

Christmas Memories

Maybe it's my age, but Christmas brings back a lot of memories to me. I'll never forget, for example, as a small boy being given a copy of Clement Clarke Moore's A Visit from St. Nicholas. It was a beautiful book filled with color prints of St. Nicholas, whom we now know as Santa Claus, in his sleigh pulled by eight reindeer through the sky:

**"Now, Dasher! now, Dancer! now Prancer and Vixen!
On, Comet! on, Cupid! on, Donner and Blitzen!
To the top of the porch! to the top of the wall!
Now dash away! dash away! dash away all!"**

St. Nicholas was on a mission: to deliver gifts to children on this Christmas Eve. He would land on the rooftop and go down the chimney into the house – this rather rotund man all dressed in fur from head to foot.

Amazing, isn't it, that the Santa Claus we know today, is based on a character from a 1822 poem written by a professor of Oriental and Greek literature at the General Theological Seminary in New York. In fact, Clement Clarke Moore was an Episcopal priest whose father was the Bishop of New York. He was a strong churchman who defended the rights of religion against any who might threaten it.

And yet, with his poem about St. Nicholas he appealed to children of all ages who view the Christmas season

as one of mystery and wonder in which grace and goodness break into our lives.

**“He spoke not a word, but when straight to his work,
And filled all the stockings; then turned with a jerk,
And laying his finger aside of his nose,
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose;
He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle.
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight –
“Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night.”**

When I think of Christmas, I think of my father dressed in a Santa Claus outfit to bring a little cheer to people who could use it. I think of my father going out on a cold snowy night and buying Christmas gifts for my cousins when my uncle was sick and unemployed. Dad, dressed as Santa Claus, would bring a whole bag of gifts to their house.

On another occasion dad bought food for our neighbors who must have been having the worst Christmas of their lives. “Son,” he said to me, “you’ve got to think of others, not just yourself, and that’s especially true during Christmas.”

When I think of Christmas, I think of all the family gatherings that have meant so much to me – aunts and uncles and cousins assembled around the dinner table, talking and laughing and feasting, which was a tradition for us both on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Many of those dear people are now in heaven, but at Christmas I especially miss them.

When I think of Christmas, I think of all the wonderful stories of the season. There's Dickens' A Christmas Carol – my favorite film version is the 1938 movie starring Reginald Heber as Scrooge – you may have your own favorite. Then there's the classic film, It's a Wonderful Life starring Jimmy Stewart being saved by Clarence the Angel on Christmas Eve – discovering that his life really does have a purpose, and that there is a reason for him to go on living.

And then, there's the film The Bishop's Wife – the 1947 version – about an angel played by Cary Grant who saves the marriage and ministry of an Episcopal Bishop played by David Niven who is at his wits' end in his attempt to build a cathedral.

I love that film and especially the ending when the Bishop returns to his old parish on Christmas Eve and preaches one of the most moving sermons ever made on film.

The Bishop ends by saying, "It's [Christ's] birthday we are celebrating. Don't ever forget that. Let us ask ourselves what He would wish for most. And then, let each put in his share, loving kindness, warm hearts, and a stretched out hand of tolerance. All the shining gifts that make peace on earth."

I love so many stories of the Christmas season, but the one I want to share with you this evening is one you probably haven't heard before. It's the story of Walter the mail clerk and Milton the cockroach.

When Walter started working for the biggest corporation in the world, the personnel director said he would have to start at the bottom and work his way up. So Walter found himself in the basement working in the mailroom. Walter liked his job, but often daydreamed about what it would be like to be a junior executive, vice-president, president, or even chairman of the board.

One day, as Walter was busy collecting the mail, he heard footsteps in the corner and noticed a small cockroach creeping around. Just as he was about to step on it, he heard a small voice scream: “Don’t kill me! Please, don’t kill me! I’m Milton the cockroach. And if you spare my life, I promise to grant all of your wishes.” That sounded like a pretty good deal to Walter. So he spared Milton the cockroach’s life.

Walter’s first wish was to get out of the mailroom and be a junior executive. Milton granted that wish. Next Walter wanted to become one of the vice-presidents of the corporation. That wish was granted too. As a matter of fairy tale fact, Milton the cockroach kept granting every one of Walter’s wishes until Walter was finally elevated to be chairman of the board, on the top floor of the headquarters of the largest corporation in the world.

Now everybody looked up to Walter and he was very happy. Ever so often, Milton the cockroach could hear Walter saying to himself: “I am Walter. Everybody respects me. Everybody knows I’m in control. I’m at the top. No one is bigger or better or more important than me.”

One day as Walter was sitting behind his desk and daydreaming about how important he had become, he heard footsteps on top of the roof. When the sound of the footsteps suddenly stopped, Walter decided to investigate. What he found was a little boy who was on his knees praying.

So he asked the boy, “Are you praying to Walter?”

“Of course not,” said the little boy with a smile of innocence. “I’m praying to God!”

Walter responded, “Why are you praying to God? I’m the chairman of the board of the largest corporation in the world. What can God do for you that I can’t do for you?”

The little boy replied, “God made me and God saved me.”

Walter didn’t know what to say. Very disturbed by this turn of events, he sent for Milton the cockroach as soon as he got back to his office on the top floor of the headquarters of the largest corporation in the world. “I want to be like God,” Walter told Milton. So Milton the cockroach granted Walter’s request – and Walter went back to the mailroom in the basement.

That’s what Christmas is all about, dear people. God works out his serving ministry in the mailrooms of life. God comes down to our level to show us how to move up in life to eternity. It’s a gift: The Babe of Bethlehem, the Savior of the world, Jesus.

When I think of Christmas, I think of God gathering all the angels together, pulling out his wallet, showing them our pictures, and saying, “That’s my boy! That’s my girl! Have you seen my boy today? Have you seen my girl today? I love them and I’m going down there to get them. I’d just die for them. I’d just die to bring them back home.”

What are you thinking about tonight? At this time of year, I think about the people I love, the people I miss, the ones no longer here but have blessed my life. But most of all, I think of Jesus. Because of Jesus, I will always have all I want for Christmas. For if God never does another thing for me ever again, what God did for me in Jesus is enough.

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Text – Luke 2:1-14
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