

Christmas: A Time for Wishing

By Jamie Buckingham

I sat silently across the room, watching my 3-year-old granddaughter turning the pages of the J. C. Penney Christmas catalogue. Unaware of my presence, she was softly whispering the names of the hundreds of marvelous items pictured in the big "wish book" which 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. The main street, which was only three blocks long, ended at the park.

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.

Then Mr. McWilliams, the mayor, would turn on the lights on the big tree in the center of the park next to the old World War I cannons. The choir from the Baptist church would sing carols and the adults would join in—while the kids would go over to the cage where the big alligators snoozed in the water. We'd toss hard candy at them, hoping they'd snarl and snatch it up in their huge jaws. They never did. The candy would just bounce off their long noses and sink into the murky water. It was OK. Mother wouldn't let us eat the candy anyway.

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

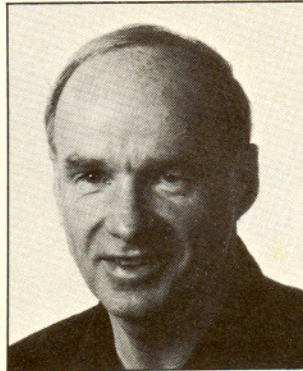
Is it so wrong to wish?

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. The rest of the year an ancient spinning wheel sat there, but we kids knew that it was just guarding the spot until next Christmas when the tree would appear—that wonderful tree with the wonderful ornaments. When all the kids were in place, sitting cross-legged on the floor, Daddy would recite 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.

I wondered what it would be like, spending Christmas as my mother and daddy used to spend theirs—with snow on the



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ground and the sound of sleigh bells ringing...are you listening?...Instead there was the sound of the balmy, Florida breeze rustling the leaves in the palm trees outside my window. Deep in the woods, beyond the orange trees, a pair of hoot owls would echo across the night. Sometimes, when the wind would die, you could hear the low roar of the ocean surf more than a mile away.

Would he come tonight? Would Donner and Blitzen find our house in the orange grove? Was Santa Claus really coming to town? If so, would he really show up in our fireplace where the stockings were hung by the chimney with care?

I'm grateful for that happy home of childhood, for it has left me with a life now filled

with wonderful memories. 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 which once excited me are now slightly frayed; the things which 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 begin...and 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 not God 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 fuddies who have lost the wonder of childhood.

How easy it is to become sophisticated. Super spiritual. To condemn Christmas trees, and 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. ■