**2020 Christmas Stories Compilations**

**The Legend of St. Nicholas and the Gold**

Retold by Dave Lindstedt

Once upon a time, in a northern Mediterranean town, there lived a husband and wife who became successful merchants. Their shop in the town square bustled with activity. But even though their busi­ness was quite profitable, they were heartbroken because they were unable to have any children. As time passed, they prayed that God would give them a child to brighten their later years. At last a son was born. They named him Nicholas and they lavished on him their love.

As Nicholas grew, he spent his afternoons scurrying around the shop with his parents. In the evening, he liked to sit at his father's desk and watch as his father counted the day's proceeds. Always, before he began, Nicholas's father would drop a gold coin into each of three small cloth bags on a corner of the desk. "This is for tomorrow, Nicholas," he would say, "so you'll always have soup with your bread."

While Nicholas was still a young man, both his parents died. He was able to live comfortably on his inheritance, so he tucked the three bags of gold away "for tomorrow," and as the years passed he forgot about them.

Having been raised in the church, Nicholas decided to pursue the priesthood and he eventually became bishop of the Christian church of Myra. One morning, as he was walking toward the vestry, he noticed a ragged man kneeling to pray. Nicholas had often seen the man scavenging in the local marketplace and recognized him as a former nobleman who had fallen on hard times.

"Oh God, please help me," the man cried as he prayed. "If I cannot find work, I cannot buy bread. And if I cannot buy bread, I will have to turn my three daughters out on to the streets to fend for themselves."

Nicholas's heart was moved with compassion, and he began to pray that God would show him how he could help this poor man and his family. That evening, as he made his way home through the gathering twi­light, Nicholas suddenly remembered the bags of gold. *This is for tomorrow, Nicholas, so you will always have soup with your bread.* Excitedly, he rushed to his house and clambered into the attic where the gold was hidden.

Nicholas knew the nobleman would be too proud to take money from him, so he decided to find another way. He took one bag of gold and under the cover of darkness crept to the nobleman's house. To his delight he found a front window open just enough to slip the bag through. A candle flickered in the background, indicating that someone might be inside, so to avoid detection he quickly slid the bag of gold over the sill and ran away.

Not long after, Nicholas was invited to preside at the wedding of the nobleman's eldest daughter, who suddenly had a large dowry. At the wedding, the nobleman regaled the guests with his tale of the miraculous appearance of the bag of gold.

When Nicholas saw the joy that his gift had brought, he resolved to provide a dowry for the second daughter as well. A few nights later, he took another bag of gold and slipped it through the nobleman's window. Again the nobleman was overjoyed, and his middle daughter soon married into a prominent family. Now the father no longer had to scrounge in the marketplace, and when Nicholas saw him next, the man was wearing a new pair of trousers and a jacket.

After the second wedding, however, the father began to wonder how these "bags from Heaven" had been delivered. He determined to watch his window every night in case a bag of gold might appear for his youngest daughter.

Meanwhile, Nicholas decided it was only right that he should give the third daughter a bag of gold as well, even though the nobleman was obvi­ously no longer destitute. That night, a chilly evening in early December, he once again made his way to the open window and tossed his treasure inside. As he fled, however, he heard the vigilant nobleman call out, "Bishop Nicholas! Is it you?"

Nicholas implored the man not to tell anyone about the gold, but the secret could not be kept. The story of Nicholas's generosity soon spread throughout the town. With his newfound fortune, the nobleman was restored to prominence in the local government. To celebrate his gratitude to the kindly bishop, the nobleman declared an annual feast to be held on December 6, and many of the villagers brought gifts to share with those who were in need. And that is how St. Nicholas became associated with the giving of gifts.

\*\*

**A Christmas Story – What a Little Kindness Can Do**

Last year at Christmas time, my wife, three boys and I were in France, on our way from Paris to Nice. For five wretched days everything had gone wrong. Our hotels were tourist traps, our rented car broke down, we were irritable and restless.

On Christmas Eve, when we checked into a hotel in Nice, there was no Christmas spirit in our hearts. It was cold and raining when we went out to eat. We found a drab little cafe, shoddily decorated for the holiday. Only five tables in the restaurant were occupied. There were two German couples, two French families and an American sailor by himself. In the corner a piano player listlessly played. I was too stubborn, too tired, and too miserable to leave.

I looked around and noticed that the other customers were eating in stony silence. The only person who seemed happy was the American sailor. He was writing a letter, smiling to himself.

My wife ordered our meal in French. The waiter brought us the wrong thing. I scolded my wife, she began to cry, and the boys defended her. Then on my left, at the table of one French family, the father slapped one of his children for some minor fault; the boy cried. On our right, the German wife berated her husband.

All of us were suddenly interrupted by an unpleasant blast of cold air. Through the door came an old French flower woman. She wore a dripping, tattered overcoat, and shuffled in on wet, rundown shoes. Carrying her basket of roses she went from table to table. “Flowers?” No one bought any, and wearily she sat at a table between the sailor and us.

To the waiter she said: “Bowl of soup. I haven’t sold a flower the whole afternoon.” To the piano player she said hoarsely: “Can you imagine, Joseph, ordering only a bowl of soup on Christmas Eve?” Joseph pointed to his empty tipping plate. The young sailor finished his meal, and got up to leave. Putting on his coat, he walked over to the flower woman’s table.

“Happy Christmas,” he said smiling, and picking out two roses, he said, “How much are these?”

“Two francs, Monsieur.” Pressing one of the flowers into the letter he had written, he handed the woman a 20-franc note.

“I’ll have to get some change, Monsieur,” she said.

“No ma’am,” said the sailor, kissing the ancient cheek. “This is my Christmas present to you.”

Straightening up, he came to our table, holding the other rose in front of him. “Sir,” he said to me, “may I present this to your beautiful daughter?” In one quick motion he gave the rose to my wife, wished us a Merry Christmas and departed. Everyone had stopped eating. Everyone had been watching the sailor. Everyone was sitting in thoughtful silence.

A few seconds later, Christmas exploded through the restaurant like a bomb. The old flower woman jumped up waving her 20-franc note. Hobbling out into the middle of the room she did a jig, shouting to the piano player: “Joseph, my Christmas present! You shall have a feast too!”

With sudden enthusiasm the piano player began to play “Good King Wenceslas,” beating the keys with magic hands, nodding his head to the rhythm. My wife waved her rose in time to the music. She was radiant, looking twenty years younger. The tears had left her eyes. She began to sing and our three sons joined in, bellowing loudly.

The Germans jumped on the chairs and began singing. The waiter embraced the flower woman. Waving their arms, they sang in French. The French man who had slapped the boy beat a rhythm with his fork against a bottle and the lad climbed on his lap. Then the owner of the restaurant started singing “The First Noel,” and we all joined in, half of us crying as we sang.

People crowded in from the street until many were standing. The walls shook, as hands and feet kept time to the rousing Yuletide carols. A few hours before eighteen people had been spending a miserable evening in a shoddy restaurant. It ended up being our happiest Christmas Eve ever.

\*\*

**A Christmas Story -- A Mustard Seed Christmas**

By Charlene Elizabeth Fairchild

What is the Kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches (Luke 13:18-19 NRSV).

Last year our first Christmas decoration was a mustard seed. A lowly mustard seed, taped on a sheet of white paper to the center of our mantelpiece. It was a sign and a symbol of the fragile and tiny hope I had of celebrating Christmas. The hope was fragile and it was tiny because I did not “feel” like Christmas last year. How could I sing the Lord’s song in the strange Land of Grief?

It was the first Sunday in Advent\* and my husband and I were having our usual leisurely coffee brunch after all the duties of the morning and the noon hour. (\*Advent: the four-week period leading up to Christmas, beginning on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day.)

Two church services and the important weekly phone calls to my father and other family members were behind us for another week. My husband, rather gingerly, brought up the subject of Christmas, knowing that I was immersed in the full bloom of grief. Mom had died on Labor Day and this was the first Christmas to be marked without her. I did not “feel” like Christmas.

Despite my fog of misery, I knew that I was being somewhat self-absorbed in my pain. Life was going on all about me but, for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out how I was going to get through this time. Everybody was busy and happy and having parties and family gatherings. I shrank inside. The thought of smiling and pretending joy was beyond pain for me. What was I going to do?

I remembered the reading from Romans that morning: “The night is far gone, the day is near. ... Let us put on the armor of light. ... Put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 13:12, 14). The season celebrating His birth and looking for His coming again was upon me, and I was being called to participate. But it was beyond me to rejoice. As I said these things to my husband, he reminded me that God is able even if I was not. He mentioned the parable of the mustard seed to me. God could take that little mustard seed and make of it something worthy. God could take that tiny seed of faith and grow it into a kingdom of hope.

I felt as if I had been touched. I got up and went to the kitchen and rifled through my spices. Yes! There it was. My bottle of mustard seeds. I got one out and grabbed a piece of paper from the pad by our phone and taped that mustard seed to the center. I returned to the dining room, waving the paper triumphantly. “I’ve got it! I’ve got it! I can celebrate this year.”

My husband said, “Here, let’s put it up on the mantel. It’ll be our first Christmas decoration.” Up it went. Every time I looked at it, I was reminded of the hope it symbolized and the faith it embodied. I couldn’t do it on my own. But God could. And God did!

The mustard seed became a powerful witness in our house last year. Many people asked about it and it became a growing joy to share what it meant. The mustard seed again graces our mantelpiece to symbolize light in the darkness, hope in the face of grief and despair, and faith in the promises of God.

\*\*

**A General History of Christmas Carols**

The first carol to be heard on Earth was sung by the angels the night Jesus was born. Ever since, Christians have continued to sing the glad tidings of Jesus' birth.

The origin of the word "carol" remains a puzzle. Some say it comes from the medieval "circle" or "ring" dance called a "carolare," which was accompanied by singing. Others believe that "carol" may have come from the Greek word for "flute player," referring to the musician who accompanied the singing of the dancing group. Many of the early carols were sung to popular dance tunes. Although carols were frowned upon by the established Church, they were popular with the common people because they expressed the joy of Christmas in music and language that was understood and enjoyed by all. Later, as better stanzas were prepared for the dancers and onlookers to sing, the word carol came to apply more to the song lyrics than the dances. In striking contrast to the slow, monotonous chants of the established Church, carols were exciting, happy and cheerful. They were used and loved by the people far more than the hymns and chants that had received the stamp of approval from the church authorities in Rome, Athens or Jerusalem.

Since the first carols were handed down from one generation to the next by word of mouth rather than being written down, several versions of the same carol may be found today.

St. Francis of Assisi is considered the "Father of the Christmas Carol." During ceremonies at his nativity scene in Graecia, Italy, in 1224, St. Francis led his followers in songs of praises to the newborn King. From his jovial singing came about a new idea regarding the holiday season--that of singing "Christmas carols."

By the 14th century, carols had become more melodic and were being used between the acts of the "mystery plays"--Bible stories or other religious lessons which were taught to the people in skit form at town squares or other locations where people gathered. The carols were first sung as interludes but gradually became integral parts of the Christmas plays. If the audience showed great approval for the carol singing, the singers would march off the stage into the street, singing their carols. This was the beginning of the custom of caroling as we know it today.

By the 15th century, people were beginning to be freed from old Church teachings which denounced dancing and communal singing of hymns and carols by people other than the trained church choir. The common people began to express their own feelings about Christian music, preferring to sing in their own languages, instead of in Latin. As a result, carols began to develop in the languages of the people, sometimes with choruses in Latin. A gradual substitution of folk songs and dance tunes for the solemn church music took place. The public wanted music that was less severe and more lively. The popularity of bards and wandering minstrels and the growth of ballads also had a strong influence on religious music.

In 1521, Wynkyn de Word, an English printer's apprentice, produced the first printed book of carols. In 1562, the Lord Mayor of London gave Thomas Tyndale a license to print "certain goodly carols to be sung to the glory of God." The carols were widely distributed in England through printed "broadsides" or "broadsheets"--little leaflets containing three or more carols sold for only one penny. Broadsheets were often illustrated with crude woodcuts, showing nativity scenes. They were easy to read, and helped people get acquainted with Christmas music.

During the 16th century, carols became more and more popular. English carols continued to flourish, and throughout the rest of Europe folk songs were becoming increasingly popular, with a special emphasis on the Christmas season.

Martin Luther, the famous Reformation 9 leader in Germany, realized the importance of music in people's lives. He loved music, and as a boy sang in the village choir, where he received his musical education. After the establishment of the Lutheran Church, he promoted congregational singing, "encouraging melodies to be sung by the workers in the field, by the wayside, or indeed, anywhere, to help the people be strengthened in the faith."

During the 17th century, however, the Puritans did away with holiday observance, including caroling. But after the restoration of King Charles II of England, in 1660, caroling came back into the open again, and a new book of carols was published.

During the 18th century, carols were looked down upon by sophisticated city dwellers as commonplace and rustic. In fact, during the boyhood years of Charles Dickens (1812-1870), the author of the story "A Christmas Carol," carols and caroling had almost disappeared.

Fortunately, certain scholars and pastors began to collect and preserve traditional carols, and it is because of their efforts that these folk songs were not totally lost to generations to come. Schools and choirs in villages and countryside regions sang and helped to keep them alive. By the last half of the 19th century, carols and caroling had again become an important part of Christmas celebrations, both in churches and in homes.

Now in the 20th century, the singing of Christmas carols and hymns has become an all-around accepted event, and many new Christmas songs have been composed.

\*\*

**A Christmas Story -- The Tanker Car**

By Thomas S. Monson

In about my tenth year, as Christmas approached, I longed for an electric train. The times were those of economic depression, yet Mother and Dad purchased for me a lovely electric train.

Christmas morning bright and early I was thrilled when I received my train. The next few hours were devoted to operating the transformer and watching the engine pull its cars forward and then backward around the track.

Mother said that she had purchased a windup train for Widow Hansen’s boy, Mark, who lived down the lane at Gale Street. As I looked at his train, I noticed a tanker car that I so much admired. I put up such a fuss that my mother succumbed to my pleading and gave me the tanker car. I put it with my train set and felt pleased.

Mother and I took the remaining cars and the engine down to Mark Hansen. The boy was a year or two older than I. He had never anticipated such a gift, and was thrilled beyond words. He wound the key in his engine, it not being electric nor expensive like mine, and was overjoyed as the engine and three cars, plus a caboose, went around the track.

I felt a horrible sense of guilt as I returned home. The tanker car no longer appealed to me. Suddenly, I took the tanker car in my hand, plus an additional car of my own, and ran all the way down to Gale Street. I proudly announced to Mark, “We forgot to bring two cars which belong to your train.”

I don’t know when a deed has made me feel any better than that experience as a ten-year-old boy.

\*\*

**The Everyone List and Lighter Dream**

By Abner, Japan

On one of my prayer walks, heaven inspired me with a plan to reach the world. I call this the Everyone List, which is a list of the people I meet and talk to about Jesus. This includes people I teach, work with, meet on walks or while shopping—everyone! And then I have prayer for the people on the Everyone List each morning.

I had an amazing dream the morning before I began to implement this idea. In the dream I was at a Christmas party telling groups of elementary students about Jesus. Several of the students had cigarette lighters in their hands, and one little girl who was about seven years old wanted one, too. I knew this had to be symbolic as kids don’t have lighters in classes.

Afterwards I went to a supermarket and I saw a young man about 20 years old who I had led to Jesus a year before. I hadn’t seen him since then. He was smiling at me, and I felt very convicted that I have known him for a year and have never given him anything to read to feed his soul.

So that morning I began the Everyone List. The first person I met on my prayer walk was the Christmas tree lady. She has a beautiful real Christmas tree planted in her garden, and she always decorates it during Christmas season with Christmas lights. (Only one or two people in the area decorate for Christmas.) I stopped to talk to her and then put her name on the prayer list.

Then I continued on the walk and stopped at the Family Mart, a convenience store, and there was the guy on the cash register whom I have talked to for two years, but never knew his name. So finally, I asked him his name, and it is a very unique name, Raita, and the pronunciation is the same as cigarette lighter! I thought that was amazing, after having a dream about lighters. I put his name on the prayer list.

Now I have hundreds of people on the Everyone List, and they receive prayer each prayer walk or prayer morning. I try to get an email address for each person if I can, or I take something to read for them. This is lighting fires of faith, and people are beginning to smile when I come.

The lighter carries the love and words of Jesus. He is the flame, but that flame needs a holder, us. We are the lighters of this world with the flame of God’s love and Word.

\*\*

**A Christmas Story -- Grandma Ruby**

By Lynn Robertson

Being a mother of two very active boys, ages seven and one, I am sometimes worried about their making a shambles of my carefully decorated home. In their innocence and play, they occasionally knock over my favorite lamp or upset my well-designed arrangements. In these moments when chaos overrules calm, I remember the lesson I learned from my wise mother-in-law, Ruby.

Ruby is the mother of six and grandmother of 13. She is the embodiment of gentleness, patience, and love. One Christmas, all the children and grandchildren were gathered as usual at Ruby’s home. Just the month before, Ruby had bought beautiful new white carpeting, after living with the “same old carpet” for over 25 years. She was overjoyed with the new look it gave her home.

My brother-in-law, Arnie, had just distributed his gifts for all the nieces and nephews—prized homemade honey from his beehives. They were excited. But as fate would have it, eight-year-old Sheena spilled her tub of honey on Grandma’s new carpeting and trailed it throughout the entire downstairs of the house.

Crying, Sheena ran into the kitchen and into Grandma Ruby’s arms. “Grandma, I’ve spilled my honey all over your brand-new carpet.”

Grandma Ruby knelt down, looked tenderly into Sheena’s tearful eyes and said, “Don’t worry, sweetheart, we can get you more honey.”

\*\*

**Bells of Hope**

Although a literary giant, Longfellow still needed the peace that only God can give to his children. On Christmas day in 1863, he sat down and desperately tried to reflect on the joys of the season. He was never considered a hymn writer; however, the poem he wrote on that day was later set to music by Englishman John Calkin. The result is one of our most popular Christmas carols.

I heard the bells on Christmas day

Their old familiar carols play,

And wild and sweet the words repeat

Of peace on earth, goodwill to men.

As he came to the third stanza he was stopped by the thought of the condition of his beloved country. The Civil War was in full swing. The Battle of Gettysburg was not more than six months past. Days looked dark. He must have asked himself, “How can the last phrase of those stanzas be true in this war-torn country, where brother fights against brother and father against son?” However, he continued:

And in despair I bowed my head:

“There is no peace on earth,” I said,

“For hate is strong, and mocks the song

Of peace on earth, goodwill to men!”

Actually, he could have also been writing for the present day. Then, as each of us should do, he turned his thoughts to the one who solves all problems. From his pen flowed...

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:

“God is not dead, nor doth he sleep;

The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,

With peace on earth, goodwill to men.”

Millions of children and adults, the world over, love this carol. Peace and goodwill shall one day come to us when the Prince of Peace shall reign. “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”— From StAgustine.com

\*\*

**A Christmas Story -- Christmas Roses**

By Lenora P. Rutledge, RDH

It was the afternoon of December 24, the day before Christmas, and as the newest dental hygienist in our office, I had to work. The only thing that brightened my day was the beautifully decorated Christmas tree in our waiting room and a gift sent to me by a fellow I was dating—a dozen long-stemmed red roses.

As I was cleaning my operatory, our receptionist came and said there was a lady in the front office who urgently needed to speak with me. As I stepped out, I noticed a young, tired-looking woman with an infant in her arms. Nervously, she explained that her husband—a prisoner in a nearby correctional facility—was my next patient. The guards were scheduled to bring him to the office that afternoon.

She told me she wasn’t allowed to visit her husband in prison and that he had never seen his son. Her plea was for me to let the boy’s father sit in the waiting room with her as long as possible before I called him for his appointment. Since my schedule wasn’t full, I agreed. After all, it was Christmas Eve.

A short time later, her husband arrived—with shackles on his feet, cuffs on his hands, and two armed guards as an escort. The woman’s tired face lit up like our little Christmas tree when her husband took a seat beside her. I kept peeking out to watch them laugh, cry, and share their child.

After almost an hour, I called the prisoner back to the operatory. While I worked, the guards stood just outside my door. The patient seemed like a gentle and humble man. I wondered what he possibly could have done to be held under such conditions. I tried to make him as comfortable as possible.

At the end of the appointment, I wished him a Merry Christmas—a difficult thing to say to a man headed back to prison. He smiled and thanked me. He also said he felt saddened by the fact he hadn’t been able to get his wife anything for Christmas. On hearing this, I was inspired with a wonderful idea.

I’ll never forget the look on both their faces as the prisoner gave his wife the beautiful, long-stemmed roses. I’m not sure who experienced the most joy—the husband in giving, the wife in receiving, or myself in having the opportunity to share in this special moment.

\*\*

**About Charles Dickens’s Christmas Carol Part 1**

From its first publication in 1843, A Christmas Carol has charmed and inspired millions. Less well known is the fact that this little book of celebration grew out of a dark period in the author’s career—and, in some ways, changed the course of his life forever.

On an early October evening in 1843, Charles Dickens stepped from the brick and stone portico of his home near Regent’s Park in London. The cool air of dusk was a relief from the day’s unseasonal humidity, as the author began his nightly walk through what he called “the black streets” of the city.

A handsome man with flowing brown hair and normally sparkling eyes, Dickens was deeply troubled. The 31-year-old father of four had thought he was at the peak of his career. The Pickwick Papers, Oliver Twist and Nicholas Nickleby had all been popular; and Martin Chuzzlewit, which he considered his finest novel yet, was being published in monthly installments. But now, the celebrated writer was facing serious financial problems. Some months earlier, his publisher had revealed that sales of the new novel were not what had been expected, and it might be necessary to sharply reduce Dickens’s monthly advances against future sales.

The news had stunned the author. It seemed his talent was being questioned. Memories of his childhood poverty resurfaced. Dickens was supporting a large, extended family, and his expenses were already nearly more than he could handle. His father and brothers were pleading for loans. His wife, Kate, was expecting their fifth child.

All summer long, Dickens worried about his mounting bills, especially the large mortgage that he owed on his house. He spent time at a seaside resort, where he had trouble sleeping and walked the cliffs for hours. He knew that he needed an idea that would earn him a large sum of money, and he needed the idea quickly. But in his depression, Dickens was finding it difficult to write. After returning to London, he hoped that resuming his nightly walks would help spark his imagination.

The yellow glow from the flickering gas lamps lit his way through London’s better neighborhoods. Then gradually, as he neared the Thames River, only the dull light from tenement windows illuminated the streets, now litter-strewn and lined with open sewers. The elegant ladies and well-dressed gentlemen of Dickens’s neighborhood were replaced by bawdy streetwalkers, pickpockets, and beggars.

The dismal scene reminded him of the nightmare that often troubled his sleep: A 12-year-old boy sits at a worktable piled high with pots of black boot paste. For 12 hours a day, six days a week, he attaches labels on the endless stream of pots to earn the six shillings that will keep him alive.

The boy in the dream looks through the rotting warehouse floor into the cellar, where swarms of rats scurry about. Then he raises his eyes to the dirt-streaked window, dripping with condensation from London’s wintry weather. The light is fading now, along with the boy’s young hopes. His father is in debtors’ prison, and the youngster is receiving only an hour of school lessons during his dinner break at the warehouse. He feels helpless, abandoned. There may never be celebration, joy or hope again. ...

This was no scene from the author’s imagination. It was a period from his early life. Fortunately, Dickens’s father had inherited some money, enabling him to pay off his debts and get out of prison—and his young son escaped a dreary fate.

Now the fear of being unable to pay his own debts haunted Dickens. Wearily, he started home from his long walk, no closer to an idea for the “cheerful, glowing” tale he wanted to tell than he’d been when he started out.

However, as he neared home, he felt the sudden flash of inspiration. What about a Christmas story! He would write one for the very people he passed on the black streets of London. People who lived and struggled with the same fears and longings he had known, people who hungered for a bit of cheer and hope.

\*\*

**About Charles Dickens’s Christmas Carol Part 2**

As the mild days of October gave way to a cool November, the manuscript grew, page by page, and the story took life. The basic plot was simple enough for children to understand, but evoked themes that would conjure up warm memories and emotions in an adult’s heart: After retiring alone to his cold, barren apartment on Christmas Eve, Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly London businessman, is visited by the spirit of his dead partner, Jacob Marley. Doomed by his greed and insensitivity to his fellow man when alive, Marley’s ghost wanders the world in chains forged of his own indifference. He warns Scrooge that he must change, or suffer the same fate. The ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Yet to Come appear and show Scrooge poignant scenes from his life and what will occur if he doesn’t mend his ways. Filled with remorse, Scrooge renounces his former selfishness and becomes a kind, generous, loving person who has learned the true spirit of Christmas.

Gradually, in the course of his writing, something surprising happened to Dickens. What had begun as a desperate, calculated plan to rescue himself from debt—“a little scheme,” as he described it—soon began to work a change in the author. As he wrote about the kind of Christmas he loved—joyous family parties with clusters of mistletoe hanging from the ceiling; cheerful carols, games, dances and gifts; delicious feasts of roast goose, plum pudding, fresh breads, all enjoyed in front of a blazing Yule log—the joy of the season he cherished began to alleviate his depression.

A Christmas Carol captured his heart and soul. It became a labor of love. Every time he dipped his quill pen into his ink, the characters seemed magically to take life: Tiny Tim with his crutches, Scrooge cowering in fear before the ghosts, Bob Cratchit drinking Christmas cheer in the face of poverty.

Each morning, Dickens grew excited and impatient to begin the day’s work. “I was very much affected by the little book,” he later wrote a newspaperman, and was “reluctant to lay it aside for a moment.” A friend and Dickens’s future biographer, John Forster, took note of the “strange mastery” the story held over the author. Dickens told a professor in America how, when writing, he “wept, and laughed, and wept again.” Dickens even took charge of the design of the book, deciding on a gold-stamped cover, a red-and-green title page with colored endpapers, and four hand-colored etchings and four engraved woodcuts. To make the book affordable to the widest audience possible, he priced it at only five shillings.

At last, on December 2, he was finished, and the manuscript went to the printers. On December 17, the author’s copies were delivered, and Dickens was delighted. He had never doubted that A Christmas Carol would be popular. But neither he nor his publishers were ready for the overwhelming response that came. The first edition of 6,000 copies sold out by Christmas Eve, and as the little book’s heartwarming message spread, Dickens later recalled, he received “by every post, all manner of strangers writing all manner of letters about their homes and hearths, and how the Carol is read aloud there, and kept on a very little shelf by itself.” Novelist William Makepeace Thackeray said of the Carol: “It seems to me a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it a personal kindness.”

Despite the book’s public acclaim, it did not turn into the immediate financial success that Dickens had hoped for, because of the quality production he demanded and the low price he placed on the book. Nevertheless, he made enough money from it to scrape by, and A Christmas Carol’s enormous popularity revived his audience for subsequent novels, while giving a fresh, new direction to his life and career.

Although Dickens would write many other well-received and financially profitable books—David Copperfield, A Tale of Two Cities, Great Expectations—nothing would ever quite equal the soul-satisfying joy he derived from his universally loved little novel.

In a very real sense, Dickens popularized many aspects of the Christmas we celebrate today, including great family gatherings, seasonal drinks and dishes and gift giving. Even our language has been enriched by the tale. Who has not known a “Scrooge,” or uttered “Bah! Humbug!” when feeling irritated or disbelieving. And the phrase “Merry Christmas!” gained wider usage after the story appeared.

In the midst of self-doubt and confusion, a man sometimes does his best work. From the storm of tribulation comes a gift. For Charles Dickens, a little Christmas novel brought newfound faith in himself and in the redemptive joy of the season. -- By Thomas J. Burns (Originally published in Reader’s Digest, December 1989)

\*\*

**Christmas is Coming**

By Aaliyah Williams

Ebenezer Scrooge and the Grinch—have you ever sympathized with them as the Christmas season approaches? Or perhaps not to that extreme, but maybe you’ve never felt the warm fuzzies that everyone else has?

I was wondering where the Christmas traditions come from and I came across this startling piece of information: “By the early part of the nineteenth century, Christmas [in North America] had almost died out. The Times newspaper, for example, did not once mention Christmas between 1790 and 1835.” Curious, I asked Google why Christmas celebrations nearly disappeared during that period in American history. It turns out that many American settlers of the 1600s were Puritans—a group of very strict Protestants who believed that Christmas was a Catholic holiday and therefore not to be celebrated. And for the next 200 years, until the start of the 20th century, Christmas wasn’t celebrated by most people in America, and was celebrated quietly by those who did.

Nor was it celebrated in Oliver Cromwell’s England. Though in 1660, two years after Cromwell’s death, the ban was lifted, and Christmas was again instituted as a holiday. That said, from the mid-1600s to the end of the 18th century—almost 150 years—Christmas celebrations weren’t much like we celebrate today. It was during the Victorian era that so many of the holiday traditions that we currently celebrate were embraced.

What changed? A lot had to do with one man writing a story about Christmas. In 1843, British novelist Charles Dickens (1812–1870) wrote A Christmas Carol. Besides the story of the first Christmas, it’s probably one of the most popular Christmas stories of all time. In his novella, Charles Dickens idealized a certain kind of Christmas that we now base a lot of our Christmas perceptions on. You might think that with him writing such a wonderful description of Christmas as celebrated by Tiny Tim’s family, that this was how most of England celebrated Christmas—the tree, the Christmas carols, the dinner, the family togetherness, the gift giving. But not really. At least, not at the time.

“When we read or hear A Christmas Carol,” says Bruce Forbes in an interview with a regional radio program, “we are not seeing a reflection of what Christmas was like in his day; we’re seeing what Dickens would like Christmas to be.” At the start of the 19th century, “There was a lot of unemployment,” Dickens scholar John Jordan says. “There was misery, and [Dickens] saw Christmas as something that tended to function as sort of a counterforce to the negative effects of the industrial revolution.” So, many thanks go to Charles Dickens for somehow looking beyond how Christmas was celebrated at that time and creating a vision of something better.

What I’d like to say is that there’s nothing stopping you from creating your own Christmas traditions that have special meaning to you. I’ve come to understand that traditions are at their best when they are done to commemorate something that shouldn’t be forgotten—and which absolutely needs to be celebrated. You don’t need to feel tied in to how others have celebrated it in the past, because, at least for me, Christmas traditions should be about celebrating love. In my opinion, that’s really the only test your new Christmas traditions need to pass.

\*\*

**He’s for Everyone**

By Martin McTeg

My wife has a fondness for miniature nativities, or manger scenes, as they are sometimes called. Twenty-five years ago she made small nativity figurines as gifts for her family. She sculpted them from clay, painted them at the kitchen table, and then baked them in the oven. Her sister still displays her set every Christmas.

When we lived in foreign countries as Christian volunteers, my wife began collecting small nativities made in those places. She has a Russian nativity and one from Israel, carved from olive tree wood. She has a snow globe nativity that also plays “Away in a Manger,” and some others.

Last year we saw a private collection of about 100 nativities from around the world. Among them, we saw the Holy Family depicted as African tribes people, as Orientals, in Indian garb, and as Latin American farmers. We saw a finely detailed nativity once used in a grand cathedral in Europe. We saw a nativity made by Eskimos, in which Mary and Joseph were wearing parkas and snow boots, and one made in a South Pacific island, where the figures were dressed as the island people dress and arranged in a hut made from coconut palm fronds.

The people who made those nativities in so many different countries all had something in common. They portrayed Jesus and those at His birth like themselves, wearing their type of clothes and living as they did, relating to them in their culture and context.

And that is the point, Jesus is for everyone. Which reminds me what a slave said In the early 1800s, before slavery was outlawed in the U.S.A., a skeptic once asked a slave, “How can you believe in Jesus and pray to the same God that your slave masters pray to?” And the slave wisely answered, “He’s not just their Jesus. He’s my Jesus too!” That slave had found Jesus and learned to draw the strength and comfort that he needed from Him.

This is still true today. Jesus relates to everyone of every race and in every land: rich and poor, rural people and city folk, the highly educated and the illiterate, the strong and the weak. He loves us all, and each of us can claim Him as our own and find in Him forgiveness of sins, salvation, and supply of our deepest needs. He’s my Jesus, and He’s your Jesus too. \*\*

**Christmas Love**

Author unknown

My son, Nicholas, was in kindergarten that year. It was an exciting season for a six-year-old, filled with hopes, dreams, and laughter. For weeks, he’d been memorizing songs for his school’s upcoming Winter Pageant.

I didn’t have the heart to tell him I’d be working the night of the production. Not willing to miss his shining moment, I spoke with his teacher. She assured me there’d be a dress rehearsal in the morning, and that all parents unable to attend the evening presentation were welcome to enjoy it then. Fortunately, Nicholas seemed happy with the compromise.

So, just as I promised, I filed in ten minutes early, found a spot on the cafeteria floor and sat down. When I looked around the room, I saw a handful of parents quietly scampering to their seats. I began to wonder why they, too, were attending a dress rehearsal, but chalked it up to the chaotic schedules of modern family life.

As I waited, the students were led into the building. Each class, accompanied by their teacher, sat crossed-legged on the floor. The children would become members of the audience as each group, one by one, rose to perform their song. Because the public school system had long stopped referring to the holiday as “Christmas,” I didn’t expect anything other than fun, commercial entertainment. The Winter Pageant was filled with songs of reindeer, Santa Claus, snowflakes and good cheer. The melodies were fun, cute, and lighthearted. But nowhere to be found was even the hint of an innocent babe, a manger, or Christ’s precious, sacred gifts of life, hope and joy.

When my son’s class rose to sing “Christmas Love,” I was slightly taken aback by its bold title. However, within moments I settled in to watch them proudly begin their number. Nicholas was aglow, as were all of his classmates, adorned in fuzzy mittens, red sweaters and bright snowcaps upon their heads. Those in the front row, center stage, held up large letters, one by one, to spell out the title of the song. As the class would sing “C is for Christmas,” a child would hold up the letter C. Then, “H is for Happy,” and on and on, until each child holding up his or her portion had presented the complete message, “Christmas Love.”

The performance was going smoothly, until suddenly, we noticed her, a small, quiet girl in the front row holding the letter M, upside-down! She was entirely unaware that reversed, her letter M appeared as a W. She fidgeted from side to side, until she had moved away from her mark entirely. The audience of children snickered at this little one’s mistake. In her innocence, she had no idea they were laughing at her and stood tall, proudly holding her W.

You can only imagine the difficulty in calming an audience of young, giggling children. Although many teachers tried to shush them, the laughter continued. It continued that is, until the moment the last letter was raised, and we all saw it together. A hush came over the audience and eyes began to widen. In that instant, we finally understood the reason we were there, why we celebrated in the first place, why even in the chaos, there was a purpose for our festivities. For, when the last letter was held high, the message read loud and clear, “CHRIST WAS LOVE.” And, I believe, He still is.

\*\*

**Two Babes in a Manger**

Author unknown

In 1994, two Americans answered an invitation from the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics (based on Biblical principles) in the public schools. They were invited to teach at prisons, businesses, the fire and police departments, and a large orphanage. About 100 boys and girls who had been abandoned, abused, and left in the care of a government-run program were in the orphanage. The Americans relate the following story:

It was nearing the holiday season, 1994, time for our orphans to hear the traditional story of Christmas for the first time. We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room in the inn, the couple went to a stable, where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger.

Throughout the story, the children and orphanage staff sat and listened in amazement. Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word. Completing the story, we gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins I had brought with me. No colored paper was available in the city. Following instructions, the children tore the paper and carefully laid strips in the manger for straw. Small squares of flannel, cut from a worn-out nightgown an American lady was throwing away as she left Russia, were used for the baby’s blanket. A doll-like baby was cut from tan felt we had brought from the United States. The orphans were busy assembling their manger as I walked among them to see if they needed any help.

All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat. He looked to be about six years old, and had finished his project. As I looked at the little boy’s manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger.

Quickly, I called for the translator to ask the lad why there were two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at this completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously. For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings accurately—until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger.

Then Misha started to ad lib. He made up his own ending to the story as he said, “And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told Him I have no mama and I have no papa, so I don’t have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with Him. But I told Him I couldn’t, because I didn’t have a gift to give Him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe that if I kept Him warm, that would be a good gift. So I asked Jesus, ‘If I keep You warm, will that be a good enough gift?’

“And Jesus told me, ‘If you keep Me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave Me.’ So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and He told me I could stay with Him—for always.”

As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears that splashed down his little cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. The little orphan had found Someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, Someone who would stay with him—for always.

\*\*

**A Christmas Story – Homeless**

*By Joseph Bartin*

I had been on the streets for two years, after running away from my home and parents. Life had been dismal at home, and I longed to break free and find adventure, so at the age of 16, I stuffed my backpack with the essentials … and left. I was excited and afraid at the same time. I had nowhere to go, and very little money, but anything would be better than the life I'd had at home with a drunk and abusive father and a psychotic mother.

My first night out I stayed in a bus stop shelter. It protected me from the wind, but not the cold. I shuddered and shivered all night long, till at last the dawn came. The next night, I didn't fare much better, but by and by, I got used to it, and soon slept in many odd places—under bridges, in deserted alleyways, at storefronts, and at bus stops—always dodging the cops. I would collect strips of cardboard during the day and use them as blankets at night. This was my life for two years.

This story began on Christmas Eve. I had been staying in an abandoned building, and was on my way to pick up a batch of cardboard boxes that I had spotted during the day, when an older woman crossed the street in front of me. Suddenly, a car sped around the corner and knocked her over onto the sidewalk almost in front of me. The driver sped off.

I rushed to her side, and tried my best to comfort her. Surprisingly, the woman wasn't seriously injured, but she was very shook up, and her leg was paining her. I held her hand and told her not to worry, and that help was coming—though I did not know where it would come from. I stayed with her for about ten minutes, until another car came by. I jumped out onto the road and waved my arms frantically to slow the car down. The car did slow down, and after hearing what had happened, the driver got out his cell phone and called for an ambulance.

Afterwards, a policeman questioned me as to what had happened, and gave me the name of the hospital the woman had been taken to. I went back to my "home," but I couldn't forget what had happened.

The next day, I inquired at the hospital, and the receptionist gave me the room number where the lady was in. The woman was very happy to see me and thanked me over and over. And so it was that on that Christmas, I found a friend, someone who took me in as her own, and cared for me as a real mom. She had been very lonely, as her husband had recently died, and she said that I was a godsend in her life, as much as she was in mine. More importantly, she taught me about Jesus, and she led me in a prayer to receive Him into my heart.

The Lord gave us to each other that Christmas, and both of our lives were enriched as a result. I later became involved in helping homeless people in our city, and lived a full and happy life, helping others.

\*\*

**Christmas Traditions**

By Aaliyah Williams

Here are three questions that might help you to find and create Christmas traditions that you’ll love. The traditions might even be things that you’ve done in the past, but which you may need a change of perspective on, or a renewed passion for why you’re doing them. And you don’t need to feel tied in to how others have celebrated it in the past, because, at least for me, Christmas traditions should be about celebrating love. In my opinion, that’s really the only test your new Christmas traditions need to pass.

**Who do I love?**

Write a list of those who mean a lot to you. Celebrate your love by doing something with them or for them—something that will mean a lot to them. You could decide on reading through a book together during the Christmas season as a means of celebrating togetherness. Or decide on a list of things to be done together on each day leading up to Christmas. Or present a loved one with quotes, songs, or tiny cute or nonsensical gifts that celebrate who they are.

**How can I celebrate love?**

I recently bought a book on crafting children’s toys, and there’s a section on Christmassy stuff to make—wooden chests, painted toy soldiers, angel wings, etc. The one I’m going to try my hand at is the decorated paper bags that serve as an alternative for Christmas stockings. Throughout the season, I’ll write letters and rummage around for little gifts for my nephews and put them in their bags marked with their names.

These ideas might sound corny, but things have started to feel holy during Christmas. I think it’s because with every activity I take on, every batch of cookies I bake, every evening I commit to spending with loved ones, I know that I do it (or try to do it) because of this divine thing called love.

Decide on wonderful things to do for those you love; bathe your actions in love—and you’ll have one of the best Christmas traditions ever. I’m loving the idea that for a long, long time, so many people around the world have gathered and done something in a particular way to celebrate a certain event or idea. That’s when traditions are at their best—when they’re done to commemorate something that shouldn’t be forgotten—but *how* it’s done could be different from anything that’s been done until now. So let’s get creative!

If the idea of Christmas feels rather dry and worn, I hope you’ll think of the guy who imagined a better Christmas, and how you can go about creating a better one for yourself too.

\*\*

**A Christmas Story -- Through a Child’s Eyes**

Author unknown

We were the only family with children in the restaurant. I sat Erik in a high chair and noticed everyone was quietly eating and talking. Suddenly, Erik squealed with glee and said, “Hi there!” He pounded his fat baby hands on the highchair tray. His eyes were wide with excitement and his mouth was bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled and giggled with merriment.

I looked around and saw the source of his merriment. It was a man with a tattered rag of a coat, dirty, greasy, and worn. His pants were baggy with a zipper at half-mast and his toes poked out of would-be shoes. His shirt was dirty and his hair was uncombed and unwashed. His whiskers were too short to be called a beard and his nose was so varicose it looked like a road map. We were too far from him to smell, but I was sure he smelled.

His hands waved and flapped on loose wrists. “Hi there, baby! Hi there, big boy! I see ya, buster,” the man said to Erik. My husband and I exchanged looks, What do we do? Erik continued to laugh and answer, “Hi, hi there!” Everyone in the restaurant noticed and looked at us and then at the man. The old geezer was creating a nuisance with my beautiful baby.

Our meal came and the man began shouting from across the room, “Do ya know patty cake? Do you know peek-a-boo? Hey, look, he knows peek-a-boo!” Nobody thought the old man was cute. He was obviously drunk. My husband and I were embarrassed. We ate in silence, all except for Erik, who was running through his repertoire for the admiring skid-row bum, who in turn, reciprocated with his comments.

We finally got through the meal and headed for the door. My husband went to pay the check and told me to meet him in the parking lot. The old man sat poised between me and the door. Lord, just let me out of here before he speaks to me or Erik, I prayed.

As I drew closer to the man, I turned my back trying to sidestep him and avoid any air he might be breathing. As I did, Erik leaned over my arm, reaching with both arms in a baby’s “pick me up” position. Before I could stop him, Erik had propelled himself from my arms to the man’s.

Suddenly a very old smelly man and a very young baby expressed their love. Erik in an act of total trust, tenderness, and submission lay his tiny head upon the man’s ragged shoulder. The man’s eyes closed, and I saw tears hover beneath his lashes. His aged hands full of grime, pain, and hard labor gently, so gently, cradled my baby’s bottom and stroked his back. No two beings have ever loved so deeply for so short a time. I stood awestruck. The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms for a moment, and then his eyes opened and set squarely on mine. He said in a firm commanding voice, “You take care of this baby.”

Somehow I managed, “I will,” from a throat that contained a stone. He pried Erik from his chest, unwillingly, longingly, as though he were in pain. I received my baby, and the man said, “God bless you, ma’am. You’ve given me my Christmas gift.” I said nothing more than a muttered thanks.

With Erik in my arms, I ran for the car. My husband was wondering why I was crying and holding Erik so tightly, and why I was saying, “My God, my God, forgive me.” I had just witnessed Christ’s love shown through the innocence of a tiny child who saw no sin, who made no judgment, a child who saw a soul, and a mother who saw a suit of clothes.

I was a Christian who was blind, holding a child who was not. I felt it was God asking, “Are you willing to share your son for a moment?”—when He shared His for all eternity. The ragged old man, unwittingly, had reminded me, “To enter the Kingdom of God, we must become as little children.”

\*\*

**Christmas Is a Time for Sharing**

The noise was enough to make Father Bonaventure almost regret having given this party. *The wild Indians are certainly run­ning true to form*, he thought. The children were indeed Indians—members of the Papago [Tohono O'odham] tribe, and they had gone wild with joy. This was their first Christmas party, given for them by the Franciscan priests at the San Xavier Reservation mission south of Tucson, Arizona.

*A party?* Father smiled to him­self. *It's more like an uprising.* The children came from poor families who labored on farms that never produced enough to buy proper food and clothes. "Let the kids have their fun," Father con­cluded, clenching his fists to control his impatience.

Games were being played with prizes for the winners, but now Father began to receive reports that Luis Pablo, just going on eight, was trying to take away prizes from boys who had won them. Time and again Father had to force Luis to re­turn a pencil or a scarf or a book.

"Luis!" Father said severely, "why can't you behave?"

"I want to win something."

"Then win something," said Fa­ther. "Don't steal it."

But the boy had no luck at all. Whatever the game, he lost. Father watched him sadly. It was a shame, for these defeats had driven Luis to the brink of violence. Father was both puzzled and angry.

At the end of the party the chil­dren formed a line and to each Father presented a bag of hard can­dy—the only gift the mission could afford in bulk. When Luis' turn came he asked, "Can I have three bags?"

"You cannot," said Father sternly. "One bag to each."

"But I mean empty bags."

"Oh! Well, why not?" Father gave Luis three empty bags and the boy left.

Later, alone in his office, the priest glanced out the window and saw Luis sitting on the school steps. Luis had three bags open beside him and carefully, by precise count, was dividing his candy into them. Then Father Bonaventure suddenly remembered: At home Luis had two brothers and a sister; they were all too young to come to the Christmas party. So this was the reason. Father went to the party room and scooped the remaining candy into a large bag. He had intended to give the candy to the Sisters, but he knew that they would not object to what he was about to do. He went outside and presented the bag to Luis.

"Here's your prize," he said.

"Prize?" Luis asked, astonished. "What for?"

"All during the party I was watch­ing to see which one of you had the true spirit of Christmas," Father said. "You win." Then the priest turned and en­tered the school quickly because he did not want the boy to see his tears.

\*\*