



Christmas 1998

Reflections . . .

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Tidings of comfort and joy...

by Judy Horton

From my earliest memory, Christmas was a day on which even the air we breathed seemed special in some indefinable way. It was a *consecrated* day—set apart, different.

My family never attended church, and I had received no religious instruction beyond a few visits to Hebrew *schule* with neighbors' children, where I got to be a Hanukkah candle in a pageant. It was not church or Sunday School associations which produced in me this frame of mind.

Each year, however, I was able to hear the story of the birth of the Christ child read over the PA system at school.

Sitting in the third-grade classroom in my large brick school, with wintry drafts seeping through the windows even as the steam radiators pumped off clouds of heat, I listened as the principal began to read the ancient words of Luke, "*And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.*"

At home, a tree was procured and set up in a corner of the living room. Our preparations were an erratic and not altogether happy affair, for my father was an alcoholic—unpredictable and edgy—and family outings had a way of going awry. Once the tree was home, the search for the Christmas tree stand became a cause for further anxiety, although for the life of me I can't now imagine how it got lost in our tiny house.

Eventually, however, the stand was found, and the tree erected more or less upright, with the lights strung according to my father's standards, after which we kids were free to decorate at will. A half hour later the tree shone in glory. Lights blazed, colorful chipped globes hung hither and yon, and great globs of tinsel clung to the tips of the branches. Mother mixed Ivory laundry soap with water to make a thick, slimy paste and we slathered it on the windows of the living room to mimic snow. Through the panes the bleak landscape of the West Texas winter failed to sustain the illusion. When all had been accomplished, and night fallen, my mother turned out every light in the house save for the tree, and we trooped outside to behold the annual marvel.

As Christmas approached, the few packages under the tree were daily inspected, counted, and apportioned by my brother and me. On Christmas Eve I went to bed early, but got to sleep late. I imagined I heard reindeer hooves and jingle bells. I thought about the baby being born in a stable. I couldn't figure out the connection between the infant Jesus and the jolly old saint in the red suit, but I didn't worry about it, figuring (rightly) that it was one of those things that would come clear in time.

On Christmas morning my brother and I arose long before daylight to light the gas heater in the living room. I looked under the tree to see if Santa had added something during the night, while Brother rolled his eyes and went off to the kitchen to make coffee for our parents who, groaning in feigned outrage over being awakened so early, stumbled into the living room, rubbing their eyes and yawning in exaggerated fashion.

We were allowed to tear into our packages without ceremony, and we did so in a frenzy, even though we knew we would find mostly underwear, sweaters, socks, and toothbrushes, for which we were obliged to act grateful. There was a nice toy for each of us, however—skates for me and a b-b gun for Brother.

The rest of the day then loomed an eternity before us. The grownups shooed us out of the house after breakfast. I, a lonely little girl, took a few tries and a few falls on my new skates, and then settled down to visit with the family dog while Brother ran off to find his neighborhood buddies. As the day grew long, I sat on the porch and pondered, amazed, the fact that all the stores were closed, and all the daddies off work. If you needed gasoline, you were just out of luck, as all the stations were shut up tight.

And all because of the baby Jesus, who wasn't even really born that day, but was just having his birthday remembered hundreds and hundreds of years after it happened.

If Christmas that year was like every other holiday, my father most surely was drunk by mid-day. But I don't remember that. All I recall are the tree, the presents, the food, and the lustrous and inexplicable quality of *Christmas* hanging over the entire day. Somehow, you see, Christmas was bigger than the sadness and poverty of our lives. Christmas was worth all the 364 other days we would have to wait before it returned to grace us again.

And Brother and I needed that day of grace, because our handsome young father, hopeless and bitter, took his own life before the new year was half over.

His death was especially hard because early in the year Daddy had caught hope like a fever. Fiercely intellectual, he had met his match in a young minister new to town. Daddy liked and respected him, and began to

take the family to church and Sunday school. He stayed with it long enough to get himself and Mother baptized, and I remember sitting on a pew with my aunt and Brother as first Daddy, and then Mother, were immersed, their billowing robes floating on the water as the minister brought them forth into the possibility of new life.

Only eight years old, I was shaken to witness this event, and began shuddering so violently in my seat that Brother reached over across our aunt to deliver me a good whack.

For a very brief time, life changed at our house. Nobody drank, and Daddy looked for work. Mom kept the house up and tended to us children. For our part, Brother and I were suspicious and a little alarmed at all the sudden supervision, but also heartened to be joining what we supposed was the normal life of our friends and neighbors.

All too quickly it was over. Daddy began to drink again, and with the loss of sobriety came the final loss of hope for life ever getting and staying better. One beautiful spring day the suicide came which branded and changed us forever.

For years I raged against my awful childhood, and blamed all manner of ills, real and imagined, on it and on my parents, even as I struggled to regain that sense of hope and promise we had briefly shared as a family. Much later, I sought comfort in a church community, and found truth. Some years after that, I began to understand a few things.

First, I found I was right about Christmas. Christmas *is* bigger than anything. The special air we feel on Christmas Day is hope being born anew into the world, and if we will, we drink it into ourselves like wine for the journey.

Next, my Daddy not only made sure there was something under the tree for me on Christmas, but when I saw him sink into the baptismal waters, he gave me a far greater gift—the gift of the Holy Spirit. He introduced me—shaking in my pew—to the Companion, who finally banished a lifetime of loneliness.

Last, the Spirit brought me to the Father, and I was able to claim every good thing which fatherhood has to offer. Those things I longed for in my earthly father—love, understanding, guidance, justice, and truth—I have been given in abundance by my heavenly Father.

Amazingly, the few things Daddy managed to bequeath to me in his short, unhappy life were taken by God and made sufficient, even though Daddy died in despair, certain of having failed in everything he touched. I came to know this in my heart a few years ago one Sunday on the Feast Day of the Holy Family.

As I knelt silently repeating the words after the priest while he read the Eucharistic prayers, I suddenly felt as though my father were beside me, pleading that I take the Eucharist not only for myself, but for him as well. In a flash I felt the despair that had driven my father to his death, and comprehended for the first time *his* tragic loss. I didn't know what I should do, but I stumbled into the aisle sobbing, startling the priest. Right or wrong, I extended my hand for the Host—for Daddy, and for his girl. Only much later did I realize that this had happened on Daddy's birthday.

Forty-eight years have come and gone since I sat on the porch and pondered Christmas. My own husband now strings the lights just so and then abandons the decorating to our daughters and grandchildren. Then we turn off all the lights and troop outside to behold the wonder of it all.

On Christmas morning the kids make terrible coffee, wake us up far too early, and we lumber into the living room, mock grumbling to their great amusement. They receive too many presents (none of them underwear or toothbrushes) and all too soon the day stretches out before us. I go to the kitchen to put on the turkey. Then we get ready for Mass.

Throughout the day, Christmas hangs over the Ranch, numinous and heavy, and the world is quiet. The kids leap among the rafters in the hay barn. We hike in the winter woods, play with the donkeys, and come back to the house for our holy day feast. It is a day like no other in the year.

We are not perfect. Like everyone else we have our problems but we are a family, bound in love to do the best we can. When our best is not good enough, we still have hope.

It is a hope born every year on Christmas day in little homes and mansions, huts and palaces, all over the world—the greatest gift a loving Father ever gave his children, and the reason why Christmas is bigger than anything.

Judy lives with her husband Jerry and their daughter Kelly, who has Down syndrome, at Down Home Ranch. They also are the parents of three adult, married daughters, and the grandparents of four granddaughters and two grandsons.

The Mission of Down Home Ranch

Faithful to the Christian mission to provide for those in need, Down Home Ranch seeks to build a rural, self-reliant community for adults with disabilities such as mental retardation, offering training, housing, recreation, and dignified employment, as well as opportunities for growth in mind, body, and spirit.

The Ranch is a charity, supported by donations from individuals, churches, businesses, service clubs, and foundations.