to deliver Christmas to our special family.

We parked the car up the street from the house and planned our delivery strategy. Within seconds, it was all accomplished. We pulled away just as the door opened.

That evening, as we said our family prayer, our minds and hearts were truly one. Christmas was still a week away, but we felt we had just had ours.



The next morning the phone rang. "Just thought you'd like to know about a family that received a special gift last night," my friend said. "They had been wondering if they should use their last twenty dollars to pay their tithing, or if they should keep it, because Christmas was nearing and they had no more money. They decided to pay their tithing. Last night their doorbell rang, and when the husband opened the door he found packages of clothes, gifts, and food. The next morning they noticed a white envelope on the floor, and when they opened it, a 100-dollar bill fell out. They know it was the Lord's way of blessing them for paying their tithing, and their hearts are full of gratitude."

I tearfully related the message to my husband and children. We felt we had already been blessed just by giving. To know that we had been the Lord's instruments for a moment that special evening made us realize the true value of our Christmas project. Though the gifts under our tree were few, we had never been blessed with such abundance at Christmas.





From Lonely to Joyful

Vera Jean Paffel

As Christmas approached one year, I was physically and mentally exhausted. My marriage had ended the summer before, and my three children and I had recently moved to a new location to attend a university, where I was studying for a teaching degree. I had no money, and my two boys, ages 16 and 12, and my kindergarten-age daughter needed warm clothing for the cold winter weather.

While I studied for finals, thoughts about my situation kept interrupting me. My cupboards were bare, I had very little money, and I was tired of trying to be both father and mother to my children. I'd had a temple marriage, had been active in the Church all my life, and had just wanted to stay home and raise my children. Life seemed so unfair.

My first exam was at 7:30 A.M. I left our apartment hoping my boys would remember to get their little sister off to school on time. The air was cold and the sky very dark. I took a shortcut through the cemetery, feeling I was on my way to failure. I had spent half the night studying and trying to remember what I had studied. I felt too old to compete with the young minds of other students.

As I tramped through the snow, I thought about my parents, who were coming to pick us up and take us to spend Christmas at my sister's home, a home where there would be a large tree and a mountain of gifts. And here I was unable to buy shoes for my own children. My feelings of resentment continued to build. By the time I reached the building for my final exams, I was in a terrible mood. I tried to concentrate but felt I did poorly on my exams. All I wanted was to go home, go to bed, and stay there for two weeks!

I began to trudge home through the snow once again. I stopped at my daughter's school to pick her up, but her teacher said she had gone home. That did it! I had asked her to wait for me, and now I was mad at her for not waiting. Entering the cemetery I spotted her bright blue parka poking out from behind a tombstone. She was hiding from me, waiting for me to pass so she could jump out and scare me, but I was in no mood for games. I walked on, pretending not to see her. Then I heard her shout, "Mama, Mama, wait for me!"

I turned on her, ready to chastise her for not waiting. But before I could say anything she shoved an envelope in my hands. "Mama," she said, "look what I made you today. You can open it. It's for Christmas. I made it just for you!"

I opened the envelope, and inside was a handmade Christmas card with "Merry Christmas" printed in a child's scrawl. She had drawn Santa flying through the air and little houses beneath him. She had drawn in the corner of the card another scene—a picture of a baby. But this was no ordinary baby. With yellow crayon she had drawn lines all around Him, signifying radiant beams shining from heaven above. There was a halo above His head, and with the brightest red crayon she could find she had drawn a great big smile on His face. No, this wasn't just any baby. This was baby Jesus, the baby who would grow up to become the Savior of the world.

I looked at baby Jesus. I had been baptized in His name; I belonged to His Church, which had been restored upon the earth; it was in His name that I prayed for strength, guidance, and direction. He had always been there for me. *I love baby Jesus*, I said to myself.

As I acknowledged my love for Him, something wonderful happened to me. Even though I had been



freezing before, a great warmth swept over me. I felt His love envelop me. He loved me; He really did.

I began to count my blessings, including my children. The night before, my 12-year-old son had given me one dollar that he had earned baby-sitting so I could buy bread and milk. And my young daughter who stood before me—I had waited seven years hoping for this child. What a blessing she had been in my life.

Now she looked up at me, her brown eyes sparkling with the excitement of Christmas. Her naturally curly hair poked out from the hood of her parka; her little nose was red from cold. "Mama, don't you like my picture?" she asked.

"Oh, I love your picture," I told her. "It's beautiful!"

"Then why are you crying?" she asked me.

"I'm crying because I love you and your brothers very much. I'm happy we are a family and can be together this Christmas. That's the most important thing in the world right now. We are going to have a wonderful Christmas."

I took hold of my daughter's hand, and we began to sing Christmas carols as we skipped down the snowy path.

It has been more than 30 years since that special Christmas. I passed my exams and went on to become a schoolteacher. But the lesson of that one Christmas has warmed me many times since as I recall the gift of love that touched my heart that day.





To Do Good Always

President Gordon B. Hinckley

In each of us there is at Christmastime something of our childhood. We all revel in the fun of Christmas—of giving and receiving tinsel presents, of singing favorite carols, of feasting on goodies we never miss at other seasons, of gathering together as family and friends, all having a wonderful time.

But there is something else, something better, and that is to sit together as families and read again the fascinating story of the birth of Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem of Judea. It is a wondrous story told in language ever so simple and beautiful by the writers of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

All of us have heard these readings since we were very young. They are a part of our lives, a very important part. Every child, certainly every child who regards himself or herself as Christian, should know and enjoy the story of our Lord, the Son of God, who came to earth and died for each of us.

That story has been told by many writers who have taken it from the accounts in the New Testament. It has been told with beauty and understanding by those who have written with love and respect. One of these was Charles Dickens, the most popular English author of his times. He lived from 1812 to 1870. He wrote such timeless books as *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Oliver Twist*, and *David Copperfield*. He was the father of ten children, and evidently was one to delight them with stories that came of a vast imagination.

He was also one who loved the Lord and who wanted his children to love the Lord. In 1849, while he was writing *David Copperfield*, he took time to write in his own hand *The Life of Our Lord*. It was not written for publication, but only for his own dear children. He would not permit its publication. It was a personal thing, a simple testimony from him to them. His children, when they grew, would not permit its publication. It remained a closely held family affair for eighty-five years. Then his youngest son died in 1933. With the passing of that generation, the family concluded that the work might be published.

I was a missionary in London in 1934, sixty years ago, and I vividly recall the advertisements of one of the popular newspapers that Dickens's *The Life of Our Lord* would be published serially. I paid little attention to it. Following serialization, it was published as a book. There was a surge of interest, and then it seemed to fade.

Years later Sister Hinckley found a copy of the book and read it to our children. While there are some doctrinal matters in it with which we would disagree, it is a wonderful story, told in language beautiful and easily understood. At this Christmas season, may I share a few lines with you? I give them just as Dickens wrote them, without editing.

"My dear children, I am very anxious that you should know something about the History of Jesus Christ. For everybody ought to know about Him. No one ever lived, who was so good, so kind, so gentle, and so sorry for all people who did wrong, or were in any way ill or miserable, as he was. And as he is now in Heaven, where we hope to go, and all to meet each other after we are dead, and there be happy always together, you never can think what a good place Heaven is, without knowing who he was and what he did.

"He was born, a long, long time ago—nearly Two Thousand years ago—at a place called Bethlehem. His father and mother lived in a city called Nazareth, but they were forced, by business to travel to



Bethlehem. His father's name was Joseph, and his mother's name was Mary. And the town being very full of people, also brought there by business, there was no room for Joseph and Mary in the Inn or in any house; so they went into a Stable to lodge, and in this stable Jesus Christ was born. There was no cradle or anything of that kind there, so Mary laid her pretty little boy in what is called the Manger, which is the place the horses eat out of. And there he fell asleep.

"While he was asleep, some Shepherds who were watching Sheep in the Fields, saw an Angel from God, all light and beautiful, come moving over the grass towards Them. At first they were afraid and fell down and hid their faces. But it said 'There is a child born to-day in the City of Bethlehem near here, who will grow up to be so good that God will love him as his own son; and he will teach men to love one another, and not to quarrel and hurt one another; and his name will be Jesus Christ; and people will put that name in their prayers, because they will know God loves it, and will know that they should love it too.' And then the Angel told the Shepherds to go to that Stable, and look at that little child in the Manger. Which they did; and they kneeled down by it in its sleep and said 'God bless this child!'

"Now the great place of all that country was Jerusalem—just as London is the great place in England—and at Jerusalem the King lived, whose name was King Herod. Some wise men came one day, from a country a long way off in the East, and said to the King 'We have seen a Star in the Sky, which teaches us to know that a child is born in Bethlehem who will live to be a man whom all people will love.' When King Herod heard this, he was jealous, for he was a wicked man. But he pretended not to be, and said to the wise men, 'Whereabouts is this child?' And the wise men said 'We don't know. But we think the Star will shew us; for the Star has been moving on before us, all the way here, and is now standing still in the sky.' Then Herod asked them to see if the Star would shew them where the child lived, and ordered them, if they found the child, to come back to him. So they went out, and the Star went on, over their heads a little way before them, until it stopped over the house where the child was. This was very wonderful, but God ordered it to be so.

"When the Star stopped, the wise men went in, and saw the child with Mary his Mother. They loved him very much, and gave him some presents. Then they went away. But they did not go back to King Herod; for they thought he was jealous, though he had not said so. So they went away, by night, back into their own country" (*The Life of Our Lord*, London: Associated Newspapers, 1934; reprint, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, pp. 11-17).

And so this beautiful story opens. Dickens wrote of Joseph as the father of Jesus. Joseph was so recognized by the people. But we know that Jesus' father was God, the Eternal Father, and that Jesus Christ was his Only Begotten Son in the flesh.

Dickens continues to give his children the story of the life of the Master, who he speaks of as "Our Saviour." He tells of his teachings, of the miracles he performed, of his death at the hands of wicked and evil men. And then he concludes his little book with these words:

"Remember!—It is Christianity TO DO GOOD always—even to those who do evil to us. It is Christianity to love our neighbour as ourself, and to do to all men as we would have them Do to us. It is Christianity to be gentle, merciful, and forgiving, and to keep those qualities quiet in our own hearts, and never make a boast of them, or of our prayers or of our love of God, but always to shew that we love Him by humbly trying to do right in everything. If we do this, and remember the life and lessons of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and try to act up to them, we may confidently hope that God will forgive us our sins and mistakes, and enable us to live and die in Peace" (*ibid.*, pp. 124-27).

All of us love Dickens's immortal *A Christmas Carol*. It is the story of the rich and selfish Ebenezer Scrooge, who is mean and unmerciful in his treatment of his employee, Bob Cratchit. And then in the night of Christmas Eve, Scrooge's deceased partner, Jacob Marley, comes to visit him with visions of



Christmas past, of Christmas present, and of Christmas future. This terrifying experience so shocks Scrooge that when he realizes that it was a dream, he is happy and changes his entire life. He reaches out to the Cratchit family. The story is a portrayal of the Spirit of Christ, which can turn men's lives completely around. It is a story of selfishness being replaced by generosity. It is a story of unconcern being replaced by deep concern. It is a story of hate being replaced by love. It is a story of sweet benediction when the little crippled child, Tiny Tim, calls out, "God bless us every one."

That is Dickens's widely acclaimed masterpiece of Christmas. But his *The Life of Our Lord*, written in a very personal way, without adornment or flights of fancy, and written for the children he loved, carries with it not only a beautiful narrative but a compelling admonition: "Remember!—It is christianity TO DO GOOD always—even to those who do evil to us."

Such is the simple telling of a beloved author. In his time and during the generations that have followed, his great novels have been read by millions upon millions. But his story of Jesus' life, written with Dickens's own pen, and without editing of any kind, was for eighty-five years a family treasure and secret. Printed with all of the editorial mistakes of the original writing, it has delighted many others beyond his family.

It is simply another of the countless testimonies of the birth, life, and death of the greatest man who ever walked the earth, the Son of the Almighty God, the Savior and Redeemer of the world, the Prince of Peace, the Holy One.

It was he of whom Isaiah spoke in prophecy: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6).

It was he of whom John said, "But one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose" (Luke 3:16).

It was he of whom John the Beloved exclaimed, "It is the Lord" when, following his resurrection, they saw him on the shore (John 21:7).

It was he of whom the angel said, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

It was he of whom Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon testified: "And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives! "For we saw him, even on the right hand of God; and we heard the voice bearing record that he is the Only Begotten of the Father — "That by him, and through him, and of him, the worlds are and were created, and the inhabitants thereof are begotten sons and daughters unto God" (D&C 76:22-24).

To which we, of our time, add our own testimony—that he lives, the Son of God, he who was the great Jehovah and condescended to be born in Bethlehem's manger; he who went about doing good, blessing and healing the people; he who gave his life on Calvary's cross in the great atoning sacrifice; he who rose from the dead the third day. He lives, and sits on the right hand of his father. He is our Lord, our Redeemer, our guide, our helper, and our friend, through whose atonement there has been opened the gate of immortality and eternal life.

This is a beautiful and blessed season. Let us rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ and in his most basic of teachings—to do good always!





Without Ribbons and Bows

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland

You will recall from Dr. Suess's holiday "horror" story, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, that the devilish Grinch determined to rob Who-ville of every holiday treat. In a nefarious scheme in which the Grinch dressed as Santa himself, he moved through Who-ville taking every package, tree, ornament, and stocking.

*He stared down at Who-ville!
The Grinch popped his eyes!
Then he shook!
What he saw was a shocking surprise.
Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small,
Was singing! Without any presents at all!
He HADN'T stopped Christmas from coming!
IT CAME!
Somehow or other, it came just the same!
And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow
Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?"
"It came without ribbons! It came without tags!
It came without packages, boxes or bags!"
And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store.
"Maybe Christmas perhaps means a little bit more!"
(Dr. Suess, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, New York: Random House, 1957.)*

Part of the purpose for telling the story of Christmas is to remind us that Christmas doesn't come from a store. Indeed, however delightful we feel about it, even as children, each year it "means a little bit more." And no matter how many times we read the biblical account of that evening in Bethlehem, we always come away with a thought—or two—we haven't had before.

I do not feel—or mean this to sound—like a modern-day Scrooge. The gold, frankincense, and myrrh were humbly given and appreciatively received, and so they should be, every year and always. As my wife and children can testify, no one gets more giddy about the giving and receiving of presents than I do.

But for that very reason, I, like you, need to remember the very plain scene, even the poverty, of a night devoid of tinsel or wrapping or goods of this world. Only when we see that sacred, unadorned child of our devotion—the Babe of Bethlehem—will we know why 'tis the season to be jolly" and why the giving of gifts is so appropriate.

At the focal point of all human history, a point illuminated by a new star in the heavens revealed for just such a purpose, probably no other mortal watched—none but a poor young carpenter, a beautiful virgin mother, and silent stabled animals who had not the power to utter the sacredness they had seen. Shepherds would soon arrive and later, wise men from the East. Later yet the memory of that night would bring Santa Claus and Frosty and Rudolph—and all would be welcome. But first and forever there was just a little family, without toys or trees or tinsel. With a baby—that's how Christmas began.



It is for this baby that we shout in chorus: "Hark! the herald angels sing Glory to the newborn King! . . . Mild he lays his glory by, Born that man no more may die; Born to raise the sons of earth, Born to give them second birth" (*Hymns*, no. 209).

Perhaps recalling the circumstances of that gift, of his birth, of his own childhood, perhaps remembering that purity and faith and genuine humility will be required of every celestial soul, Jesus must have said many times as he looked into the little eyes that loved him (eyes that always best saw what and who he really was), "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3).

Christmas, then, is for children—of all ages.





A White Christmas in Ecuador

Carl Grossen

As a new full-time missionary I was anxious to see what Christmas would be like in Guayaquil, Ecuador, where I was serving.

I knew we would not be having a snowy white Christmas like those I was accustomed to. As other thoughts of turkey dinners, gifts, lights, and caroling flashed through my mind, I began to long for the Christmas traditions I was familiar with.

My companion and I felt a renewed urgency and greater responsibility to spread the restored gospel of Jesus Christ to make the Christmas season more meaningful.

One December day we stopped at the humble home of Señor Torres and were given a warm welcome. He told us he had been waiting and praying for the truth for eight years. For two months my companion and I had passed by his house daily without stopping. Señor Torres said, "I always wanted to stop you to ask about your church, but you were always walking so fast that I thought you were too busy for me." Prayers had been answered. We began teaching Señor Torres and his family with great joy.

Christmas day drew nearer, and we could hardly wait to see the Torres family as we quietly approached their home for our fourth visit. Before we knocked on the door, we saw through the window a scene that touched our hearts.

Beauty emanated from the whole family, their loving eyes, rosy cheeks, and gentle faces glowing in the dimly lit room. Beneath a tree on a table in the corner stood miniature Nativity figures, telling the story of a small family in a stable. Two young girls leaned eagerly over their mother's shoulder as she read from a book we had given her, *Gospel Principles*. The oldest child, eight-year-old Victor, was watching attentively as his father played "Silent Night" on a xylophone.

Victor saw us and ran to greet us. We joined in singing "Silent Night" in Spanish. Next they asked us to sing it in English, and then we all sang it together again in Spanish.

Sister Torres told us that before we had shared the gospel with her family she had not felt like celebrating Christmas. But now pictures of Christ, Christmas music, and the Nativity scene had been brought from their place in the cupboards, where they had been collecting dust for the past three years. The true Christmas spirit had been restored as we had presented the gospel message. As servants of the Lord, testifying in His name, we had helped to bring Jesus Christ back into the family's Christmas.

On the third week of December, Christmas became complete for me as I watched Brother and Sister Torres and Victor, all dressed in white, enter the waters of baptism and become members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. My companion turned to me and whispered, "Looks like it's a white Christmas after all." I couldn't have asked for a more meaningful Christmas.





More Than Lights and Bright Colors

Patricia Ch. Merlos

In the months leading up to Christmas in 1998, my husband and I wanted to celebrate Christmas in a different way than we had ever done before. In the past we had celebrated Christmas by meeting with relatives and friends, having dinner together, and opening our gifts on Christmas Eve, which is the tradition in our home country of El Salvador.

But this year we felt a deep desire to teach our two small children the true meaning of Christmas. We wanted our children to know that Christmas is more than lights and bright colors, more than parties and celebrations, more than wrapping paper and ribbons, more than decorating a tree, more than hugs and best wishes.

As Christmas Eve drew near, we weren't sure what we were going to do that night, but I felt free of the stress that normally overwhelms me at Christmastime. We decided we would not go out with friends that night or make any other social commitments. Instead, we would spend the night in simple celebration as a family. Our thoughts would center around our Savior.

On Christmas Eve, I prepared a delicious dinner. As we sat down at the table, our young daughter, Ileana, said expectantly, "It seems like someone is coming tonight." I struggled to keep tears from my eyes. I hoped Jesus Christ would indeed accept our humble invitation.

After dinner, my husband taught us about the birth of Jesus Christ as described in the second chapter of Luke. When he read verses 13 and 14 [Luke 2:13-14]—"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men"—we silently joined with the heavenly hosts in thanking our Eternal Father for sending His Son to atone for our sins. Then Ileana read to us the meaning of Christmas symbols. We opened a few simple gifts and took photographs.

Our evening together was filled with reverence, love, and gratitude for Jesus Christ. We experienced a sweet joy we had never felt before on Christmas Eve.

On Christmas morning we decided to continue our Christmas celebration the way we had started it. We prepared food as if for a picnic, and at about 11:00 A.M., we headed for Opal's house. Opal is 80 years old and not a member of the Church. She has an inner beauty that makes people want to be close to her. Even though Opal doesn't speak our language and isn't from our Spanish culture, our children have accepted her as their grandmother. Ileana could spend hours talking with Opal. And despite his shyness, our son, Kevin, doesn't hesitate for a minute to hug her. I am grateful for Opal's love, especially since our children's grandparents live very far away from our home in Texas.

We wanted to share our Christmas with this lovely widow who lives alone and has no children. Her eyes sparkled when we arrived. She was emotional as we served dinner—it was probably the first Christmas in many years she had spent with anyone.

After we ate, Opal opened some gifts we had brought her. But our visit was more of a gift to us than to Opal. Her joy warmed our hearts.

Next we went to the hospital to visit Sister Schroeder, a member of our ward. From the time our children were very young, Sister Schroeder had taken notice of them and had made them feel important and loved. Every time she greeted us, her first smile was for the children. Now she was in



intensive care and was close to leaving this world. I didn't think the children would be allowed into her room. But their sincere pleading softened the heart of the nurse, and they were admitted inside.

Since Sister Schroeder was unconscious, I didn't know if she would hear anything we said to her. We wanted to tell her that she was important to us and that we loved her. With all the tenderness in my heart, I caressed Sister Schroeder's arm as I sent a prayer to our Heavenly Father in her behalf. It was the first Christmas gift I have ever given with such a sincere desire; it was wrapped in compassion and tied with the ribbon of my tears.

Then Ileana approached her bedside and said in an angelic voice, "Sister Schroeder, it's Ileana. I'm here to wish you a Merry Christmas." Her tearful words were brief but sincere. I was certain Sister Schroeder would somehow take that loving memory with her to her new life.

Our unplanned Christmas taught me much. I came to understand that Christmas celebrations need not be competitions to see who can give or receive the most expensive present. Our most valuable gift is our love—love for the Christ child, who was born 2,000 years ago in a humble manger, love for our families and our neighbors, love for the beautiful world Heavenly Father has given us. Another valuable gift is our compassion—the feeling that causes us "to mourn with those that mourn" (Mosiah 18:9), to lift the weak, to visit the lonely, to dry the tears of those who are sad. And another gift is our gratitude—gratitude for our Savior who taught us how to live and who lovingly and willingly bore our sins, our griefs, and our weaknesses as His Father had commissioned Him to do.

We celebrate Christmas best when we live the Savior's teachings—not just at Christmas but every day of the year.





Christmas Eve Miracle

Alda McDonald Strebel

I can still hear my mother's soft voice as she related this Christmas Eve miracle. The experience was sacred to mama; she told it only on special occasions, such as the evening my sweetheart asked for my hand in marriage.

The story began on a crisp autumn day in October, 1928. The huge barn behind our home in Heber City, in northern Utah, was heaped to the rafters with fresh hay, and the loft was filled with the happy laughter and shouting of romping children. I was among them, unaware of the tragedy about to strike. I found myself an inviting hay hill, and got ready to slide down. Suddenly I was falling headfirst through a chute. Down I shot to a cement floor into a feeding manger at the bottom of the barn.

I still remember the startling sensation of regaining consciousness, and the horrible frustration of not being able to cry. My brothers ran for papa. How comforting and secure his sturdy, strong arms felt as he lifted me out of the hay manger and carried me into the house. Gently he placed me on my bed. Several days later my headache had not subsided. The condition became even more complicated when I contracted a severe cold; to this day I remember the nightmare of the accompanying high fever. Later one afternoon when the doctor made his routine call, he shook his head as he read the thermometer, and mama knew it was time to take action. She sent for papa, and we prepared to leave for Provo, forty miles away, where I could be hospitalized. Neighbors and relatives gathered to offer their assistance and assure us that my four small brothers would be well cared for.

The journey through the winding roads in Provo Canyon was long and hard, as papa pushed his Model T Ford through herds of sheep on the roadway. We arrived at the hospital late that night.

The pain was severe behind my left ear and after two more days of high fever, the doctors operated and discovered a deep-seated mastoid infection. By this time it had entered my blood stream. The next week the surgeons were compelled to lance my left arm, and the next week my right leg. For seven long weeks I endured the grueling ordeal of many operations.

Three days before Christmas the doctors called my father into the office and told him they could offer little hope for my recovery. Knowing of my intense longing for my brothers and home, my parents decided to take me home for Christmas. They located a truck to take me to the train (there were only a few trucks in the entire town) and lifted me onto a cot. In the hallway the hospital personnel gave me a lovely doll dressed in a pink, handknit sweater and cap. I clutched the doll close to my body under the blankets, and when we came out into the refreshing night air, I was hysterically happy. I thought I was leaving the whole ordeal behind me in that hospital.

Slowly the truck made its way to the depot. We boarded, the conductor shoveled a huge lump of coal into the potbellied stove in the caboose, and the train began its three-hour journey home. The sleeping powder the doctor had administered before we left the hospital soon took effect, and I slept most of the way. When the train stopped, papa stepped to the door of the car, then bent over me chuckling.

"You would never believe the crowd that is out there to welcome us," he said. "My goodness, you would think a celebrity was getting off this train." He chuckled again as he pulled a warm cap over my head. Mama tucked the covers under my chin, and my cot was lifted to Uncle Dode's bobsled. Sleighbells tinkled as the horses pranced down Center Street over the smooth, icy roads.



When we reached the tabernacle corner, the sleigh stopped with a merry "Whoa." In the middle of the main street was a large Christmas tree, adorned with electric tree lights, the first I had ever seen, How colorful and sparkly they were! The children of my primary class stood beneath the tree, welcoming me with the sacred strains of "Silent Night, Holy Night." With all the faith and meekness of a child, I felt the love of our Savior in the hearts of many gentle people. Mama's tears were mingled with the soft snowflakes that fell on my face.

A short time later, at our own front door, Mama laughed and cried as she hugged her four little sons. Seven weeks without a mother had seemed an eternity to them. Then, with hushed excitement, they led the way into my bedroom which they had adorned with red and green paper chains. A large, deep-red tissue bell hung from the single light globe. "Oh, see! The Christmas elves have been here!" Mama exclaimed, hugging the boys again.

But as the exertion of the trip took its toll, I realized the pain and suffering had not ended. By Christmas Eve my situation was critical, and the doctors told my parents that my chances of surviving the night were small. The elders administered to me, and for the first time my parents had the courage to say, "Thy will be done."

After the blessing a special peace descended over the household. Papa and mama went into the living room with the four boys and helped them hang their Christmas stockings. Then they tucked each one into bed, assuring them that Santa was on his way.

Knowing that she was going to need strength for what lay ahead, mama was persuaded to retire to an upstairs bedroom. I loved to hear her tell of lying in the stillness of the night and of the peace that came over her as she fell into a sound sleep. She awakened, startled, just as dawn was breaking Christmas morning. She turned to my bedroom door, a silent prayer on her lips. Papa was just coming out, his tired face bathed in a relieved smile. A miracle had happened. I had been given strength to survive the night, and Mama could even see a slight sparkle in my tired eyes.

"Has Santa been here yet?" I asked.

"You bet he has," she cried, tears streaming from her eyes. "It looks like Santa just stumbled into our living room and all the toys fell out of his bag."

"But the most precious gift of all," mama would say whenever she retold the story, "was the Savior's gift to us that hallowed Christmas Eve."

Although the illness left me with a physical handicap—one leg was much shorter than the other—I have been privileged to lead an active life. In 1977, before he passed away, my husband, Dr. George L. Strebel, and I served in Europe, where he was coordinator of English-speaking seminaries and institutes. I now have four happily married children and fifteen beautiful grandchildren.

Four years ago I had total hip surgery—three and a half inches were added to my leg. I am now walking without crutches and with just a slight limp. My leg is getting better all the time—a modern installment to the miracle that began that Christmas Eve.





Finding the Christmas Spirit

Sandi Schureman

Time was running out. It was December 24, Christmas Eve, and I still hadn't found that magical feeling, the spirit of Christmas. I had done the things I thought would bring it—attended my children's school performance of Christmas carols, decorated our tree, baked, shopped, wrapped. Yet nothing seemed to spark the Christmas spirit within me. I had resigned myself to the fact that this just might not be a very good Christmas.

My husband, Steve, a firefighter, was on his routine 24-hour shift at the firehouse, which meant he would not be home for either Christmas Eve or Christmas morning. Our four children and I were eager to spend what time we could with him, so we all drove down to the station.

As we arrived, the firefighters had just returned from a first-aid call to a nearby motel, where they had rendered care to a young boy with a fever and other symptoms. My husband expressed to us his feelings of concern and his desire to do something more for the boy and his brother and their mother. They had fled an abusive, alcoholic situation and were now hundreds of miles from home, with one change of clothes each, very little money, and now an ill child on Christmas Eve.

Steve looked at me and at each of our children and asked, "What else can we do to help them? We picked up a small tree on the way back to the station that we want to decorate for them, but what more can we do this late?" It was 9:25 P.M.

Our children began a clamor of ideas. My daughter was sure a toy store somewhere was still open. My oldest son, then fifteen years old, offered a prayer and asked Heavenly Father to guide us to a place where we would find the gifts we needed. This filled the children with hope that we could find a toy store still open. I didn't share their hope, largely because even if we did find a store open, I didn't know how we would pay for anything we found.

I wanted to share, as much as my children did, but this Christmas was already our leanest ever. Our own children were receiving only two gifts each. Still, we drove eagerly around looking for anything open, planning to meet Steve and the other firefighters back at the motel room before the little family returned from the hospital, where they'd gone for medicine.

Every store we saw was closed. Then one of my sons said, "Hey, I know somewhere that's open." "Yeah, and they've got presents already wrapped!" declared the other son. Wondering what they were talking about, I pulled the car to the side of the street, and in frustration I turned to the kids and asked, "Oh, yeah, just where is this great place?" Their answer was so enthusiastic and genuine that it instantly ignited within me the flame of the Christmas spirit. "We can go to our house," they chimed together. "The presents are already wrapped and under the tree."

I asked them each if they really wanted to do this, and their eager response was, "Yes! Yes! Now hurry!" Once we were home, I watched with wonder as each pulled name tags off of their presents and each picked certain ornaments from our tree. At first, I was surprised to see that the ornaments they picked were the ones they themselves had made over the years. Then I realized that they were giving of themselves, and these had special value.

Two of my boys came out of their bedroom with their baseball gloves, their "pride and joy" mitts. We loaded the presents, some tree lights, and candy and goodies that were our family's stocking stuffers, and we were off to the motel. The manager let us into the austere little room, and we set



right to work with the firefighters, who had also brought things.

We set the tree on the tabletop and adorned it with lights and the ornaments. Some of the firefighters hung candy bars and twenty-dollar bills on it with paper clips. Presents were in place under the tree, canned goods stacked in the corner, and clothes for the mother and children folded neatly on the nightstand. The room had been transformed.

On each of the bed pillows lay a somewhat used baseball glove from our boys, and I saw my fifteen-year-old place between the mitts one of his most prized possessions. It was his home run baseball. I doubted that the little boys receiving this prize could possibly know what a sacrifice this was or what a revered spot it had held in my son's room for the past six months. But that moment I knew that in my son's heart, the spirit of Christmas flamed brightly, lighting that little room even after we turned off all the lights except the diamond-like ones on the tree.

I had almost given up on finding that precious spirit of Christmas. But it was given to me by my dear husband who recognized a need when he saw it, my children who so eagerly responded, and my Savior, whose love for all mankind serves to remind me that I'll never need to be without the Christmas spirit again. I realize as never before that the Christmas spirit comes to us as we give of ourselves to others.





The Things That Really Matter

Teresa Pitman

In December 1981, as I attempted to prepare for the holidays, I became increasingly dissatisfied. With three young children, the house seemed too small, and the constant Christmas advertising encouraged me to long for things I knew we couldn't afford.

Despite these feelings, I wanted to make the season special for my family. The local historical society had restored a 125-year-old house, once the home of the town's doctor, and had decorated it as it would have been decorated for Christmas in 1860. We decided to take our children on the tour.

The little house had two bedrooms downstairs, but one had been rented out to help meet the family's expenses. The family's five children had all slept upstairs in the loft. All the cooking had been done over an open fireplace in the basement, and the clothes had been washed by hand. Each person had had only two or three outfits to wear.

As I looked around, I realized how thrilled the owners of this home would have been with our three large bedrooms, our indoor bathroom, our furnace, and our electric stove.

The home was carefully decorated with strings of popcorn and cranberries, homemade cookies, and a hand-carved crèche. As I stood by the fire, a still-warm gingerbread man in my hand, my thoughts traveled even farther into the past. I remembered the mother who had spent the very first Christmas in a stable, with only a manger for her child's bed. I believe she was content, knowing she was where her Heavenly Father wanted her to be, with her newborn son safe in her arms and her husband at her side. Because, after all, those are the things that really matter.





Stockings Filled with Love

Henry Copier

I chuckled to myself as I picked up one of seven red stockings lying neatly on my mission companion's bed. "Who are these for?" I asked, trying not to laugh.

"For the Winkle family," he responded shyly as he packed away his needle and thread.

"They're ... really nice," I said with some apprehension. Elder Johnson and I had been assigned to serve in the town of Muskegon, Michigan. The Winkles were a choice investigator family scheduled to be baptized on Christmas Day, and in all honesty I felt sheepish delivering these cute little stockings with hand-embroidered gold lettering.

"What are you going to stuff them with?" I asked.

Somewhat surprised at my question, he looked around the room at the oversupply of goodies we had received from home and replied, "Candy—what else?" Then in a more serious tone he added, "I was hoping that we could also include in each stocking a personal Christmas wish and our own written testimonies."

Still feeling uneasy with this idea, I nevertheless decided to go along with it for fear of offending my creative companion. Our month had been filled with preparing this family for baptism, and now the day of their interviews had arrived at last, Christmas Eve. Everything was ready, or so we thought.

Arriving at the Winkle home, we immediately sensed something was wrong. As I interviewed Brother Winkle privately, he told me that the children had been quarreling all morning and that everyone in the family was on edge. Some of the older children had even expressed doubts about being baptized. Upon returning to the family, we encountered more negative feelings.

"Elder Copier, this baptism has caused a lot of concern in our family," said Sister Winkle, "and I'm not sure we should go through with it if it's going to cause so much contention."

After spending a few more minutes discussing the problem, we decided together that we should postpone the baptism until the family could feel better about it. To give the family time to sort out their feelings, Brother Winkle asked us not to return unless he contacted us.

With heavy hearts and deep concern, we slowly walked home. Our apartment seemed quiet and gloomy that Christmas Eve. Hours passed as we sat in silent depression. Finally Elder Johnson broke the silence as he pulled out the paper bag filled with the stockings and candy.

"Do you suppose we could leave these at their home anyway?" he asked quietly. Numbly I nodded, and instantly gloom turned to cheerfulness as we spent the rest of that Christmas Eve writing our testimonies for each member of the family and stuffing them in the little red stockings.

As we approached the Winkle home that chilly dark evening, Elder Johnson asked, "Should I knock?" "No, let's just leave it by the door," I suggested. I did not want to cause any problem with the family. Elder Johnson slipped the brown paper bag inside the screen door. Quietly we turned away and headed for home. How difficult it was for two young, inexperienced elders who loved a family so dearly to simply walk away. Snowflakes began to fall, and we knew it was going to be a white Christmas.



We were awakened the next morning by the sound of snow shovels and the voices of children outside our window. "Merry Christmas, elders!" the Winkle children called to us as we opened our door. "We wanted to shovel your walks for you and also tell you that our whole family is ready to be baptized! Our parents want to know if you can come over right away!"

We dressed and ran to the Winkle home. Sister Winkle greeted us warmly and apologized for all that had happened the day before. "We were scared," she said. "Baptism is such a big step in our lives." She paused, then pointed to the seven red stockings hanging by the fireplace. "Those," she said with emotion, "are what took away our fears and doubts. You see, elders, I was so touched by the love you showed our family yesterday—despite the way we acted—that I just couldn't put it out of my mind. I finally said a silent prayer and asked the Lord to let me know, just one more time, if the message you brought was true. As I prayed, I said, 'Heavenly Father, if the elders are really thy messengers, send them back today even though we asked them not to return.'

"Well, hours passed, and I kept hoping you would come, but you did not. At midnight I gave up hope and decided that my answer was that I shouldn't get baptized. It was then I went to turn off the porch light and noticed the brown bag in the screen door. When I opened it and realized it was from you, I began to cry. You *had* come back. I woke up the family, and together we read your testimonies and Christmas wishes. We shared a spirit of love and unity unlike anything we had known before, and we knew it was time to be baptized."

The chapel's entire front row was filled with Winkles dressed in white baptismal clothing that Christmas Day. It was indeed a very white Christmas.





An Angel in Deed

Amanda Rowe

When my eldest daughter, Lauren, started school, I looked forward to her afternoon account of the day's activities. As Christmastime approached, her enthusiasm for the Nativity play was delightful. Each day she would tell me of the various preparations being made for the performance. She sang me the songs and recounted the familiar story of the birth of Jesus with childlike wonder.

One afternoon she announced that she had been chosen to play the part of an angel. She went on to describe the beautiful white dress she would wear and talked excitedly about the golden tinsel that would garland her hair. Over the next few days, as the rehearsals became more intense, her excitement continued to grow, so I was slightly puzzled when she arrived home one afternoon and made no mention of the play.

A few days later, Lauren came home and immediately started rummaging through her box of dress-up clothes. I inquired what she was looking for, and she told me she needed a dull, plain dress to wear for the school play. Puzzled, I asked about her angel costume. She quietly explained that there was a little boy in her class who did not get along with any of the children. His difficulty in fitting in with the others had alienated him from his classmates. This young boy's role in the play was to be part of the crowd of people in Bethlehem, but despite instruction and rehearsal his constant fidgeting on stage was disruptive. To help keep Charlie quiet, the teacher had asked Lauren to forgo her part as an angel and stand in the crowd scene beside him so that he would not disturb the flow of the performance. Lauren had quietly accepted the change of plans and was now looking for a costume—not only for her but also for Charlie in case he forgot to bring one.

My indignation rose as I absorbed what she was saying. Why should she give up her special part for a troublesome classmate? As I looked at Lauren, however, I held my tongue. Instead, I commended her for her thoughtfulness. Still, a nagging irritation stayed with me throughout the night.

The next day I broached the subject with Mrs. Roberts, her teacher. She told me that recently she had watched a relationship develop between Lauren and Charlie. As other children had scorned him and laughed at his clumsy ways, Lauren had begun to befriend him. It seemed that not only was Lauren helping him through the play but she had also been assigned to sit next to him in class. I related my concern that in looking after Charlie, perhaps my daughter would fall back in her own work. Mrs. Roberts smiled and assured me that Lauren was a bright little girl. "She gets on with her work quickly and efficiently and then spends time helping Charlie with his tasks while others are finishing," she explained. "Lauren is patient and understanding with him, and his work has improved and his self-confidence has blossomed. By becoming his friend, she has done more for him in three weeks than I, a qualified teacher, have been able to do in three months!"

I left the classroom with a spring in my step. The Christ-like attitude of my five-year-old daughter was humbling. That evening, as the lights came up on the Nativity play, there was a general stir in the audience as the little angels in white dresses and sparkling tinsel halos came on stage. But one mother, at least, recognized the glowing inner beauty of a little girl in a dull blue dress standing in the middle of the Bethlehem crowd scene—holding tightly to Charlie's hand.





Just a Few Stamps Short

Wanda Daines Hammond Vetterli

As the years pass and Christmas memories fade, one Christmas stands above the rest. The year was 1918. There was a terrible flu going around in Logan, Utah, and my father was stricken. As there were no antibiotics in those days, we waited for the change that would mean life or death.

Because of my father's illness, Mother told us there would be no money for Christmas gifts that year. My brother and sisters and I secretly decided to do something special for our parents to show them how much they were loved. Oh, if only we could buy them special gifts! We decided we would each look for a job to earn money and then pool our savings. Henry, my older brother, found a job selling Christmas trees, chopping wood, and cleaning walks. Carmen did housework for others, and Luella, who was a fast knitter, made and sold her handiwork. I baby-sat for a mother down the street. Only Marie was too young to work. She just looked forward to Christmas.

The day before Christmas was a crisp, wintry day. A thick blanket of snow covered the streets, and the stores were full of shoppers. We all gathered in my sister's bedroom and counted our money. We had just enough to buy Father a warm robe and Marie a doll buggy. But what about Mother? What could we get or do for her, and where would we get the extra money?

We needed Heavenly Father's help, so as brother and sisters we knelt down and prayed with all the fervor we could muster. And then we remembered: there was an almost-full book of green stamps from Christensen's Department Store, and the completed books could be redeemed for merchandise. We hurried downtown and found the robe for Father and the wicker buggy for Marie, which we purchased at Christensen's store. We received only a few stamps for our purchases, however, so we still lacked enough to fill the book. Carmen was walking through the store when a woman near the counter dropped her stamps. Carmen bent over, picked them up, and handed them back to her.

"I don't save these," the woman said. "Would you like them?"

Would we? We were overjoyed! Now we could buy a gift for our mother. We found a small table for just one book of stamps, but it was too heavy to carry home. We asked the clerk if it could be delivered that night, but she told us the delivery truck had already left. We must have looked very sad because she offered to contact the driver and see if he would deliver the table after hours.

That night, for the first time in weeks, Father seemed better and even wanted to join us for the festivities. The temperature was below freezing outside, but we were blanketed with a warmth of love for each other. We made chains of popcorn, colored paper, and cranberries for our tree, and the spicy smell of baked cookies and pies filled the air. Friends and family dropped by, and we sang our favorite Christmas songs and shared our treats.

Mother gave us all small gifts of knitted mittens, hard candy, and stockings, but still her gift had not arrived. What if it did not come? Then there was a knock at the door and someone shouted "Merry Christmas!" The delivery man was there with Mother's table. We jumped up and down and cheered, and Mother had tears in her eyes.

That Christmas I learned that loving *someone* was more important than loving some *thing*. We felt the joy that comes from giving of ourselves, and that evening we knelt in prayer to thank Heavenly Father for His help and kind blessings.





Anonymous Gifts

Valda P. Hoennicke

When I think about my most inspiring Christmas, I think of "Christmas angels" and turkeys. What a combination! But together they showed me the true meaning of Christmas.

As the 1970s came to a close, it seemed as though my husband, Ron, was out of work more than he was working. We thought our problems were over, though, when in 1981 he found a good-paying job to support our family of five. It seemed there was light at the end of our financial tunnel. In September, we had more cause to celebrate—we learned that our fourth child would be arriving the next April. Life was wonderful.

Then came the tenth of November, our son's first birthday, and Ron came home to inform me that disagreements with his employer might force him to leave his job. Sure enough, on the sixteenth, Ron was again unemployed. Needless to say, money became nonexistent for a while as his employer refused us unemployment benefits. With only a couple of weeks until Christmas, we became depressed as we thought of how little we could do for our three children, ages six, three, and one.

A couple of days before Christmas, after an evening of Church meetings, we returned to our locked car to find a turkey and a box of groceries on the front seat. With the box was a card that told us our service to the Lord hadn't gone unnoticed. The next morning, there was another turkey on our front step, and a large plastic bag tied with a poinsettia. In this bag there were presents for each of us. And before the day was over, we received another turkey!

Not only were we blessed by receiving, but because of the generosity of our anonymous friends, we were blessed in being able to help other unemployed families.

Now, as Christmas time rolls around, we have a family home evening just to do something special for another family. When I hang the plastic poinsettia on my curtains, I think of the greatest gift of Christmas—love—and how grateful we are to our "Christmas angels" for loving us through that difficult period of our lives.

