

THE RELUCTANT REINDEER (AND OTHER TALES OF CHILDHOOD)

This Christmas season our family seems to have been paying a lot of attention to reindeer, at least the younger members of the family.

Our grandchildren in Fort Myers were both part of a play that told the tale of a Christmas Eve when poor Rudolph got a cold and couldn't guide Santa's sleigh through the night.

Christopher, the four-year-old, was originally cast as Donner. But he's a very energetic little boy, and he just couldn't stay in line, so he got demoted to a nameless reindeer in a supporting role. He wasn't even sure he wanted to do that. Our son Matt called him the reluctant reindeer.

Meanwhile, our older grandson, Zachary, was cast as the hero of the piece. Just in the nick of time, so to speak, Rudolph remembered an old friend of his who lived on a farm. Maybe he could substitute. So, Santa makes a phone call, and Zachary, dressed in coveralls, a John Deer cap, and antlers, comes riding in on a toy pickup truck to save the day.

Meanwhile, in Orlando, our only granddaughter and her mother were talking about leaving out milk and cookies for Santa on Christmas Eve. Haley thought that was a good idea, but she didn't like her mother's other suggestion.

"Haley, do you want to leave out carrots for the reindeer?"

"No," said four year old Haley.

"Why not?"

"Reindeer eat leaves, Mommy. Not carrots. Rabbits eat carrots. Reindeer and dinosaurs eat leaves. "

I may be a doddering old grandfather, but it makes sense to me!

It is such a joy to be able to see Christmas through the eyes of children, isn't it? Every parent, every grandparent, every aunt, uncle or older cousin here tonight, probably has some similar tale of childhood you could share; some similar story about the children in your lives, and how they see things in a new and different way. No wonder so many people say Christmas is for children.

And why not? After all, the most important Christmas story, the original Christmas story, is all about a child. A child born in Bethlehem. And as we retell his story, we can't help but be reminded of the great joy little ones bring into our lives.

But we also must remember the circumstances of his birth. He lived in poverty, in an occupied land, under foreign dictatorship. He had to be placed in a manger, a feeding trough, because there was no room for his family in the inn. Like many children around the world, Jesus was born into less than ideal circumstances.

It is, of course, fine for us to enjoy the unique take our children have on Christmas, it is fine to indulge them a bit. And who can help but be stirred by the images of childlike innocence that permeate this holy night. But Christmas, if it is to mean anything, must mean far more. It must, in the end, be a time of recommitting ourselves to making this world a safer, better place, for all children.

Like Jesus, Claire Kenny was born in less than ideal circumstances. She was thirteen weeks premature, and weighed just 2 pounds, 2.5 ounces. She was unable to breath on her own. An emergency tracheotomy, resuscitation, and a respirator, all played a role in the first few minutes of her life. She stayed in the pediatric ICU at Yale New Haven for six months. She has endured operations on her lungs, her intestines and her tonsils.

It's always touch and go with Claire, who is now six. She uses sign language to communicate most of the time, and is on oxygen 24/7. She has a whole catalog of medical issues ranging from chronic lung disease to broncho-pulmonary dysplasia.

For the most part, though, Claire's parents were able to keep things on an even keel. But then her mother was fired from her job because she missed too many days of work tending to Claire's many needs. And then her father was laid off from his job working with a trucking company.

As things got worse financially their roof started to leak. For most of us that is a real inconvenience, but for Clair it was life threatening. For the leak, which could not be fixed due to lack of funds, started spawning mold. And for someone with breathing issues, that spells disaster.

About that time the bank sent an inspector to assess their property to begin foreclosure.

But the good folks of Milford, hearing about the situation, rose to the occasion. And just last weekend, they showed up at little Claire's home, bearing gifts and promises of help. They brought enough cash to pay the mortgage for December. They brought gift certificates for food at the local supermarkets. They brought a new crib for Claire, who is still very tiny, and had one that was falling apart. A local auto repair company drove up with their tow truck and hauled off the family van for free repairs—it hadn't been running for a while. They brought a tree, and gifts, and a painter and a contractor, and even heating oil. And they sang

songs of hope and cheer, including “Hark the Herald Angels Sing!” “All of you,” said Claire’s mom, “are Christmas angels to us.”

One of the organizers, Tony Candido, told the family, “Claire is the reason we are here. Each and every one of us is just a step away from being disabled So when a family like yours needs our help, we will be here. That’s what a community is for.”

And so it is. Our local congregation. Our local community. Our global community. We are called to be present for one another. We are called to remember the children in our midst. All the children. Not just the ones like my grandkids, who are fortunate enough to enjoy stories about reindeer, and visits from Santa, but all children. And we are called to not just remember them, but to work towards that day when there is always room at the inn for each and every one. That day when housing and food and heating oil and medical care are not just for some, but rather for all.

One of the children who went along to Claire’s house when they were helped out so magnificently, was a six-grader named Joe. Joe, like so many kids, is a very observant young man. “There’s a lot I have,” he told a reporter, “That I don’t know that I even realized until we got singing here” He then went on to talk about some of his pet peeves, and his jealousy of some of his friends who have even more than he does. “Nobody in my family struggles, though,” he said, “not like this—with serious medical stuff and about money [and food]. I [just] wish [Claire] and her family had it easier.” (All quotes, *CT Post*, 12-23-07, A-2)

So do I, Joe. So do I. I wish that it was easier for Claire, and the children of Bridgeport, and New York, and Baghdad, and yes, Bethlehem as well. I wish that all the children of the world had it a bit easier. I wish none of them had to struggle for the basics. But unlike Joe, I’m an adult—and so are most of you. And I can do more than just wish. We, like the good folks of Milford, can reach out to the Claires of this world. We can reach out to the children we know, and those who we don’t. As volunteers, as advocates, as financial supporters, we can work in ways that will make their lives not just easier, but better. All in the name of the child born this very night.

You and I can work for the day when all childhood tales have happy endings. You and I can work for the day when all children have a Merry Christmas, and a good start in life.

Amen

John H. Danner

