



LOWCOUNTRY MUSINGS

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THE ADVENT CALENDAR

By Florence Bothwell Cosby



These days you do not need an Advent Calendar to know when Christmas is coming. The countdown to Christmas begins earlier and earlier each year. Black Friday, the much-awaited kick-off day of shopping madness, and its partner Cyber Monday, are already being advertised at online retail sites and with flyers in the mailbox when we are barely into November.

Within the Christian faith community, the four Sundays spanning the feast day of St. Andrew the Apostle—November 30th—to the birth of Jesus—December 25th—are rooted in the liturgical period called Advent, meaning coming in Latin. The celebration of Advent dates to monastic life in the 6th century, with the countdown marked most commonly by the lighting of a candle and burning each of the marked days from top to bottom, or chalk tally marks on a door that were erased each day during the period. In mid-19th century Germany, Protestant Christians introduced the Advent calendar in the form of a piece of paper or a card with 24 or 25 small windows—one to be opened each day during December.

The numbered windows are scattered about the card, so that the recipient first must search for that day's window and then open it for the surprise image. Once opened, the window flap remains ajar, and as the month unfolds, more opened windows are added to the whole. The final window is viewed on Christmas Eve, usually Santa arriving, or the Nativity scene from Bethlehem—the grand finales of the secular and religious events.

At first, the opened windows of the Advent calendar featured scenes from the Christmas story and related Christian icons and symbols, but as it grew in popularity, many other themes were included behind the Advent windows—winter snowscapes, storybook characters, animals and toys—a compendium of the many seasonal images and traditions associated with the month of December and the celebration of Christmas.

As a kid, I was given an Advent calendar by one of my aunts pretty much every year, usually at Thanksgiving time. Often the temptation was overwhelming to open all the windows at once, but discipline ruled, and I followed the tradition of one window a day. The theme of my calendar was different each year, with Santa and his sleigh one year, and Christmas in Germany another. Most were a large cardboard card with a fold-out piece on the back that enabled it to stand upright on my bedside table. An unusual one opened into a 3-D village with glittery snow on the rooftops, and a tasty one contained small wrapped candies and tiny toys in little boxes behind each window. As an adult and far from my childhood home, my mother continued to send me my annual Advent calendar, with varying themes and artistic elegance, such as a replica of the annual Christmas tree from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan, where each window contained an angel ornament to hang on the miniature tree. Several years ago, my THS friend Johannah Turner introduced me to an online Advent calendar produced by Jacquie Lawson, with interactive windows on an animated landscape from a quaint European location—this year’s version is a village in the Swiss Alps.

And so, for me, the Advent calendar is an integral part of my countdown to Christmas, presented here as windows of memory and recollection from holiday seasons past.



THE HOLIDAY BAZAAR

My family’s church, the Church of St. Andrew in Richmondtown, held an annual holiday bazaar in mid-November. It was a grand affair, attended by many folks from the surrounding communities. A showcase feature was the sale of handmade holiday décor designed and crafted by the minister’s wife and a group of church women. My Aunt Madeline was one of the members, and spent many hours throughout the year cutting felt figures, then stitching and gluing the pieces, sequins, braiding, and trims into unique and festive decorations for sale at the bazaar. The fair itself was scheduled as a prelude to the holiday season, with a multitude of stalls and tables for homemade food, a variety of gifts, raffles for prizes—all set on a background of music, fellowship, and family fun. I still have several of the classic Christmas crafts from that holiday bazaar, including a red felt Santa with a cottony beard and mustache and a Christmas tree skirt with reindeer and elves arrayed at its edge. Treasures from Christmas past.





THE CHRISTMAS PAGEANT

When my family first moved to Robinson Avenue, we attended the Church of the Holy Comforter in Eltingville—now St. Albans. As with many churches, an annual Christmas Pageant was held at the beginning of December, to herald the onset of the holiday season. Also called a Nativity Play, it is a performance recounting the birth of Jesus, with church members playing the roles of the Holy family, the three Wise Men, shepherds, and angels. When my brother Jack and I were very young—probably about five- or six-years-old—we were assigned the roles of two angels who stood holding each side of the thick velvet curtains that framed the stage. Our mother and aunt made our costumes, which included cardboard wings trimmed with gold glitter. I am sure that our family thought we were adorable, quietly posed and acting like, well, a couple of angels. Until we got bored with the event—as young minds tend to do—and began rolling ourselves up into the folds of curtain fabric then popping out again, and pretty much creating an unwanted distraction from the solemn scene in Bethlehem.



THE CITY AT CHRISTMAS

I cannot imagine a Christmas season without a trip into “The City” to see the holiday sights. This always included a stop at the Rockefeller Center tree and skating rink, St. Patrick’s Cathedral, the department store windows on Fifth Avenue, and Radio City Music Hall for the annual Christmas Spectacular. My mother arranged the outing each year when we were kids, and I followed this tradition with my own child when we lived in New Jersey. But there was a time in between when I lived in California with my husband David, who had never experienced what I gushed about each Christmas. So, for our fifth anniversary, we flew back to New York to visit my mother and to embark on the grand tour of Manhattan in December. We were used to warm weather in Santa Barbara at that time of year, so had to plan on cold-weather clothing for the trip. I purchased a heavy woolen pant suit and turtle-neck sweater, certain that I would put them to good use on the east coast. But the weather did not cooperate, and New York City temperatures soared into the high 60s, causing the ice at the skating rink to melt and the area to be shut down for several days, and me to tug miserably at my sweltering attire.

When we eventually moved back east with our daughter, we made sure that she enjoyed Christmas in Manhattan each year that we lived there. She especially loved the animated window scenes at Macy’s Herald Square and Saks Fifth Avenue, as well as the enormous decorations on the skyscrapers—

distinctly different from the low-profile streetscapes in Santa Barbara. She said it was impossible to choose a favorite, with so many spectacular sights of color and glitz.

But one year, we happened to be in Manhattan on a cold, rainy Sunday in late November. David was busy on business, so Cati and I decided to take our annual stroll up Fifth Avenue, albeit a bit early. To our delight, we witnessed a different aspect of holiday decorations. As we peeked into the windows of closed businesses, we saw employees unloading stacks of storage boxes for decking their halls. In the darkened window of Japan Airlines, a group of employees assembled the sections of the enormous tree and opened its branches to receive the ornaments. There were cartons of origami ornaments nestled in tissue in sectioned layers. Several persons sat on the floor and carefully unwrapped each one, then handed it to another person, who in turn passed it up to yet another person on a ladder, who gently hung it from a branch of the tree, top to bottom filling it with amazing replicas of common objects folded into the complex origami shapes—cranes, lotus blossoms, stars, and even reindeer. It was a new and different view of holiday decorations that filled us with a joyful expectation for the ultimate unveiling of the completed tree.



THE MUSIC OF CHRISTMAS

What would the holidays be without music! Here in Summerville where I live now, the local radio stations begin playing holiday tunes before we have even reached Thanksgiving. Way too early for me, but once December rolls around, I enjoy the traditional carols, as well as the silly secular songs. My favorite CD that we have is from the Clare College Choir at Cambridge University, with a close second to the Robert Shaw Chorale. But who could forget the novelty songs from our childhood, such as *Frosty the Snowman* sung by Gene Autry in 1950, or *The Chipmunk Song* sung by Alvin and the Chipmunks from 1958.

Our neighborhood on Robinson Avenue began around the corner on Oakdale Street at Linda and Lois Link's house. Growing up, I always felt that our block began in their backyard, which bordered on our driveway. The house on the corner between us was the source of holiday music that could be heard throughout the neighborhood. The man who lived there set up speakers in the top-floor window and broadcast instrumental seasonal favorites each evening from several weeks before Christmas until New Year's Eve. It was loud enough to enjoy but without being obtrusive, and set the tone for holiday activities on our street. I especially remember listening to the delightful music as I drifted off to sleep.

Have a Holly Jolly Christmas by Burl Ives was released in 1964. As a retiree, Burl Ives lived in Santa Barbara at the same time we did. He was known around town as an old grouch, and not one to acknowledge pleasantries from his neighbors and community residents. One Christmas in the late 1960s, I was standing in line at a seafood market near the beach, waiting my turn to purchase our

Christmas Eve order. The weather was seasonably warm and so several of the connecting glass doors were pulled aside, leaving most of the front wall of the store open to the sidewalk. There were perhaps a dozen people waiting in line, with me about half-way back, and Burl Ives standing two persons in front of me. True to form, he did not make eye contact with anyone and kept his head down and to the side. But as he left the store with his own purchase, a young man towards the end of the line began humming the tune to *Have a Holly Jolly Christmas* as Burl Ives walked by. Well, even he could not ignore the gaiety of the moment and did in fact turn, smile, and give a wave to the crowd before continuing out of sight. It most definitely was a Holly Jolly moment.



THE FLAVOR OF CHRISTMAS

The array of seasonal foods for Christmas is endless, and I am feeling my mouth water with the thought of all the possibilities. But foremost in my memory are the sweet treats that invite indulgence on a grand scale—snowball coconut cake, peppermint bark, ribbon candy, brandied fruits, fruitcake, and of course cookies in lavish variety and abundance.

My mother loved to bake Christmas cookies and spent days at this activity. Her repertoire included sugar cookies which she rolled into a thin dough, then cut out in shapes of Santa, reindeer, stars, and snowmen. When cooled, she decorated each one with piped icing she had colored with food coloring, then added sparkly sugars and nonpareils. She made gingerbread men and gave them rows of silver-ball buttons and silly faces. But my favorite of her holiday baking was her Spritz cookies, which she formed from a special gadget that squeezed the dough through a disk onto the baking sheets. She tinted some of the dough in green and pink for wreath and star shapes, with one color flowing into the other for a variegated look. These, too, were sprinkled with glistening sugars. She kept at her baking until the cookie jar was full, as well as others sealed up in air-tight containers lined with wax paper.

While my mother baked in the kitchen, it was my father's job to keep track of the timing for each batch and to alert her when the cookies needed to be pulled from the oven. But one year, he performed his duty while reclining on the sofa, and had drifted off to sleep. My mother did not realize this until she smelled the cookies burning in the oven. He was mercilessly in trouble for the rest of the day, so much so that my father drove up to Brower's Hardware Store in Great Kills village and purchased a gadget new on the market in 1950 called a Lux Minute Minder®. That got him off the hook forever after. I still have the cookie jar, and my mother's cookie press, and continue the tradition of making those delicious Spritz cookies in variegated dough colors.





THE CHRISTMAS STOCKING

My mother would fill our Christmas stockings in secret, then quietly lay them on the floor next to our beds on Christmas Eve so that first thing on Christmas morning we would wake up to the treasures she had packed inside. I have always loved the stocking tradition, with its sweet treats and small gifts, sometimes even money. The origin of the Christmas stocking is a bit fuzzy, but connects to St. Nicholas, the traditional gift-giver of early European culture. This task is also attributed to Santa Claus and Father Christmas, but whomever it is who stuffs your stocking, the custom is a welcomed one for children and adults alike. Originally using everyday socks, families now often have special stockings that are made exclusively for holiday use. Many are elaborately crafted, while others simply state a person's name or initial. My mother would use one of my father's socks, a large white sport sock, to which she affixed a bow or shiny ornament.

One of my all-time favorite Christmas stocking gifts was indeed a treasure—a Paper Mate® ballpoint pen of my own. It was a new model on the product market, and one I had never expected, as I thought it was too grown up for me as a kid. But there it was, bright red to celebrate the holiday season. It had that distinctive click for extending or retracting the ball point. As well, the clip that attached to a shirt pocket or writing pad displayed the Paper Mate® logo, with its distinctive double-heart design. I have had any number of pens over the years, but none has offered me the thrill of surprise and unbridled joy as the one stuffed into that Christmas stocking of my youth. As the trademark aptly proclaims—*INK JOY*.



THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

My parents always piled our gifts under the tree while we were asleep, to be opened on Christmas Day. But somewhere along the line, David and I began our own tradition of a tasty feast on Christmas Eve, interspersed with gift giving. We have continued that arrangement with our daughter Cati and grandson Cameron, and no one has complained about getting their presents early! We also like to have a special activity to escalate the excitement, rather than everyone tearing into their own stuff at the same time.

We take turns around our dinner table, and dispense one gift to one person at a time. That stretches out the fun, lets each of us enjoy the spotlight, and gives attention to a carefully chosen gift.

We have always saved one last gift for our grandson as the grand finale, first convincing him that there are no more, but then springing a surprise on him at the last minute. One year it was a puffy parka with a fur-trimmed hood, which still hangs behind his door since 6th grade, even though he no longer lives here and is grown and flown. He said it is the memory that keeps it in place. Another year we told him there was one more gift... *IF* he could find it, sending him hunting around the house as we called out “warmer” or “colder” until he found it hidden in the linen closet.

When Cameron was studying Spanish in high school, we decided to create a scavenger hunt for his final “big” present—which that year was a Hoverboard® stashed away in the garage. Cati and I spent several days secretly writing clues on slips of decorated paper that would take him all around our house as he searched for the next clue on his way to final discovery. The catch was, that all the clues were written in Spanish. What fun we had, not only constructing the clue sentences in understandable Spanish, but also watching him puzzle over the location of the next clue. The final clue sent him out to the garage where his sought-for gift was finally discovered. He delighted us all by re-entering the house riding his Hoverboard® and zooming around the room with a million-dollar smile on his face and singing *Felix Navidad!* (Yes, the product was later recalled, and yes, we did return it for a refund, but that did not diminish the fun of the hunt.)

Last year Cati followed tradition and presented Cameron with what *she* thought was the One Last Gift—tickets to a Celtics game. Well, that gift was received with an enormous amount of delight and excitement, surely the highlight of the evening. Cati settled back with a sigh of complete satisfaction that she had pulled it off on a grand scale. But to everyone’s astonishment, Cameron one-upped his mom and, with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, revealed a surprise gift for *her* from its hiding place, thus dramatically usurping the place of ultimate gift giver. Father Christmas, for sure.



THE NATIVITY

The final window in the religious Advent Calendar is reserved for the original purpose of the calendar in the first place—a countdown to the birth of Jesus. The traditional setting shows Mary and Joseph with the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, with a brilliant star in the eastern sky above them.

My mother had a Nativity scene that she bought at Macy’s Herald Square when I was very young. She set it on display every year on a side table in the living room, then passed it on to me to use in my own

home, and which I have since passed on to Cati. The figures were made in Italy from papier-mâché and painted with subdued Renaissance hues. Their quality is finely characteristic of their place of origin and period in history and in art, but with an affordable Macy's price tag stamped on the bottom of each figure—10¢ each in the value of the 1940s. The stable is made of wood with rough bark on the roof and back wall. The set includes Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus to be staged in the center of the stable. There are shepherds and lambs to be placed outside the open doorway, as well as three kings, who arrive on camels with their gifts in hand. The major figures are from the original set, but with a few other pieces that my mother had added over the years—perhaps not recognizable members of the Nativity cast, but which somehow seem to blend in. However, we are still not sure why there is a gaudy white plastic reindeer with silver glitter peeking in at the baby Jesus, but then again, my mother always was an equal opportunity believer.



At the start of December, I eagerly await the opening each day of the windows on my Advent Calendar, but once it is completed, I am reluctant to take it down and end the daily ritual. The Christmas season itself is over all too quickly, but we are reminded to keep the spirit of peace, fellowship, and giving in our hearts and actions throughout the year.

GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST, AND ON EARTH PEACE AND GOOD WILL TOWARD MEN.



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