

Christmas Wishes

I sat silently across the room, watching my 3-year-old granddaughter turn the pages of the J.C. Penney Christmas catalog. Unaware of my presence, she was softly whispering the names of the hundreds of marvelous items pictured in the big “wish book” that lay across her knees.

“Fuzzy bear, rocky horse, bubble gum machine, roller skates, fire truck...”

I was mesmerized. Kristin’s bright blue eyes twinkled as she put her stubby little finger on each picture.

“Cinderella doll, red wagon, Big Bird, tricycle...”

I listened carefully. Is it so wrong to wish?

I’m not sure I ever really believed in Santa Claus. But it was fun to wonder. And to wish.

Each year, early on Christmas Eve, Daddy would take us downtown. Pretty soon the city fire truck, siren howling, would arrive as the climax to the Christmas parade. Mr. O’Malley, who owned the restaurant, always dressed up like Santa and rode on the back of the truck. He carried a big bagful of hard candy and Cracker Jack boxes.

Each kid, no matter how poor, got something. Mr. McWilliams, the mayor, would turn on the lights on the big tree in the center of the park. The choir from the Baptist church would sing carols.

Then it would be time to go back to the house. To wait. To wish.

Christmas Eve was a time of wonderful expectation. Daddy would bring us together around the tree, which always stood in the same place in a small alcove next to the stairs. When all the

kids were in place, sitting cross-legged on the floor, he would recite the famous Christmas poem from memory:

“‘Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house...”

Lying in my bed upstairs, listening, I could hear the sound of my younger brother’s breathing as he lay in the bed across the room. We would not speak. To do so would have broken the spell. But I knew he was wishing—as I was.

Would he come tonight? Would Donner and Blitzen find our house in the orange grove? Was Santa Claus really coming to town?

I’m grateful for that happy home of childhood. And I’m grateful for the sense of Christmas expectancy that I’ve brought with me into adulthood.

Life has a way, as you move into middle age, of becoming routine. The fascinations that once excited me are now slightly frayed; the things that once thrilled are sometimes tepid.

But once a year, time turns backward in its flight, and on Christmas Eve I’m a child again—just for the night. Is it wrong to wish—as a child?

Where else does prayer faith start?

Long before I knew God, I would kneel beside my window. “Star light, star bright, first star I’ve seen tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight.”

C’mon! I know it’s not a prayer. But it was the best I could do as a child. It wasn’t until many years later, after Daddy became a Christian, that we started reading Luke 2 rather than “The Night Before Christmas” on Christmas Eve.

But was all that other wrong? Does God not sometimes use fantasy to prepare our hearts for reality?

The people I pity this Christmas are those who have no expectations. Those who no longer wish. The spiritual fuddy-duddies who have lost the wonder of childhood.

How easy it is to become sophisticated. Super spiritual. To condemn Christmas trees, Santa Claus and the wonder of childlike wishing—because we’ve grown old... and correct.

“Cabbage Patch doll, red rabbit, toy piano, Jesus...” She looked up and saw me across the room. “Look Pa-Pa. Here’s baby Jesus in the manger. I wish for Him most of all.”

I held her close so she could not see what was happening in my eyes.

I know there’s a difference between wishing and praying, but for some of us, it’s the only way we can begin.

I hope I never grow so old, so stodgy, so theologically stiff that I no longer go to bed on Christmas Eve without listening for the sound of hoofbeats on the roof.

Jamie Buckingham (1932-1992) wrote a column for Charisma from 1979 until his death.