

Christmas Reflections 2011



CHRIST
CHURCH
CHARLOTTE



Christ Church
Christmas Reflections 2011
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Jan Fairbrother, a beloved member of the Writing Your Faith group. Jan proposed this collection with great enthusiasm and love, and was in our hearts as we brought it to fruition.

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Advent

Counting off the days, decorating and preparing for church pageants, what little girl wouldn't want to be Mary or boy, to be Joseph? Maybe that was when my fascination with the Madonna began.

Looking through picture books of the Christmas story, I fixed on the lovely young woman in blue, next to the Christ Child. I grew interested in art books, searching for any Mary painted by an Old Master. It was Botticelli, with his graceful, flowing figures, the mythical goddesses of perfection that became my favorite. As an old man, the artist concentrated on religious subjects. The faces of his Madonna expressed the longing, the mystery, and the prophetic nature of his portrayals of the Chosen One. To me there is no likeness painted or drawn of Mary as tender as a Botticelli Madonna. These portraits say -- *this is what it means to be a mother whatever the future brings to pass*. I don't know how much the mother of Jesus knew, but I know that there is no controlling what the world brings to our children or what our children seek from the world and what they will find there.

I was never a Mary in a Christmas pageant. The Episcopal Church I grew up in – beautiful, traditional old Trinity in Columbia, S.C. – may not have had pageants back then. I do remember that one of my sons was Joseph – twice – here at Christ Church, looking as solemn as that merry boy could manage. And one Christmas Eve, my frightened nine-year old daughter stood in the Christ Church pulpit, robed in white with a golden halo over her golden hair, holding something golden out to Mary, burdened in holy blue below her. As Gabriel, she summoned all her courage to say the words from Luke: *“The Holy Ghost will come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee.”* These words are inscribed in Latin below Botticelli's Cestello Annunciation. A painting I first saw in Florence at the Uffizi Museum. I'm still captured by this painting.

And I am forever captured by Christmas pageants, the two-person donkeys, the confused shepherds, the wandering hosts of angels, all casting their innocent, wondrous light that we lost sheep, so desperately seek.

THE DANCE

after Botticelli

The virgin turns her body from the news,

smooth palms fending off the Angel

of Annunciation. God's messenger

has dipped to one knee as in proposal.

*Mary's shoulders slope
like folded wings, a bird poised to fly*

*through the open doorway,
past a garden and the lone tree*

*splayed out against blue sky.
Gabriel holds a long reed, a quill*

*ready to write her story. Mary offers
her eggshell face, beautiful in the way*

*of all Botticelli's dazed Madonna's,
eyes downcast or gazing into a future*

*his fledgling angels,
those dreamy boys, are spared.*

By Diana Pinckney

Advent's poem, "The Dance" by Diana Pinckney, was published online only in 2006 by ThePedestalMagazine.com.

The Gift of Love

This story is supposed to be about Christmas memories. Usually, I think of memories as something that happened many years ago. I could tell you many of the usual stories from my childhood; waking up on Christmas morning, family gatherings, special gifts, etc. I could tell you even more precious stories about my children – even show you some adorable videos.

In fact, I had planned to tell you a medley of tales. But this past Christmas something very different happened. On the day of the birth of our Lord, I began a journey close to death that actually brought me new life. Twelve days later, on Epiphany, I came home after spending the twelve days of Christmas in a hospital, mostly in ICU, unconscious on a ventilator.

I know the time was very difficult on my family. Steve spent every moment by my side, sleeping only in a straight back chair or in an uncomfortable, well-lit waiting room. My family spent New Year's Eve sharing a bottle of champagne with the ICU nurses praying I would breath on my own soon.

Despite the hardship on my family (and my body), it was the greatest gift I could have ever received. It was more than I could ever dream of asking. I received the gift of LOVE like I have never known. I discovered an outpouring of love that I didn't know was mine. I know many people, but I didn't know I was loved by so many and so greatly. Most of all, I am not sure I knew how much my husband and children loved me. It wasn't because of any inadequacy or fault in them. It was because I didn't know people were capable of love that powerful. I never could see it before. I also knew I had good friends- some old and some new, but it never occurred to me that they loved me so much that their lives would be missing something without me. I truly felt blessed by a multitude of prayers, visitors, notes and letters, flowers, and delicious meals. Blessed by LOVE.

All of this love comes from the source of all love- Jesus Christ.
HIS LOVE.

1 John 4:16

So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. Whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

1 Corinthians 13:13

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

By Anne Schmitt

Christmas Joy is Always a Surprise

In the 1990s, my son and his wife bought a house for me in Cotswold. The older neighbors were moving into Assisted Living Centers and the young flocked to the “close in” neighborhood. They had precious little ones that ran, and jumped and sang on sunny days in all seasons. They brought me joy.

At Christmas, the United States Postal Service offers to hand cancel “letters from Santa” with a North Pole location, provided they are received timely. It became an Advent tradition to pen a Christmas message, address it to each family with a thirty-three-cent Santa stamp on the envelope, and bundle them all into a Priority Mailer. VOILA! The wee ones and their parents received a letter from Santa postmarked the North Pole. No one suspected me. What splendid Christmas mystery, surprise and joy.

It worked so well that I bought plastic Easter Eggs, stuffed three per household with nickels, and left them near their driveway after the Easter Eve Service. Initially, I walked them to each home. Then old age and rainy weather prompted me to drive them about. And, of course, I was found out. Arthritis worsened and eventually I was unable to deliver the eggs, and the children had outgrown the letters. I was saddened but thankful I had brought the Christian message to those close by.

On Easter morning last year, I opened my front door to find a pink plastic egg with a nickel inside! What Joy. The Bunny found me again.

If God is love, and if service is perfect freedom, could it be that joy is being surprised with the mystery of sharing God’s love in childlike ways? I surely hope so.

By Mary Harrisonranson

Wrapped and Labeled

I don't really remember my maternal grandmother. What I have are "faux memories," those made of photographs I have happened to see and stories I have happened to overhear. But I do have memories of visiting my maternal grandmother. The house to the right of hers had a creaky, wooden porch swing that, at full hilt, swung you up and over the most beautiful blue hydrangea blooms. The house to the left had a screened in porch in the back where the mama cat in residence gave birth to a litter of kittens -- each one so very different from the next.

Upon entering my "Grammy's" house you would find yourself first in a sitting room. Like sitting rooms of all grandmothers across the land, it was where breakables took their chances. No words were necessary; just a quick smack to the top of my outstretched hand. Then there was the dining room -- Grammy's chair closest to the door leading to the kitchen. The kitchen smelled of coffee and nutmeg. Go left rather the right through the door and you would come upon the room that was home to her sewing machine and, therefore, to a soft, tomato pin cushion I recall envying. I slept in this room. In the hallway stretching between "my" room and hers was what could now only be considered a relic -- a phone table! (If you can believe that!) And that is as far as the tour goes. No matter how hard I try, I cannot see her bedroom in my mind's eye. I can only see my four-year-old hands in what must have been the top drawer of her dresser, swimming in her scarves. These I was allowed to touch. Silk. Satin. Enchanting.

My lack of memories of my maternal grandmother has everything to do with the fact that she died when I was five. She died in early December. She was supposed to spend Christmas with us only weeks later. Her passing was my first real experience with death and there were many other firsts associated with it. Considered old enough to attend the funeral, my first, I also experienced my first ride in a limousine as well as witnessing my Mom cry for the first time. It scared me a little -- her tears that is. I know people came by Grammy's house after the service and burial, though I do not remember for sure. I do recall some divvying and packing in the days to follow. Amongst the items that went home with us were our wrapped and labeled Christmas presents. They would sit under our tree until Christmas Morning with all the others.

I may not have any detailed memories of my Grammy, but I will always remember this. When her time came, she was prepared and was patiently awaiting Christmas. In her dying, she was living Advent.

My gift from my Grammy that year? Two satin scarves -- one white and one blue.

By Anne Ranson

A Christmas Story

Time frame: December 1944, Battle of the Bulge near St. Vith, Belgium. Knee-deep in snow, and severe cold was almost worse than engagement with the enemy. For over a week, the Eighth Air Force was grounded because of the weather. We Dog Faces, Infantrymen, missed the pre-dawn strikes by our P-51 fighters, the smallest plane in the Eighth Air Force and only airplane capable of flying from England to the front lines and returning. When the P-51s battered the enemy lines before we jumped off, our casualties were light and we could advance the front line closer to Germany.

December 24, 1944, not Christmas Eve to us, just another evening readying our equipment for a Christmas Day battle. "H" hour* was first break of daylight when we looked up and saw stars for the first time in weeks and the sky was filled with Eighth Air Force bombers, fighter escorts, and our buddies the P-51s zooming over our heads as they softened the enemy resistance we were about to encounter. We won big that day and unfortunately we lost many P-51 pilots along with our own ground troops.

Fast forward to February 25, 1945. My luck ran out and I was on a litter, semi-conscious in a hospital airplane on my way to England and then to Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, DC. By April, I was ambulatory and enjoyed every weekend when U.S.O. volunteers would visit Walter Reed and I met Marie. It was there that a platonic relationship with Marie gradually changed to love. As we became a twosome, Marie told me her brother Douglas was a P-51 pilot and lost his life on Christmas Day 1944 flying support for the Infantry.

Eventually, we were engaged, married and had a great marriage of fifty-nine years. I did my best to help fill the void in her family over the loss of Douglas. Eventually her wonderful family became mine and no one ever had the marvelous interface I had with my spouse's parents.

I lost the love of my life, Christmas 2009, when we lost a tug of war with the Almighty after a stroke had crippled my love. I was her caretaker for two-and-one-half years and the two of us were never closer than during those years that I was her right leg, arm and fingers. Now I live with memories and always touch daily a great picture of Marie's brother Douglas standing in front of his P-51, the Infantryman's greatest friend. I also fastened to the frame my Combat Infantry Badge, two comrades in arms.

*H hour is the specific time at which an operation or exercise commences, or is due to commence.

By Rodney Morris, 291st Combat Team, WWII

Beautifully Made and Unique, Each One

My 25-year “Christmas Memories Book” is almost full!

I am a journal nerd. I have kept handwritten journals since I was thirteen and joined the scrapbook craze in the 1990s. In addition to our children’s detailed baby books, I have also diligently maintained a Christmas book for the past 21 years.

Typically I have written my yearly “Christmas Memories Book” entries (complete with annual family Christmas card photo) two or three days following Christmas. This year, I lazily waited until July.

After the July 4th celebrations subsided, I found myself gloriously home alone. I had planned to use this gift of time to update my treasured holiday journal. Instead, I gave in to the seduction of reliving the past. I turned to page one and suddenly I was the mother of a newborn again!

Flipping through the pages, I saw pictures of once-cherished, but long forgotten moments: My first Christmas as a new mom, “away from home.” We had just moved to Charlotte. There was our beautiful, tiny first house; complete with nativity scenes on the mantle and a plastic basketball goal in the living/dining room.

Another year showed my husband and me attempting to assemble a plastic brown and white spring-loaded horse, kindly sent to us by my sister-in-law in Nashville. Just before midnight Christmas Eve, we solicited neighbors to help saddle the horse and keep our marriage intact! Eighteen years later, our two “boys” still talk about riding that ole’ stallion. Little did we know then that assembling a spring horse at midnight was NOTHING like tackling a ping-pong table at 2:00 a.m.

Some past Christmases were better than others. There was the year of “the surprise puppy”. There was the year it snowed and Santa was forced to come down the chimney by candlelight, and then the year my cherished ornaments came loudly smashing to the ground when our tree fell during Christmas Eve dinner. There was the December 24th when we raced to my family home in Charleston to support my father who had been in a horrible car accident earlier that same day. We had a 10 month old then, and did not know if my sweet dad would make it through the night. The Christmas after the 9/11 attacks was extremely tough. Everyone, it seemed, had a story of a tremendous loss of a loved one. Then in December of 2005, my adorable mom died. On occasion a person will comment “how hard it must have been to lose your mother at Christmastime”. My response is, well, “Yes, and...No!”

My mother loved Christmas and transferred that love of this magical time to me. I hold her memory dear, especially in December. As a child, my mom was the center of our Decembers and it is because she taught me to celebrate family and tradition that I have kept my “memories book” full and my photos up to date. I look back and joyfully realize that Christmas memories remind me of Psalm 139, v. 14. Each of us, like each Christmas year, is unique. Each of us is beautifully made, like Christmas. Even though I have yet to complete the 2010 entry in my prized volume, I know that tradition will hold true and I am glad that I listened - both to Psalm 139 and to my mom.

By Karen Reid

A Taste of Christmas

God's love for us experienced at Christmas can be reflected in something as spiritual as singing *Silent Night* to as whimsical as small children wearing sheep costumes in a pageant.

For me, the hope and joy of Christmas is tangible in a box of petits fours, those small squares of cake encased in decorative icing. My passion for them seems irrational in a season overflowing with freshly baked goodies. The packaged petits fours that I buy in cardboard boxes wrapped in cellophane were probably produced six months earlier and stuck in a warehouse until December.

My longing for these little cakes is purely nostalgic. When I was young, my father always ordered petits fours from the Swiss Colony catalog at Christmas. Sometimes he ordered macadamia nuts as well, but I never really cared for those. The petits fours always struck me as a very sophisticated, very special pleasure.

This was the 1960s, long before Charlotte had a Dean and DeLuca, Trader Joe's, Fresh Market or Earth Fare. Today, I could get petits fours at a variety of locations, but find the boxes at the Hickory Farms kiosk at SouthPark to be the most in keeping with my father's tradition.

My dad died in 1971, but 40 years later, I still seek out petits fours at Christmas. They are small, sweet, tangible reminders of my dad and my ongoing connection with him. He wanted to introduce his daughters to diverse experiences, culinary and otherwise. After all these years, I am glad to have this holiday tradition that he began.

The feelings induced by the petits fours are sweeter and richer than the morsels themselves. Wistfulness for loved ones who are gone. Pleasure at a small connection with them. Gladness for the people with me now, with whom I can share these treats. Hopefulness for holidays present and future. Confidence that whatever changes in the world, petits fours will probably still be the same next Christmas as they have been for decades.

If you've never tasted petits fours, I'll share a secret with you. The ones with chocolate frosting and white stripes usually have yummy chocolate cake inside. Reach for those first. Share them with someone you love. And save one for me. May your Advent and Christmas traditions bring you closer to the people you love and the love of God made manifest.

By Dorothy W. Trotter

Tinfoil Stars

My sister was so small they were afraid to weigh her. She was, they guessed, less than four pounds. This was 1941. Thanksgiving Day.

In large cities, incubators were being used to keep premature babies alive. Oxygen was pumped in. If a little is good, more is better, doctors decided. So they pumped more. As a consequence, many of these infants were blinded for life.

In our town, we had no incubators, but one of our doctors decided to build one. Oxygen was pumped in, in small amounts. My sister was the first baby in our town to sleep in an incubator. Her sight was saved by the inadequacies of the one available to her.

It was days before I could visit Mama and the baby. From high up in her hospital bed, Mama had decided I had nothing to wear. She sent Daddy shopping. He bought me a burgundy silk dress with a white lace collar. I was four and a half. I still have the too-fancy dress I wore to meet my sister. First we saw Mama, then Daddy walked me to the nursery window and picked me up so I could see the baby. She was smaller than any of my dolls.

Mama came home before the baby did. My little sister stayed at the hospital, safe in her inka-binka. For years after, we called her "the inka-binka baby."

One day, weeks later, my daddy walked down the hall with his mother. My grandmother was carrying a lace pillow with a tiny baby on it. I stood there, warming myself over the floor furnace installed to keep my sister warm. It was December 7, 1941. The rest of the country was straining toward their radios: the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

But here was my sister, eager to receive all the sweet attention.

Soon it was Christmas. Daddy stood a scrawny pine in front of the windows. I watched from the sofa, being good as gold, as he threaded colored lights through the branches. Finally he beckoned me over and handed me, one by one, long silver icicles to drape over the limbs I could reach. But I missed Mama.

One day, when the baby was sleeping, Mama helped me climb up beside her on her bed. Daddy had pulled cardboards out of his laundered shirts and Mama was cutting out stars. She showed me how to wrap the stars in foil, press gently between the points, and crinkle the silver to catch the light. Then she sent me to get her sewing box. Mama took needle and thread, zipped the thread through the needle's eye and, in a wink, wet her fingers and tied a knot. I watched her pierce a point of each star and string it into a garland.

"Look at all the stars we've made, you and me," she said.

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Mama eased out of bed, walked to her dresser and picked up a handful of tacks. In the living room, I watched as she pinned each end of the thread to the mantel. After she'd plugged in the tree, she sat down on the sofa and pulled me up.

The tinfoil stars twinkled in the lights. The inka-binka baby, far away in another room, shimmered in her crib. And I was safe, beside the mama I knew.

By Dede Wilson

An At Home Christmas Pageant “The First Christmas: The King Was Born”

For years on Christmas Eve we have had a family dinner. Family members in and out of town, as well as friends have attended. Religious and other stories were read. They really did not seem, however, to have much of an impact on that special evening. My concern was the fact we should be very cognizant of the meaning of Christmas.

Ten years ago when my eldest grandson was nine, followed by brothers ages seven, five and three, I was speaking to my two older ones suggesting that they might like to read the Christmas Story from the Bible at our Christmas Eve dinner. One asked if they could act it out and the other hastily added “with costumes”. Oh my! I was not sure about the costumes but said I would try, but most importantly they could act it out. (Since then my granddaughter was born.)

Our tradition began with the reading of the Christmas Story from Luke by the narrator of the pageant. I bought cloth in six-foot lengths that would enable us to have Mary and the Three Kings in full regalia. I decided shirts worn backwards would work for the angels and I found different pieces of clothing around my house: two actually purchased in Jerusalem, one would work well for Joseph and other characters. As the years went by others added to the costume collection or developed and wore their own design. A program was produced listing those participating, as well as those who had added costumes or other important items for the play.

Through the years we have continued this tradition. Sometimes there has been a real baby for Jesus; sometimes a girl or sometimes a boy, and, if not, a doll. Joseph has been played by all ages including a college student, a friend from California and teenagers. We had a donkey costume one time and even a real live dog was in the pageant. Relatives from Florida came to see and be a part of this affair. Mary has been played by all ages. We have sometimes had a star balloon and we have had those who want to be sheep. The angels are in all shapes, sizes and ages. The shepherds sometimes have dual roles as kings. We have had trumpets played as well. Each time this is produced, it is a little different. At first artwork was also produced by the young people and the art decorated the program.

On December 23 we usually have a two-hour event. The young people choose their parts, pick out their so-called costumes (by the way the cloth is fastened with clothes pins in the back), and then have pizza. It is unruly and I always wonder what the next evening will bring. But the next night it is a miracle.

We eat dinner first. The pageant takes place. Everyone seems to know the significance of Christmas and everyone is at their very best. There is joy, love and peace. At different places in the story songs are sung by the audience and, at the end, the cast comes out and joins in singing “Silent Night”.

By Martha Bedell Alexander

On behalf of my family and friends who have been participants or observers of the pageant.

Hark and Herald

Toronto had really started to feel like home. I'd found an apartment on the not too noisy side of Maple Leaf Garden (and learned to call them the Maple Loafs), a Hudson Bay blanket, and a church. Still no home is complete without a parakeet so I went to the pet shop and picked out a pair I hoped would get on famously. Unfortunately, there was no cage available equal to the lifestyle to which I intended them to become accustomed. I ordered one as much out of *Dynasty* as the catalog and left the pet shop with the two birds, promptly named Blair and Fallon, and a rented cage.

We'd hardly enjoyed our Thanksgiving together when I learned that Toronto would not be my forever home. New York called, literally. My parakeets were truly my first thought. Not unsympathetic, my managing director immediately suggested that I bring them back with me; the company would pay their way. But I couldn't consider quarantine. No one at the office wanted them and I had no friends in Canada ... yet.

December and my departure drew near and there was still no home for Blair and Fallon. These were not going to be happy holidays. Then one night I received a telephone call. It was someone from church calling to ask if I'd lick envelopes. I explained that I would be leaving Canada and asked on a hope if she knew of anyone who might like a pair of parakeets. She said she thought she might, two ladies at church who loved birds and already had a couple.

Would a church that was much too new to claim as "my church" come through for us? Does the Lord provide for parakeets?

We waited, patiently perched, and when the call came it offered all I'd hardly dared pray for and more. A woman called to say that she and her housemate would be happy to take them both. They had three parakeets already! A home! With Episcopalians! Technically, Anglicans enjoying the Book of Alternative Services, but close enough for anyone. And with new feathered friends, an extended family!

We agreed to meet at the upcoming carol service and found each other easily after the beautiful service. Back at my apartment both birds made a favorable first impression as they were placed in the travel cage. Twice the ladies offered to pay for them. They didn't realize they had already done so. I did keep the palatial cage.

They were given new names: Hark and Herald because they had been adopted after the carol service. I'm sure the music has marked all of their anniversaries just as it's kept them close to me each year back in America. Even now as much as when I walked these two wonderful women and my two feathered friends to the car.

"Goodbye, Blair and Fallon."
Merry Christmas, Hark and Herald!

By Rita Leonard