

December 22, 2009

Dear Friends,

In every place I have lived, my Christmas has acquired new traditions. As I was sharing the night of the potluck, one tradition which survives from childhood days, is my keeping of Advent. In those days I kept advent using an advent calendar, sent in the mail by my German aunts. What fun to open each numbered door, and see what was concealed there! Sometimes it was a piece of sweet marzipan, sometimes a bitter chocolate, sometimes just a picture of a donkey, or of a wise man or some other character from the Christmas story. This is now the fifth Christmas I've spent in Guelph, and I realized Sunday night, in going around our neighbourhood carolling for the

fourth year in a row, that this may well be the experience (or one of them) that will live on in hallowed memory as my "Guelph Christmas tradition."

As I asked myself just what it is about the carolling evening that I so enjoy, I reflected that perhaps it is related to my childish pleasure in seeing what is concealed behind the doors. The doors of my neighbours' homes, like the doors of the advent calendar, all conceal a story (sometimes bitter, sometimes sweet), and at that magic moment when the crack opens and a face peers out, I catch a glimpse of 30 different Christmases -- 30 different stories taking place inside.

Door number 1: an older woman, apparently living alone, anxious lest her dog and her heat should escape. "Go next door -- she'll enjoy it," she tells us. No room at that inn.

Door number 5: a middle aged woman, asks us to wait a minute while she gets her wallet. "No, ma'am, we're not taking donations -- just trying to spread a little Christmas joy." But she's off looking for her purse, and, such as it is, she's missed our singing, so thrown off balance is she by a gift that's free.

Door number 12: a young family. "Come see this, you guys!" A little girl comes running barefoot and gapes at us wide-eyed; a teen-aged boy comes sloping in from a farther room, still not too cool for Christmas. Smiles. Applause. Thanks. "Merry Christmas!" A good one.

Door number 15: another young family. We've been at this house a few years running and they always give us a warm welcome despite the fact we always seem to catch them at bath-time. This year we have Bevin with us, and he's singing "Away in a Manger" for all he's worth to a boy about his own age. It may be this child's first encounter with a "bi-lingual" boy: one who at Christmas is able to speak both the language of Rudolph and of the baby Jesus. I'm thinking this is cross-cultural mission in its most basic form, and my heart swells with pride at our little missionary.

Door number 20: across the street a young girl comes to the door. She looks a little older than Taylor, a little younger than Nicki. The house is dark; is she there alone babysitting while the parents are out buying an "unforgettable Christmas" for their family? She doesn't look afraid to come to the door, but then she can see the two girls with us, so she knows we're not threatening. And I'm thinking about God -- how he entered our world as a child, meeting us as one of us, at eye level -- so we might know we needn't be afraid; so we might perhaps open the door to him a little.

Door number 21: an elderly man, the only light inside a flickering TV. "Not now," he says, "my wife is dying and I'm in my pyjamas." A total loss, that one, I thought...until I found myself praying for him last night. If we hadn't knocked, how would we know there was a family facing a bitter Christmas behind door number 21?

Door number 24: a family from the church. It's nice to be able to call the occupant by name. "Are you having the grandkids this year?" "Will we see you on Christmas Eve?" but compare this to door number 25:

Door number 25: here is the element of surprise, the look of "now what is this?" turning to a smile and the look of recognition: "oh, it's carollers -- how lovely! And fancy them coming to *our* door!" (It's what I call to myself the Elizabeth-reaction: "and how is it that the bearer of the Lord should come to *me*!") The woman is French Canadian, I think. She accompanies our rendition of "Go tell it on the Mountain" with clapping and dancing. I tell her she gets the prize for the night's most enthusiastic reception, and can join us next year if she likes. Sometimes I think that God addresses Christmas especially to folk on the outside -- to the shepherds sleeping rough, and the foreigners, come with their costly gifts -- because it is only they who can see the true



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amazement of what is unfolding beneath our noses. It is sometimes those not of the church, who remind us most powerfully of the wondrous nature of our gospel.

Door number 28: a Dutch Reformed family. I know they're Dutch Reformed because there are lots of kids, the father is tall and handsome, and they offer us mentos peppermints. They look at us with an immediate understanding of what we're about: "another fold, brothers and sisters, but the same Lord." Encouraging.

Door number 30: Journey's end. Ross and Avril invite us in from the cold and ply us with Christmas home-bakes and a steaming cup of cocoa. What a gift is hospitality!

And as I think about it, that's what we've been seeking all evening long – hospitality – be it a door opened a crack, or a door opened full – some indication that the heart is opened wide enough to the Christ whose birth we sing, not to turn his heralds from the door. This carolling evening has become such a meaningful part of my Christmases spent in Guelph, because it interprets the Christmas story to me. It provides an experience of what those two outsiders in the city of Joseph's birth must have felt, as they went from door to door, looking for someone who had room at their inn. ...An experience not unlike what the Light of the World must feel as he knocks at the door of each one of our lives and says, "Have you room? If you open to me, I will come in and share a meal with you as friends." A little hospitality is all that Christmas asks.

How many of us answer like some of our neighbours? "It's good for the woman next door but not for me." "It's not a good time; my trouble is too great to invite Christ in as part of the solution." "I'd open the door but I'm afraid." "Let me get my purse; I only understand value in connection with things I can pay for." "Come back later, I've gone to bed." This year let us answer Him Who Knocks with the enthusiasm of those other neighbours, the barefooted house-coated women and the drippy-nosed grandfathers standing uncomfortably yet with such good cheer in the open doorway, and the curious thumb-sucking children and the yappy dogs just behind them – those neighbours who welcomed us with smiles and best wishes of the season. "Where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in."

What Christmas Asks
by Richard Paul Evans

*Our family gathers round open script,
A Yule observance yearly kept,
And reads the lines of Bible writ,
The story that all year has slept.
A mother—Mary—in travail,
In search of place that she might birth,
That sin and heartbreak not prevail,
A son to bring into this earth.
And as she crossed from door to door,
A stranger in unwelcomed place,
Rejection met with each implore,
This small request from Heaven's face.
And we this night in our warm room,
Two thousand years removed and safe,
Condemn those who sent her away,
Claim we'd act different in their place.
And yet, we too must make this choice,
As Christmas moves from inn to inn,
If we hear its gentle voice,
And open up and let her in.
For Christmas yearly asks of us,
The question that I might impart,
Will we grant access to our soul?
Or is there room within our heart?*



Christmas Carollers by Thomas Kinkadee

*With blessings to
you and yours
this Christmas.
Karla*