

The great light of Christmas

There is something special in remembering Christmases of old. When the air chills and the sky darkens, we want memories to point to the reason we celebrate this season. Every year, Our Sunday Visitor asks our readers to send in their favorite Christmas memories, as well as their original Christmas poems. This year, as always, we are delighted to share these stories and poems to warm your heart during the holiday season. So cozy up with a steaming drink and settle in to read some Christmas memories of miracles, gifts, prayers answered, and childlike wonder for Christ's presence during this most wonderful time of the year.

Christmas Carol Express

Our train lurched from the Bangkok train station. We were journeying to Chiang Mai in north Thailand. It was not snowing this tropical Christmas Eve.

Once the conductor checked tickets, we strode to the restaurant carriage. The passing breeze from open windows cooled us. Fellow passengers ordered rice dishes and cold beer. An Italian group entered. Germans drank beer. A Spanish group smiled over fried rice. We were Americans ordering cashews with chilies.

Everyone was joyful. The train chugged through the countryside. Passengers were wishing all "merry Christmas!" in many languages. The Italians started singing a Christmas carol in Italian. Everyone clapped. Then the Spanish chanted their Christmas carol. After they finished, the Germans caroled their Christmas hymns. Our turn began; we sang "Silent Night." The whole restaurant car overflowed with Christmas caroling.

Thai train staff crowded inside to listen and applaud at each carol. Smiling passengers crowded to listen. Christmas joy

spread.

When we stopped at upcountry stations, multitudes flocked to outside the dining car to hear the Christmas carols. Wise train staff radioed ahead to proclaim the rising star of the Christmas Carol Express. Young people crowded platforms to listen to the yuletide singing. They clapped loudly.

Our Christmas Carol Express made its way northward, spreading the Good News, bringing the gift of Christmas to all people, enlightening our carols with the star of Bethlehem and exemplifying Christmas as a festive holiday for all.

– **Douglas Broderick**, Whiting, New Jersey

An answered prayer

My favorite Christmas as a child is one I always recall with a smile, as it was one that helps to remind me that it is God's love, come to dwell with us on earth, that we celebrate.

This particular Christmas, I was a little girl of no more than 6 years old and still harbored a deep love for my three most cherished stuffed animals. Only a few days before Christmas, I realized that Valentine, my red and white stuffed bear, was nowhere to be found. The last I could recall, he had gone shopping with me. As I told my mom the news, I was heartbroken, but I did have a plan! I would pray and ask Santa to bring him back. My mom wondered what connection prayer had to Santa, so I explained that I would ask God to tell Santa to find Valentine since the two are friends (the first Santa was St. Nicholas, after all). And so every night for the rest of the days leading up to Christmas, I prayed very hard that Valentine would be under the tree that special morning instead of my gifts.

On Christmas morning, I ran with a hopeful and trusting heart to the living room to see what had become of my prayers. I was happier than I could have imagined when I saw my little

Valentine sitting cheerily beneath the tree! Not only had God and Santa managed to find my bear (dad checked with Tractor Supply's lost-and-found), but they also gave me a pile of gifts that I cherished for years to come. I knew then that God must really love me to grant such a small request!

– Anne Verellen, Snover, Michigan

An angelic caregiver

Christmas morning 1991 had just dawned. I was sitting beside my comatose wife, Kelly, in the hospital's intensive care unit.

Sitting nearby was Marsha, the nurse on duty. She got up extra early so she could be with her three young sons when they opened their presents from Santa. Though I had just met her, I felt I had known Marsha my entire life. She was that type of person – friendly, compassionate, quick to smile, quicker to reach out and hold a trembling hand.

When I got home, Brianna, our 2-year-old granddaughter, was playing with a doll Kelly and I bought her for Christmas. "What's your dolly's name?" I asked. "She doesn't have one," Brie answered. "How about we call her Marsha?" I suggested.

From that moment, Marsha has been a Christmas tradition in our family. For the past 29 years "Marsha" has been the angel atop our Christmas tree. Her once curly blonde hair has turned gray and matted. Her cherubic face is scratched and dirty. It doesn't matter. Every Christmas Eve, we tie her to the top of the family tree.

Kelly eventually recovered, and Marsha (the nurse) became an unforgettable Christmas memory until, decades later, on Easter morning 2013, I was again sitting beside my comatose Kelly in the ICU. She was again hooked up to a ventilator after being admitted with a severe virus infection. With me were five of our six children and several of our twelve grandchildren.

Also, in the room, ironically, was Marsha, the same compassionate nurse who cared for my wife that Christmas morning more than 20 years earlier, still working in the ICU. Marsha was not assigned to be my wife's nurse, but she asked her superiors if she could care for Kelly. She said it would be an honor.

The next day, my wife of almost 54 years passed away, surrounded by her family. A few nights later, as the viewing was about to end, a woman hurried into the funeral home. "Am I too late? I just finished working," the woman asked breathlessly.

No. Marsha was not too late.

– **Joseph Clark Sr.**, Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania

The symbol of a secondhand tree

One year we were late in finding a redcedar Christmas tree. We were getting anxious and downright depressed because we had not yet hunted for a tree, with a few days left before Christmas Eve.

By chance, Mom drove by our parochial school, which was on Christmas break. We saw the cafeteria's redcedar Christmas tree lying on its side by the dumpster, still covered in tinsel. We snatched up that secondhand symbol that was destined for the landfill and honored it with another round of holiday cheer. The poor thing was browning, so we cut a fresh bottom to the trunk to aid in the tree's absorption of water, and Mom gave the branches some thorough spritzing with green food coloring and water.

The Germans brought evergreens into their domiciles for centuries before Roman, Gallic and Irish missionaries converted the pagan tribes to Christianity. Some may recognize certain pagan practices as proto-Christian, even though those in darkness did not know why their rituals had correct

meaning. Their use of evergreens during the coldest, darkest hours nearing the winter solstice is an example. That greenery foisted into gray cloudy lives helped lead them – and us – to the birth of God, less than a week after the Northern Hemisphere's longest night.

When we decorate our homes with evergreen branches, let us be reminded of their participation through centuries of celebration with the Body of Christ in the grand feast of Jesus' entrance into the world!

– **Craig McEwan**, Portal, Arizona

A blessed recovery

Last year, I was so looking forward to the Christmas season. I was anxiously awaiting to be off work for a long Christmas break. I was becoming overly concerned and busying myself with decorating, shopping, preparing to bake and finally being able to sit back and relax to watch Hallmark Christmas movies!

I quickly learned that my idea was not to become a reality.

Alas, my eyes were opened to the true meaning of Christmas and my dependency on Jesus when my husband was diagnosed with a life-threatening cerebral hematoma. He was flown to the hospital and remained in critical care while he awaited surgery. Our family pulled together; our five children, spouses and grandchildren all stayed at the hospital day and night as we prayed for a miraculous recovery. The thought of losing my husband of 41 years was becoming very close to a reality for which I was unprepared. I prayed for him. I wasn't ready for my life with him to be over.

He underwent surgery and unexpectedly had a very serious complication afterward. He invoked the intercession of St. Benedict and had a very miraculous recovery.

As I prepare for Christmas this year, I am keeping my focus on

the Savior of the world, Jesus. I will whisper in his ear over and over again, Thank you for my prayers answered. Merry Christmas.

– **Mary Lynn VanEman**, New Castle, Pennsylvania

Gifts worth remembering

In 1973, the year I graduated from high school, my mother had a massive stroke that left her paralyzed on her right side. She lost the ability to speak in complete sentences, but she could still sing. Dad, my younger sister and I spent every holiday at the nursing home. The staff invited the families of patients to share holiday dinners in the activities center down the hall. Mom wasn't able to leave her room, so the four of us ate our holiday meals around her bed.

After a few years of this routine, we felt depressed about another nursing home Christmas. Things changed somewhat in 1977. That was the year an anonymous donor gifted my mother with a 2-foot-high lighted ceramic Christmas tree. The tree showed up on her windowsill a couple of weeks before Christmas. We noticed a row of homemade cards taped to the wall opposite her bed, right in her line of vision. The cards had been made by students at one of the area's Catholic schools. I can't begin to tell you how much that little tree and those cards cheered us up.

We were in her room on Christmas Eve that year when the carolers arrived. It was a group of students from a Catholic high school. When they came into our room, Mom sang along with them. The woman who couldn't finish a sentence sang every Christmas carol without missing a word. We were all in tears, but we were smiling.

Mom lived two more years at the nursing facility before passing. I will always remember that blessed Christmas Eve when a group of young people shared the music that lifted our

spirits.

– **Elizabeth Dreier**, Poland, Ohio

The Nativity play

The Church was dark, with only pinpricks of light emanating from the candles on the altar. The smoke rose slowly toward the vaulted ceiling, carrying the prayers of the faithful to the heavens. The murmuring voices fell silent in anticipation of the beginning of the reenactment of the journey to Bethlehem.

The doors leading to the church swung softly open. The congregation rose and turned toward the sound. They began to sing in unison, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." Leading his wooden donkey (situated on a skateboard), was my then 7-year old son, Joseph. Carefully guiding the Virgin Mary and anxiously scanning his surroundings, he searched for another place to spend the night, for there was no room at the inn.

St. Joseph and St. Mary approached the steps to the altar. On the top step was a manger filled with straw. Positioned on the altar were the young school children dressed as angels, shepherds and animals. A spotlight shone brightly on the Christ Child lying in the manger. Mary and Joseph knelt in adoration before the Savior of the world.

Suddenly, the Church was flooded with light and filled with the pure, innocent and reverent voices of the young actors singing "Glory to the newborn King" and "Gloria in Excelsis Deo." The entire People of God joined their voices with the children in praise of Emmanuel, "God is with us."

– **Kathleen Coleman**, Lancaster, California

A gift from St. Anthony

One winter, our family planned a Christmas gathering in the

snowy mountains. Our car was packed to the gills, including Christmas decorations and a tree on the roof.

As we arrived at our cabin, I quickly set to work creating a joyful Christmas scene with cards, candles, garlands and the fir tree loaded with shiny, colorful ornaments and twinkly lights. Then I set up the Nativity set, which I had bought at a craft sale.

The small crib had center stage. Mary and Joseph stood nearby, the Wise Men on the left and the shepherd and sheep on the right. And now, the best for last: the tiny baby for the crib. But where was that little baby? I looked everywhere but could not find the infant Jesus. From time to time I would search the whole area again, but to no avail. I was getting desperate.

It was time to call on St. Anthony. I asked him to open my eyes that I might see and find what had been lost. Exhausted, I took a nap on the couch nearby. As soon as I woke up, with only one thing on my mind, I again searched out the Nativity scene. Suddenly my eyes were opened, and where I had looked so often and saw nothing, I could now see the King of the Universe. He was being carried in the arms of a Magi. Wedged between the king's gift and outstretched arm, the wee baby blended in so perfectly that only opened eyes could see him. With a gasp of surprise and joy, I thanked St. Anthony and placed the tiny infant in his manger bed.

May all our eyes be open to see and find Jesus this Christmas.

– **Dorothy Buto**, Fountain Valley, California

A special delivery

In 2017, we spent Christmas away from our new baby girl. My labor had been induced because of an abnormal ultrasound at my 38-week checkup. Eva Marie Teresa was born Dec. 20 and had surgery Dec. 22nd to remove a massive ovarian cyst. The

surgery was successful, but the recovery process and several other things kept Eva Marie in the neonatal intensive care unit over Christmas.

My husband, James, and I went to Mass that morning at a parish near the hospital, and then we went up to see our little girl. Later in the day, we left the unit for a few minutes, and I vividly recall feeling disoriented as I looked around the hospital cafeteria, seeing all of the other people who didn't want to be there either. I knew in that tired moment that things wouldn't be this way forever, but it was certainly a far cry from the cozy Christmas we had planned.

That night, we ate pizza and exchanged presents with my family at our house, grateful to be celebrating with loved ones but aching for our little girl.

Looking back, I now understand the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary a little better. Mary's joy at the Annunciation was surely tinged with fear at the change in her and Joseph's wedding plans. Her joy at her son's birth didn't erase the fact that he was born in a stable. The joy of his presentation in the Temple was tempered by the sobering prophecy of Simeon. "Joy" doesn't mean pain-free, it just means that pain doesn't have the last word.

– **Anne Marie Williams** via email

Seeing Christ in the faces of family

My father was unemployed the year of my most memorable Christmas. My younger sister and I wondered if there would be any gifts at all under the Christmas tree.

It was not that we thought that presents were the end-all and be-all of Christmas. It was just that we associated gifts with love, and feared that without brightly wrapped boxes underneath the tree, the love would be lacking somehow.

And then came a knock on the kitchen door, a slight rustle and the sound of excited voices. As we ran to the door, we could see my beloved foster cousins and their parents. They came bearing gifts – lots of them. But they also arrived with an unbridled joy that was infectious. In addition, they came bearing much love for my parents, my sister and me.

Christmas had indeed arrived at our modest apartment a day early, heralded by a family who truly embodied what Christianity is all about. They gave to us enthusiastically, generously and selflessly, knowing we had no way to reciprocate.

I can look back at that moment of excitement, and in my mind's eye I see Christ in the beautiful faces of those family members. They brought Jesus to me in a way that would only be surpassed by my own reception of holy Communion.

– **Maria V. Gallagher**, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

A Christmas meditation

During the December holidays, we all weeded for the crops in the morning, then in the afternoon, we divided domestic chores – fetching water, collecting firewood, picking greens from the garden for cooking, looking after cattle, cooking dinner and washing utensils.

If you finished your chores in time, you would help to decorate the church in preparation for Christmas. We would build a cave, and then we would use cotton swabs to imitate snow-covered cave. We lived out in the village away from the town and the parish center. We did not get Mass frequently in our outstation, but my father would offer us service without Eucharist every Sunday.

Then came Christmas Eve, the most memorable part of the holiday. After dinner, we would sit outside. The air felt warm and pure. We would sing different Christmas carols, then at

midnight we always sang this one particular children's song. We would share a hot cup of black tea, and we felt the wonder and joy of Christmas. There was a feeling of awe, wonder, beauty and pure joy. My little heart soared toward the heavens as we sung.

Now I recall those simple rituals with joy. They are part of me, and have shaped how I experience Christmas. Little did I know then that I was engaged in meditation about the Word incarnate.

– **Sister Teresia Mutiso**, Binghamton, New York

The joy of Christmas morning

The four weeks before Christmas – Advent, in Catholic circles – were filled with mundane things and preparing for the upcoming holiday (holy day).

We kids would haunt the stores that carried toys and games. We attempted to get Christmas catalogs from Montgomery Ward or Sears. We'd try to decide just what that One Thing was that would satisfy our heart's desire. We didn't have a long list of choices. We were aware that this was Christmas, not our birthdays – no piles of loot, but maybe needed clothing would be there.

We'd head to bed on Christmas Eve, and the house still looked just like it did the rest of the year. Christmas morning would dawn, and we would come downstairs to see the tree standing in the corner, lit up with multicolored bulbs. The room smelled like the forest, and the presents under the tree were mute evidence that Santa had once more visited our house. Soon we were off for 9:30 Mass. *Christus natus est* – Christ is born!

– **Kathleen E. Melville-Hall**, Apena, Michigan

On account of Christmas

I was about 10 or so, and Christmas was fast approaching. With the savings account I had signed up for at school, I headed for the bank. Joining the closest line, I finally reached the window. I handed the teller the withdrawal slip. I had been saving throughout the year.

The bank clerk spoke, "Oh, do you want to close out your account?"

"No, I just want to take out \$4."

"But you only have \$4! If you withdrawal all of it, you won't have anything left, and your account will be closed!"

After some haggling, she called the manager, who said, "What seems to be the problem, young lady?"

"I have to buy Christmas presents for my mother and father and my six brothers and sisters. That's 50 cents apiece, so I need \$4."

He allowed me to take out my \$4 and keep the account open.

I remember our enthusiasm when the "Billy and Ruth" toy catalog came. My brother and I would excitedly point to the toys and say to each other, "That's what I want!" But we never asked for any of them; we just enjoyed reading about them and welcomed whatever gifts we received.

In the 1940s, money may have been scarce, but the love in our family was the best present we could ask for.

– **Mary Teresa Cloran**, Palmyra, New Jersey

A Christmas choir

Being an active-duty Air Force family, we moved a great deal, but every Catholic community in the United States and in

Europe was always welcoming. In that regard, Christmas of 1994 holds a wonderful memory for our family.

In late November, our Northern Virginia parish bulletin had an article asking people to join the choir for the Christmas celebration. My daughter, who attended a local Catholic high school, asked if she and I could join for the Christmas celebration. The opportunity to do something special with my teenage daughter made for a resounding “yes.” Our first practice was great, as we were warmly welcomed with her joining the soprano section and me with the tenors. The month flew by as we practiced and even became part of the Sunday Mass choir in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

The midnight Mass was prayerful as we sang memorable carols, with Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus” sung as the postlude. Making the night even more wonderful, my wife and son were there participating in the celebration and watching as we sang with the choir.

The experience so moved my daughter that she wanted to join the choir on a regular basis. For the next three years, until she went away to college, a father and his daughter celebrated Sunday Mass and holy days singing with a choir that made the effort to ask people to join them at Christmas.

– **Mark Clark**, Roanoke, Virginia

Messiah in a manger



Baby Jesus' hands reaching out to you and me,

Lovingly for everyone to see.
Children's eyes gazing so bright,
As it's Christmas – what a delight!
For the reason God became man,
Was to save us as only He can.
Dying on the cross, was the plan;
Jesus cannot forget one lost lamb.
– **Catherine L. Balk**, Cresco, Iowa

Christmas joy

Where or why is Christmas joy?
The birth of a boy.
We mentally see a manger scene.
Then ponder what it can mean.
For humanity's salvation
God wrought Christ's incarnation.
A baby imbued with radiating love
Given by God above.

He chose life as a man to extend
The promise of heavenly life without end.
– **Colleen Rider**, Avon, Ohio

Pie Jesu Domine

His earthly parents-to-be traveled the route,
Obedient to laws of the day.

Pie Jesu Domine

Homeless in her hour to deliver,
Mother and Babe lay humbled on hay.

Pie Jesu Domine

Through love of Father, light of Spirit:
Conceived to be born in hallowed ray.

Pie Jesu Domine

Guarded by angels, honored by shepherds,
Laden by kings in star led way.

Pie Jesu Domine

Flesh and blood; soul, divinity
The God-man depicted in paint, stone, wood, and clay.

Pie Jesu Domine

Oh, Christ-Incarnate, we celebrate you
Coming as children to party-play.

“Happy Birthday”

Pie Jesu Domine

– **Bretta Ribbing**, Manchester, Missouri

A gift for Baby Jesus

In the 50s in Houston, Texas,
under sky with stars so bright,
The church around the corner
had a live nativity each night.
In a stable built from old lumber
with piles of hay in the loft,
the Christ child was a life-sized doll
swaddled in soft flannel cloth.

Mary was ever so lovely,
humble, graceful, and small.
Joseph was properly bearded,
gentle, strong, and tall.
This familiar scene was made special
by cow, ewe, and ram from a farm,
and shepherds who knelt to worship
the Babe in His mother's arms.
But then a surprising miracle
etched in memory still crystal clear:
the ewe gave birth to a tiny lamb,
the Christmas event of that year!
– **Ann Applegarth**, Roswell, New Mexico

When Christ was born

Oh, sleeping town of Bethlehem
Beyond your hills afar,
There sounds the holy angels' song
And burns the shining star.
What wondrous gift has blest this night?
What brought this celebration?
The birth of Christ the King it was
The dawning of salvation.
– **Katie Furman**, Malvern, Pennsylvania

A light for the nations

The darkness of the night
Is filled with heavenly light.
The holy angels sing
And blessed anthems ring.
The shepherds stand in awe
At the miracle they saw.
To the stable they must go
On knees they bow down low.
They gaze upon the child

So small, so meek, so mild.
His mother holds him tight
Ever in his father's sight.
He came for you and me
For all the world to see.
A Savior born this day
To help show us the way
To our eternal home
Straight path, we should not roam.
A light to guide the nations
A fulfillment of all revelations.
Priest, Prophet and King
To Him we all must cling.
This holy night is still
So we may do His will.
Grant us, O Lord, we pray
With you we'll always stay.
– **Deacon Steve Dixon**, Alexandria, Virginia