

3 Christmas Stories

COOKIES AND CAROLS

By Bethany F. Bingham

The more we caroled and shared baskets of cookies, the more excited we became.

Armed with 10 plates of cookies and 10 copies of a Church Christmas DVD, our youth group set out on a snowy Mutual night to sing Christmas carols to the neighbors. It was the bishop's idea, a chance for leaders and youth alike to meet the people who live near our Church building in Connecticut.

The house across the street had a huge, barking dog, and the only way to get to the front door was by passing him. No one appeared to quiet the dog, and I wondered how we would be received. As we sang our first carol, the youth stood back, hesitant to be on the front line. A woman answered the door, and one of my fellow leaders handed her a plate of cookies and the DVD. The

leader informed her that we were from the church across the street and wanted to express our appreciation to them for being good neighbors. She was pleasantly surprised and listened politely until the end of our song.

THEY CAME WITH HASTE



“Did these shepherds, personally invited to undertake a search for the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, concern themselves with the security of their possessions? Did they procrastinate their search for Christ? The record affirms that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem. . . . And they came with haste” (Luke 2:15–16; emphasis added).

President Thomas S. Monson, “In Search of the Christmas Spirit,” *Ensign*, Dec. 1987, 5.

With the first home behind us, our confidence grew. We walked a little more quickly to the small apartment complex next to the church. This time the woman who answered the door recognized two of our youth. She had been their teacher in elementary school, and she reached out to give them a big hug.

This positive encouragement was all we needed. From then on, Kourtney, one of our Mia Maids, wanted to deliver the cookies and DVD at every door. As leaders, we no longer had to physically move the youth closer to each doorstep—they encouraged each other.

Although one man listened uncomfortably to our song and declined our gift, every other person who answered a door was gracious and appreciative.



One woman had tears in her eyes and gave Kourtney a kiss as she delivered the goodies and DVD. But the most amazing of all was door 19.

A man came to the door and stepped outside to listen to our carol. When we finished, he asked if we had heard of Fayette, New York. We excitedly said we had, and he responded with, "I was baptized in Fayette." He went on to tell us that he had been baptized about 10 years before but that since moving to Connecticut, he hadn't sought out the Church and no one in our area knew about him. He said, "Well, I

guess this means I'd better come to church on Sunday."

As we walked away from his door, I recognized the Lord's hand in our service and knew that this man had never been lost to the Lord.

By this time we were having so much fun we didn't want to stop. So despite being empty-handed, we caroled at one last house. The Spirit of the Lord filled us with joy as we then trekked, arm in arm, back to the church. We all felt grateful for this chance to spread the Lord's love—and His joy—to the world.



A SMALL, SNOW-COVERED TREE

By Darrell Smart

*When we arrived at the cemetery,
we were touched by what we found.*

One day, shortly before Christmas, our third child and first son, Bay, was born. As I said good-bye that evening to my exhausted but joyful wife and left the hospital, the warmth and joy that accompanied the birth of my son overwhelmed the cold chill of that clear December night.

The following December we celebrated the first birthday of our dark-eyed, dark-haired son. The day after Christmas, during an evening of games at the home of my in-laws, our revelry was interrupted by an awful shriek from my mother-in-law: "He's not breathing!" She had gone to check on Bay, who had been sleeping on her bed, and discovered his cold, lifeless body. We immediately rushed our son to the hospital, attempting CPR on the way. We were grief-stricken to learn that nothing could be done to save his life. He had died from sudden infant death syndrome.

Since then, Christmas has been filled with a much deeper meaning for our family. Each year on Christmas Eve when we take down our other children's stockings to fill them, one solitary stocking is left on the fireplace mantle. Throughout the remainder of the holiday the stocking serves as a reminder of Bay.

Each year, around the time of Bay's birthday, my wife and I drive to the cemetery where he is buried. At each visit we find that someone else has arrived before us and placed something on our son's grave: one year it was delicate, small flowers; the next year, a stuffed bear; the next, a little Christmas tree decorated with miniature ornaments. We have no idea who is responsible; the gifts, which touch us deeply, are never accompanied by a note or card.

When I hinted to my mother-in-law that I knew her secret, she denied responsibility. The following year while she and my father-in-law were serving a Church mission abroad, we again found that someone had placed a gift on our son's grave. Even after inquiring with other family members and friends, we were unable to solve the mystery.

Ten years after our son's death, a series of snowstorms prevented us from traveling short distances. As a result, our annual visit to our son's grave site was delayed until several days after Christmas. When we finally made it, we saw a small, decorated Christmas tree, mostly buried in the snow, standing bravely at the head of Bay's small grave. The effort it must have taken for someone to get to the cemetery through the heavy snowfall overwhelmed us. Tears streamed down our faces as we realized that someone still shared our grief and loss.

After that, we were more resolved than ever to discover the identity of our benefactor and thank him or her for showing us such compassion. But as we reflected more, we realized that whoever was doing these acts of kindness did not want to be identified. We decided to allow our friend to remain anonymous. We replaced our need to thank our friend with a desire to simply live better.

It is now harder for us to speak ill of or criticize any of our friends or family members, because any one of them may be our anonymous friend.

Often while doing service, my wife and I pause to examine our hearts: are we doing good things to be seen by others or for the pure love of Christ and of our fellowmen?

For us, charity—humble and never seeking its own—is symbolized by a beautifully decorated Christmas tree, half-buried in snow, resting in a quiet cemetery.

IN SHEPHERDS' FIELD

By Annie Tintle

As I thought about the place where the Savior was born, I began to understand His role as the Shepherd of mankind.

While attending Brigham Young University, I studied in Jerusalem with approximately 170 students during the fall of 1998. As the Christmas season approached, we began to focus our studies and field trips around the birth of the Savior.

It was cool and windy the evening that 40 of us pulled up to our last and most anticipated stop for the day. Tradition held that Shepherds' Field, located just outside of Bethlehem, was the place where the ancient shepherds sat watching sheep on the night of the Savior's birth, never anticipating what would soon be proclaimed to them.

The field was nothing like I had imagined. I saw a terraced hill with hardly any greenery. We walked down a rocky path, and each of us found a quiet place to sit and write in our journals. I finally found a large rock to sit on. It was cold, uncomfortable, and surrounded by thorns.

When we were told we would be able to see the local shepherds and their sheep, I wasn't prepared to see children in rags. But even though they were dressed in worn,



secondhand clothing, their eyes were bright. Open-palmed, they approached our group's chaperone. After asking the children their names, she gave each one a few shekels. One of the children carried a newborn lamb. He approached me and offered to let me hold it.

As I took the warm baby lamb in my arms, I began to see the situation differently.

The Savior knew about the life of a shepherd. He knew about the cold nights, rocky trails, and danger of thieves and predators. He

knew shepherds sometimes held the baby lambs in their arms, standing watch while waiting for the darkness to pass.

While the Wise Men were able to bring the Christ child gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the shepherds could offer little in the way of material gifts. Their sacrifice was simply in coming to offer humble hearts and joyful spirits in partaking in the celebration of their infant Lord.

The Savior has brought the gift of joy to our cold and dreary world. He has promised to stand watch through the long, dark night, despite the terrors and hardships this life can bring. He knows us, His sheep. He is our Shepherd.

That night, for the first time, I began to understand the promise in the gift of our Savior. ■