

## **Childhood Longing: And Don't Forget the Cookies**

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**Scripture** – Matthew 18: 1-5 – The disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Jesus called a child over to them and said, “Truly, I tell you, unless you become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me.”

Selections from Isaiah 35 – The desert shall rejoice, and flowers will bloom in the wasteland. And God will say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong and do not be afraid! For I am here.” A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way. Those whom the Lord has rescued will travel home by that road, with singing and everlasting joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

**Sermon** - These are my mother's cookie tins. She used them every December to store her Christmas cookies until Christmas day. About two weeks before Christmas, she would get together with her good friend June Butler while my brother Rick and I were in school, and my Mom and June would spend the day baking Christmas cookies. The cookie dough was from a special recipe handed down in June's family from her grandmother, who had owned a bakery. The dough was thick and pushed through this cookie press to make cookies in the shape of stars and trees, snowflakes and wreaths and candy canes. Some of the dough was colored green with food coloring to make the trees; some of it was colored red for the candy canes. Some of the dough was flavored with vanilla; and some was almond. My mother would arrive home from her baking session with five or six tins full of cookies, which she stashed away so that we wouldn't eat them before Christmas. She'd make a small plate of rejects, cookies that hadn't turned out just right – trees that were too fat, candy canes that looked like an inverted S – and Rick and I were allowed to snack on these. On Christmas Eve, she would create a large tray of all these assorted cookies, beautifully arranged, that she served to everyone for dessert at Christmas Day dinner. That tray was rearranged with new cookies every night for the next ten days and brought out whenever anyone, family or friends, stopped by during the holidays. Rick and my dad and I got very adept at furtively lifting up a corner of the aluminum foil covering that tray and sneaking out a cookie or two during the afternoons.

I remembered those cookies as I thought about our Advent theme, “Through the Eyes of A Child.” Christmas, more than any other season, invites us to enter its rituals with a childlike wonder. Christmas, more than any other season, invokes our nostalgia, not only for the ways we experienced Christmas as children, but also, more poignantly, for all the ways we missed or didn't have the Christmas experiences we longed for. That excited and yearning child still lives within each of us no matter how old we are. And what is it that we long for at Christmas-time? I don't think we yearn for lots of presents to open. I think we long for those feelings of magic and mystery, that sense of being nurtured and loved, that wonder of both the familiar rituals and the unexpected magical surprises.

In the scripture passage we read, Jesus says that we find the realm of heaven by becoming like a child. And the prophet Isaiah talks about the kinds of hopes we have, for our world, for our nation, and for ourselves. We hope for a season of rejoicing. We hope that we can hear God call to us, saying "Do not be afraid! For I am here with you!" Isaiah promises a highway, called the Holy Way, that will be there for us, a road on which we can travel home with singing, a road on which our sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

I believe that to find Christmas, through the eyes of a child, in the midst of this busy, commercialized, challenging season, requires revisiting our own childhood memories, a grounding in an adult spiritual practice, and an openness to wonder and surprise.

First, back to those cookies. One way to see Christmas through the eyes of a child is to remember our own best childhood moments. What were the rituals, the events, the small familiar things that were the essence of Christmas for you when you were growing up? My mother's cookies are the taste of Christmas for me. When I bite into one, I'm transported back to my house on Northwest Drive in Silver Spring, Maryland: the Christmas tree in our family room; reading the Christmas story in our living room; my parents and grandparents, my aunts and uncles and cousins, all gathered for Christmas dinner.

Now I make those cookies myself and the taste is the same. But there is a second truth about childhood rituals, and that is as adults we have the freedom to refashion them, to fill in the gaps, whatever was missing for us, and nurture ourselves with them in new ways. When I was a child, my mother and her friend June made all the Christmas cookies. I wasn't included in the cookie baking. So when I grew up, I changed that. I only make one or two batches of these cookies each year, which makes it a joy, not a huge enterprise. My children were always included in helping with the cookie press and putting on the sprinkles, no matter how unusual the cookies looked. In addition to the trees and wreathes, we make heart-shaped cookies, because Chris asked one year if we could make holiday hearts, something he'd seen in a Christmas show, and so we do. I now make these cookies when my grandchildren are here. It doesn't take long; we don't make more than we can eat in a day or two. Reinventing this tradition with my children and grandchildren has been a way I have both treasured my Christmas memories while also healing some of the childhood gaps in myself and allowed myself to be healed.

Second, I ground my Christmas with the Advent journey of spiritual practice; it is, for me, the highway, the Holy road, that Isaiah promises. One of the advantages of growing up in a liturgical Christian church is that you get to experience the intentional rituals of the Advent season. In my childhood Lutheran church, those symbols and practices were embedded in the worship and the language every Sunday leading up to Christmas. Each person in that congregation was drawn into the Advent season as a time for deepening our connection with the Holy. As an adult, I re-turn to those spiritual practices as my stepping stones on that highway. Lighting the Advent candles, reading the daily Advent reflections, walking the Labyrinth, singing in the choir, praying and sharing in the Contemplative Prayer sessions, reaching out to others both within

my circle of family and friends and church and well beyond, all those practices are my framework of preparation, without which Christmas would be hollow.

Third, I open my heart through these touchstones of spiritual practice and reinvented childhood rituals, and that then leads me home to the place where, Isaiah says, sorrow and sighing shall flee away. This is probably what we most long for, what the child in us still yearns for, that moment when all the pieces come together, and we are surrounded by love and touched by mystery. What I know is that those moments always come as a surprise. We cannot plan them or predict them. We have to put ourselves on the road; we have to prepare what we can; but most often it's the unexpected moment of grace breaking through our fears and our busy-ness that touches our deep longing and yearning that we carry within us like a child who hopes for that perfect Christmas gift. It's that unexpected renewing phone call, the note of gratitude from a friend, the moment of being able to really help someone else, the look of wonder in a child's eyes, the spontaneous touch of a loved one, the candles glowing outside on Christmas Eve .... it's that moment of grace, whenever it suddenly appears, that moves us to tears and fills our hearts.

And finally, there is the Christmas story itself, whose beauty and meaning touch us when we read it as the story of the birth of a most beloved child. Read it as a story not unlike the story of your own birth, or the birth of your children and grandchildren: how far the parents had to travel and where the baby was born; who came see, to celebrate, to hold and love that child; and how that child's birth changed everything in that family, and truth be told, changed everything in the world as well.

Remember the words of Madeleine L'Engle: "This is the irrational season when love blooms bright and wild. Had Mary been filled with reason, there'd have been no room for the child."

So, in the weeks ahead, let go and make room for the memories and wonder of childhood to be reborn in you this Advent season. May you seek out and walk the highway, the Holy road, that takes you to what matters, to what is important, to what you long for. May you listen to the story, hear the songs, see the candles and stars, breathe in the prayers, and for sure, taste the cookies.

I invite you now to a time of reflection, a time when you consider your own Advent journey and longing that you have this year. During this time of silence, we will share a weaving together of childhood tradition, of ritual and surprise, in the taste of cookies that stir our memories and bring us a Communion-like grace.

Let us close this time of prayer together with these words: May God be born yet again within me and into this world anew.

**\*BENEDICTION** – In the eternal scheme of things, shining moments are as brief as the twinkling of an eye. Yet such twinklings are what eternity is made of: moments when we human beings can say "I love you" ..... "I forgive you" ..... "I am grateful for you." That is what eternity is made of: invisible, imperishable good stuff.

May your life abound with shining moments and imperishable good stuff.

*~ Fred Rogers*