

Christmas in the Box



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Presented in Chapel
at Nazarene Bible College
December 12, 2006

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Angela was tall, even for an eleven year old girl. That was good, because she could stand at the front of the gift shop and look past the window display into the street outside. By now the Christmas Eve crowds of last-minute shoppers were gone. The streets were almost empty and the snow had finally stopped. The white everywhere gave a special shine to the light. Inside the shop the lights were dim. Everyone had gone home; everyone but Momma. And Angela, of course. The shop manager wanted the store ready to open on the day after Christmas and had asked Momma if she would take down the Christmas display in the window for extra money. Momma had said yes, and Angela had come to help with the chore.

Angela tilted her head just a little. Light came through the window and the sparkle flashed into a dozen different colors. The streetlamp outside beamed crystal-clear through the window at the front of the gift shop, and when the light touched a bit of ice on the window, the beam quickly showed its Christmas colors.

Momma was tall, too. That was good, because she could reach the top of the Christmas tree in the display without a stepladder. “Here, Angela,” said Momma. “Take this Angel and put it in the . . . oops!” A Christmas ornament fell off the tree but didn’t break. Instead it landed on a sloping piece of cotton cloth, then rolled across the wooden floor. Angela chased it, giggling at the way it wobbled as it rolled because of the point it had on one end and the hook on the other end. It stopped, finally, against the Teddy Bear shelf. Carefully, she picked it up and carried it back to the stack of boxes that Momma had taken out to store all the decorations from the display. “We’ll use most of these things again next year,” Momma had said.

“Put that bulb away, then come get this Angel, Angela.” Momma laughed, because it sounded funny that her Angel should help with the Angel.

“Where do I put it?” Angela asked.

“Its box is on the railing. You’ll know it when you see it,” Momma explained. “It’s just the right shape and just the right size.”

It took only a moment to find the box. The ornament nestled into the molded plastic; the size and shape fit the ornament perfectly.

“Now, the Angel,” urged Momma as she held it out. “The box is over there,” Momma gestured. She smiled. “It is just the right shape and just the right size.”

One after another, the tree ornaments came off and were fitted into boxes. Angela and Momma played a bit of a game. “Just the right shape and just the right size?” Angela would chant, and Momma would reply, “Just the right shape and just the right size.”

Then the tree came down, and it too went into a box that was just the right shape and just the right size, but the game had lost its fun. The banners, pictures, coverings - everything was put away. Momma was tidying up when Angela noticed a stack of brightly wrapped boxes that had been under the tree in the window. Momma had moved them into a corner when she had started to take down the display. “Momma, what about these?” asked Angela.

“Oh,” Momma answered slowly. “We won’t use those again next year. We need to take the ribbons, bows, and wrapping paper off and throw the boxes away.”

“Oh, no!” Angela’s eyes grew large. “Those are gifts. We can’t just throw them away!”

“Well . . .” Momma looked at Angela with a little smile. “If you would like to have them, they are yours. But you need to open them now.”

Angela’s eyes grew even larger. “For me? All these gifts?”

“Yes, but you will need to open them now,” Momma repeated. “You do that while I finish up storing the boxes. We are almost done, and Timmy and Daddy will be expecting us home soon.”

Angela started opening the first beautiful box. She carefully took off the bow, found where the ribbon had been taped together, removed and folded the festive wrapping and opened the box. It was empty. She was a bit astonished and almost said something to Momma. Instead, she repeated the process and opened the next box. It, too, was empty. She hesitated, then asked, “Momma? Are all the boxes empty?”

Momma nodded. “Those are just props. They are not real gifts; they are there to be pretty in the window. Here. Let me help. We are almost done.” In a few minutes, everything was put away, and Momma turned away to make sure all was ready for the day after Christmas. Angela was quiet, thinking, and all the way home she said very little, even though the moon had come out and brightened up the fresh snow, making the neighborhood still and beautiful. Momma hardly noticed because she was tired and was counting everything else she had to do at home before she could finish for the night. Tomorrow was Christmas, and there were still some important chores to do.

At home, Daddy and Timmy were already back from the church. Daddy was a pastor, and he had helped with the living nativity scene. Timmy was Angela’s eight-year old brother, and he had too much energy and too many questions.

“Where have you been? What you been doing? Did you see the moon? Did you know the sheep ate the hem of the wise men’s robe?” On and on he went, and Angela needed to think. Mrs. Barkley at the church had once looked at Timmy and said to Angela, “I’m sure that you are glad that God gave you such a wonderful brother. He must be a blessing to you.” Momma said that Mrs. Barkley was “such a saint.” Angela came to the reasonable conclusion that one could be a saint without being very smart.

Timmy looked at Angela and asked another of his endless questions. “What’s the matter with you? You aren’t saying much and you’re not pushing me around.”

“Timmy, maybe you can answer a question for me. What is it that makes a Christmas gift a Christmas gift?”

“Huh?” Timmy blinked a few times. “Oh, I see. Stuff. Stuff makes a gift a gift.”

“Stuff?” Angela echoed.

“Yeah, stuff. Stuff like a new basketball, and Roger the Rocketman, and Lincoln Logs, and an electric train. You know, stuff!” Finished with his profound answer to a silly question, Timmy headed to the kitchen.

After a short snack, Timmy asked if he could go to bed. “The sooner I sleep, the sooner it will be Christmas morning.” Angela came to another reasonable conclusion - you could be smart and still not be a saint.

While Daddy and Momma took Timmy to bed and to say prayers, Angela cleared the table and began to put away Timmy’s toys. She carried her own things to her room and changed into her pajamas. She lay back in bed and waited for Daddy or Momma to come to say goodnight prayers with her.

Momma came. “Daddy has a few things to do, so I’ll pray with you tonight,” explained Momma. She looked carefully at Angela. “Sweetheart, are you all right? You have been so quiet since we left the gift shop.”

“I’m okay. I just need to think about something.” Momma looked at her a moment, then nodded.

“Say your prayers, then go to sleep. Tomorrow morning is Christmas.” This time, the tiredness was forgotten, and her smile was happy and loving.

Near the end of her prayer, Angela paused. “And Heavenly Father, could you please answer my question about Christmas gifts? You know what I mean. Amen.”

Momma hesitated a bit before she added her “Amen.” “Angela, can I help with your question?”

“No, I just need to have God help me some with this one. But, would you sing me the Christmas Lullaby?”

Momma’s voice was clear and sweet. As she sang, sleep came to Angela, urging Christmas to come with the morning sun.

Angela slept, and woke quietly, even though Timmy’s eyes were just a few inches from her own. “Come on,” he turned as he spoke. Over his shoulder he threw the challenge: “Let’s go get the stuff.”

Down the stairs they hurried, only to stop when they remembered the family tradition. “Sit down and we will hear the Christmas story. Then we will open our gifts.” Daddy was firm about this, and even though Angela needed to see if her question had been answered, she truly liked to hear this story time after time.

“¹ And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.

(Angela liked it when Daddy read from that “Old” Bible.)

² ([And] this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) ³ And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:;) ⁵ To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. ⁶ And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. ⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”

Daddy’s rich, strong voice continued about shepherds and the Angels -

“Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord . . . ,”

and ended with Mary pondering all the things in her heart. Then Daddy said a prayer of thanks for God’s greatest gift of all, Jesus, the Savior.

And then the gifts. Timmy wasted no time, but Angela hesitated. She took the first box with her name on it. She lifted it, then turned it and listened while she gave it a gentle shake. She looked at Momma, removed the wrapping, just as she had done in the gift shop the evening before, and opened the box. And in it was the most perfect music box with a brightly colored merry-go-round and horses that really moved up and down. “Do you like it?” Momma asked.

“Oh, yes, yes! I love the gift, but I am mostly glad that these gifts aren’t just empty boxes, like last night.”

“I see,” Momma said quietly, as Angela turned to open another gift. For long moments she looked at her daughter.

When all the gifts were opened, and everyone was hugging everyone else - Angela even got a hug from Timmy - Momma held her a bit longer than usual. “Did God answer your question, sweetie?”

“Oh, yes. And what is interesting is that Timmy answered the question last night. Sort of. I asked him what made a gift a gift, and he said, ‘stuff.’ In a way he was right. A box is not a gift. That’s just decoration and wrapping and cardboard. People may have songs and readings and prayers, and things, but if Jesus is not in it, it’s not really Christmas, and it’s not really a gift. It’s what is *in* the box that makes it a gift.”

Momma looked so proud. “Angela, you are growing so fast in your understanding. We celebrate a real Savior. His coming was real, his life was real, and his death, burial, and resurrection were real. It is possible to have pretty boxes that are empty when they are opened. But with Jesus, when you get past the wrapping, you find *him*. He is real.”

Angela hugged Momma again. “Jesus is the most important gift of all. And do you know what? My heart is the box that is just the right shape and just the right size for him.”

The End
and May You Have a Blessed Christmas!

