

CHRISTMAS EVE TRADITIONS

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By Al Mansfield

A loud, tenacious, unrelenting demand for "Frosty the Snowman." Sword fighting acolytes. Video premieres. A bell-ringing "Sister." Thanking Baby Jesus. Receiving a blessing whether you want to or not. These are just a few things that make up the Mansfield Family Christmas Eve Celebration. Read on and I will explain...

For a number of years, especially as our grandchildren came along, we have had a special Christmas Eve celebration. It has evolved a bit over time but has gradually taken on a rather fixed program. With so many family members now, and given a limited time frame, things have to be rather scheduled and organized. But then we are, after all, Mansfields - no strangers to schedules and organization!

PRAYER SERVICE

After everyone arrives, greetings are exchanged and photos are taken. Then, the family gathers for a time of prayer and worship, usually beginning with some Christmas songs and carols, accompanied by guitars, flute, keyboard, oboe, and any other assorted instruments the musicians remembered to bring.

I offer a brief prayer, asking the Lord to bless our time together, and we move into the Scripture reading. At this writing, it is limited to the account of the Nativity of Jesus in Luke 2, although in times past it included other Scripture readings as well. For quite a few years, the gospel reading has been done by our eldest grandson. In an effort to include the younger boys in the service, I had the bright idea of making them "acolytes," and letting them flank the reader with lighted (battery-run) candles. However, when they started sword-fighting with the candles, I was tempted to question the wisdom of this decision! The boys soon learned, however, that it is a serious and solemn moment in which they play an important role.

Following the gospel reading, I give a brief spiritual reflection. With the passage of time, as the number grandchildren increased, my "fervorino" has necessarily become shorter because I'm often competing with a crying baby or a screaming toddler. Years ago, a three-year-old demanded that we sing "Frosty the Snowman" over and over again as I was trying to speak. No one seemed able to settle him down until his ten-year-old cousin addressed him in no uncertain terms, "Look man, I like 'Frosty' too but right now Grandpa's got to talk, so we all got to listen to Grandpa." Much to my surprise - and delight - it worked!

After my reflection, a small statue of the Baby Jesus is passed around among the family members for them to express what they are most thankful for during the past year. This is a beautiful time, especially hearing the children sincerely thanking God for His blessings.

A more recent addition to our service has been a prayer/blessing ministry. I didn't initiate this, but it rather happened at the insistence of our seven-year-old special-needs grandson. A few years back at another family gathering, when I was laying hands on everyone in prayer for the upcoming school year, this grandson decided to join me in doing so. Since then, he has become a regular on the prayer/ministry team! So, although this feature was not originally part of our Christmas Eve service, our grandson feels strongly that it should be, and he proceeds to give each family member a blessing as we conclude this session.

RING THAT BELL!

A practical question - how do we signal a transition to another phase and get 23 people to move in the right direction? The answer, my friend, is called "Sister Mary Bell Ringer." This role originated with our eldest granddaughter (who moved on to other things, like Louisiana State University Drum Major). The post is currently held by our very sweet eight-year-old granddaughter, who carries out her mission to perfection!

MEAL, ENTERTAINMENT, PRESENTS, DESSERT

We always have a delicious meal of ham, salads, Christmas casseroles, and blueberry muffins - a favorite among us (although there is an ongoing debate about who likes them the most).

Afterward, there is some kind of presentation, which has taken a variety of forms through the years. Sometimes it is a live drama of the Nativity story. (Picture an angel with a flashlight acting out "the glory of the Lord shone all around them.") Or it could be a video - produced, directed, and performed by "Cousins, Inc.", the troupe of grandchildren formed and led by our eldest grandson from his earliest years. (Note: after distinguishing myself in a few bit parts in several videos, I was given a co-starring role along with one of our very talented granddaughters. We are still waiting to receive our Oscar nominations!)

We then proceed to the opening of Christmas presents - always a chaotic, joyous, noisy time, as one might imagine.

And finally, there is dessert, the singing of "Happy Birthday to Jesus," and, of course, a birthday cake.

PARTING THOUGHTS

Some of our grandchildren have said that our Christmas Eve gathering is their favorite event of the year. I am certainly inclined to say the same. For me, the best Christmas present is to be in the midst of my family celebrating the coming of the Savior into the world. I believe that what makes our gathering special is the spiritual dimension, that is to say, the presence of the Holy Spirit among us.

As I write about this, I am afraid that it might come across as too perfect or too idyllic a picture. Bear in mind that I haven't mentioned any of the tensions or misunderstandings that inevitably crop up in the life of any family. Patti and I say, however, that it has always impressed us as truly remarkable how well the young cousins get along with each other, even as the adults might be disagreeing about football, music, politics, or whatever!

I will close with a word of encouragement to any of you parents, grandparents, or other family members - take whatever steps you can to bring Jesus into your Christmas celebrations. He is, as they correctly say, "the reason for the season."

Let us give the Lord our God the honor, worship and thanks He deserves for His love, grace and mercy in sending Jesus into the world to save us from our sin (cf. John 3:16). Let us thank Him for the opportunity to gather as a family, "like olive trees planted in the house of the Lord" (cf. Psalm 128:3).

Christmas blessings from our family to yours!