

Real Life Stories

The Brown-Bag Christmas

When I asked our newlyweds Sunday school class to share a favorite Christmas story, Carrie Fuller said, “Our family has one we call the “Brown-Bag Christmas.” When she finished, I had to hear more. Two days later, I called a member of her family for more details.

It was the early 1930s during the Dust Bowl days of Kansas, in the heart of the Depression. The Canaday family – Mom, Dad, and seven children – were having a tough time existing, so there would be no luxuries at Christmas that year. Mom told the children to go outside and find a Christmas tree and decorate it. After a lengthy search, they returned with a dead branch, the only thing they had been able to find. They stood it up in a bucket of sand and decorated it with pieces of paper tied with string. Little Judy, almost four, did not know how a Christmas tree was supposed to look, but somehow she knew it wasn’t like that!

As Christmas approached, the Canaday children, like children everywhere, pestered Mom and Dad about what presents they might get under their “tree.” Dad pointed out that the pantry was bare, that they did not have enough to live on, and there certainly would be no money for gifts. But Mom was a woman of faith and told her children, “Say your prayers. Ask God to send us what He wants us to have.” And pray they did.

On Christmas Eve, the children watched out the window for visitors, but no one came. “Blow out the lamp and go to bed,” Dad said. “Nobody is going to come. No one even knows we’re out here.”

The children turned out the lamp and got in bed, but they were too excited to sleep. Was this not Christmas? Had they not asked God to send them the presents He wanted them to have? Did Mom not say God answers prayer?

Late that night, when one of the children spotted headlights coming down the dirt road, everyone jumped out of bed and ran to the window. The commotion woke up Mom and Dad. “Don’t get excited, children,” Dad said. “They’re probably not coming here. It’s just someone who got lost.”

The children kept hoping and the car kept coming. Then, Dad lit a lamp. They all wanted to rush to the door at the same time, but Mr. Canaday said, “Stay back. I’ll go.”

Someone got out of the car and called, “I was wondering if someone here can help me unload these bags.” The children dashed out the door to lend a hand. Mom said to her youngest: “Stay here, Judy, and help Mom open the bags and put up the gifts.

A deacon from the church in town had gone to bed that Christmas Eve, and lay there tossing and turning, unable to get the Canaday family off his mind. Later, he said, “I didn’t know what kind of shape you folks were in, but I knew you had all those kids.”

He had gotten up and dressed and went around town, rousing people from their sleep to ask for a contribution for the Canaday family. He filled his car with bags of groceries, canned goods, toys and clothing.

Little Judy got a rag doll which remained her favourite for years.

The next Sunday, Mrs. Canaday stood in church and told what the members – and one deacon in particular – had done for her family. There was not a dry eye in the house.

Years later, the oldest sister, Eva, wrote up this story about her family for a school project. Eva said, “We were so thrilled by all the wonderful things in the bags, for a while we lost sight of the most special gift. The best gift that Christmas was not in brown bags at all. It was Mom’s faith, as she taught her children to bring their needs to Jesus and trust Him to meet them. And Dad’s love that wanted only to protect his children from hurt and disappointment.”

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When Carrie finished telling her story, she added, “Little Judy is my wonderful grandmother.”

We give thanks for praying mothers and caring fathers and believing children. We give thanks for sensitive deacons and generous friends and sleepless nights.

And we praise God for the hard times that teach unforgettable lessons, stories of faithfulness that get told and retold through the years, inspiring each new generation to place their faith in a loving Saviour.

.....Joe McKeever