

TABLE GRACE
Christmas Eve 2009

Christmas is a season of tradition.

Most of our trees in our homes are decorated with ornaments which have been hung year after year, reminding us of the joy of Christmases past.

Some of us never miss the opportunity to watch our favorite Christmas shows which are only televised during this season—*It's a Wonderful Life, Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, Miracle on 34th Street.*

And many in our church family shared a piece of their family tradition in our church Advent book, which offered scriptures and recipes, inviting us to join with each other around our different tables and share grace together.

The table has been the focal point of Christmas for us this year, and so tonight, in the vein of another Christmas tradition, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, I invite us to grasp the hand of angels of present, past and future and travel to other tables where God's grace is made evident.

The angel of Christmas Present arrives first, and offers us a glimpse into the life of one woman, one family, as she sits at her breakfast table early Christmas morning, drinking her coffee and eating her buttered toast—a moment of peace before the chaos of children's squeals of joy and wrapping paper everywhere.

She sits, contemplating the first five years of her marriage, when she and her husband desperately prayed for a baby. Her prayer at that time had been, "Lord, I'll be a perfect mother, love that child with all my heart, and raise it with Your word as my guide, if only you would grant this prayer."

She closes her eyes as she give thanks to God that her prayers were answered with a son. The next year God blessed them with another son. The following year they were blessed with yet another son. And the year after that they were blessed with a daughter.

She laughs softly to herself when she remembers that her husband remarked that God had blessed them right into poverty.

She remembers how she began her endeavor to be the perfect mother. She read a few verses of the Bible to the children each day as they lay in their cribs. She tried to be patient the day the children smashed two dozen eggs on the kitchen floor searching for baby chicks. She tried to be understanding when they started a hotel for homeless frogs in the spare bedroom, when it took her nearly two hours to catch all 23 frogs. When her daughter poured ketchup all over herself and rolled in a blanket to see how it felt to be a hot dog, she tried to see the humor rather than the mess.

Her proudest moment had come the night before, during the children's Christmas Eve pageant at church. Her daughter was playing Mary, two of her sons were shepherds, and the youngest son was a wise man. This was their moment to shine.

Her five year old shepherd had practiced his line, "We found the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes." But he was nervous and said, "The baby was wrapped in wrinkled clothes." To which her four-year old Mary said, "Not wrinkled clothes, silly. It's dirty, rotten clothes."

A wrestling match broke out between Mary and the shepherd and was stopped by an angel, who bent her halo and lost her left wing. Just in the nick of time—because the wise men arrived.

Her other son stepped forward wearing a bathrobe and a paper crown, knelt at the manger and announced, "We are the three wise men, and we are bringing gifts of gold, common sense, and fur."

The congregation dissolved in laughter, and the pageant got a standing ovation.

"I've never enjoyed a Christmas program as much as this one," the pastor had laughed, wiping tears from his eyes. "For the rest of my life, I'll never hear the Christmas story without thinking of gold, common sense, and fur."

The woman rolls her head gently as she thinks about the moment of extreme embarrassment that she felt because of her children. And then, we see her begin to chuckle and she starts laughing so hard that we who are watching have caught hold of her laughter, and we join her.

Suddenly, we can see by the look on her face that she is overwhelmed with joy as she realizes that Christ was present at that pageant, in and through her children, in and through the chaos, to make his joyful presence felt in all their hearts.

And as the angel of Christmas present begins to lead us away, we hear her as she lifts up a prayer—her table grace—saying, “Thank you God, for Gold, common sense and fur.” (taken and amended from an email story—no author attribution).

But now we have been invited by the Angel of Christmas Past to glimpse into the life of another woman. We are whisked over mountains and deserts and across the seas and back through time where a woman named Mary, now old and feeble, sits at her table and begins to sing her table grace.

All the way to Elizabeth
And in the months afterward,
She wove him, pondering,
“This is my body, my blood.”

Beneath the watching eyes of
Donkey, ox and sheep
She rocked him, crooning,
“This is my body, my blood.”

In the moonless desert flight
And the Egypt days of his growing,
She nourished him, singing,
“This is my body, my blood.”

Under the blood smeared cross

She rocked his mangled bones,
Remembering him as a baby, moaning,
This is my body, my blood.”

When darkness, stones, and tomb
Bloomed to Easter morning,
She ran to him, shouting,
“This is my body, my blood.” (Irene Zimmerman)

Our hearts race with the sound of her exultant prayer whose echo continues to pierce this night. It is the Table grace of all graces—“This is my body and my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.” And with the joy of new life, the angel of Christmas past takes our hands and puts them into the hands of Christmas future, and together, we walk forward, to this table, and into tomorrow.

This is a table of life, of life eternal, spanning past, present and future.

This is the table of God’s grace—gift of God for eternity.

May all our tables around which we gather tomorrow be graced with the love of our God, who loved us so much that baby Jesus was born just for us—today, tomorrow, forevermore. Amen.