

My Best Christmas Memories

by Skip Lineberg

For the record, there is nothing like the love and joy that a father feels when experiencing the magic of Christmas through his child's delight. Over the years, I have accumulated a great many wonderful Christmas memories. I'll try to articulate and share the best of them.

I have many dear, beloved memories that--upon reflection--are rooted in my hometown church, St. John's Lutheran Church in Martinsburg. On many occasions I have attended the midnight service on Christmas Eve, accompanied by family and loved ones. It is a very simple, yet enriching service, lighted entirely by candlelight. The service usually ends with the small choir singing "Silent Night" in a *cappella* fashion.

The feeling at such times is full and rich and emotional - an unmistakable lump in the throat. One gets the sense that everyone feels those same emotions. As if this weren't enough, in my recollection it seems that at least 50% of the time, upon exiting the church in the first hour of Christmas that the air has become filled with a new, light snowfall.

One year, Pastor Riley gave a very short sermon or homily. He told about the year prior, during which time the ushers whispered to him that a strange-looking man had sneaked into the church, in a far, rear pew, during the Christmas Eve service. "Might cause trouble" was certainly the predominant thought. Pastor told the lead usher to find out what the man wanted and to see if the church could help him. As they learned, the man wanted "to be warm." He was, in fact, homeless.

All he wanted for Christmas was some heat--to be warm for an hour, for a change. This story really put things into perspective for me, reminding me how richly blessed my life was, is and honestly always has been. The resulting feeling of humility was in a much different way, also the best of Christmas ... wanting to be helpful, wanting to express sincere thanks ... reminders of the fundamental reasons for the season.

On a much different, lighter note. I want to share a wonderful memory from my childhood. At the time, I was a boy of eight years old. My Granddaddy had a tremendous sense of humor. He was a great practical joker, a clever needler and a real prankster. Like most boys of such age, I would lie awake on Christmas Eve, far too excited and anxious for sleep. I had bunk beds, slept on the bottom bunk. I can remember staring at the ceiling ... and at my bedroom window.

The Christmas lights from outside the house shone through the curtains with warm, red, green and blue colored-light reminders that Santa would soon be arriving ... that sensational gifts and presents were hours away. On many a Christmas Eve, my parents would entertain visitors--family, friends, my grandparents. On this particular night, the guests had gone, the sounds of voices had diminished, but I could still hear Granddaddy's voice in the house. As I lay there in a half-sleep, half stupor of anticipation, I heard scratching noises on the rooftop outside, right above my bedroom.

A moment later, I heard the jingling of bells ... then a "Ho Ho Ho." I bolted out of my bed and ran down the hall into the living room. As I emerged onto the scene in the living room, Mom, Dad and Grandma were having a good-natured laugh, as Granddaddy came in through the front door carrying a long-handled rake broom and a strand of sleigh bells. I was given a good many hugs by all of them and told that Granddaddy was just making some fun for all of us, wondering if he could convince me that Santa had arrived.

To this day, I still do--and always will--love a good, well-conceived and good natured prank like the one Granddaddy attempted that one Christmas Eve in 1974.