



WHEN I WAS BUT A WEE LAD,
PASSING THROUGH MY NORMAN
ROCKWELL CHILDHOOD IN THE
HEARTLAND OF THE UNITED
STATES, CHRISTMAS WAS PRETTY
MUCH ALL ABOUT PRESENTS.

Oh yes, there was the Nativity, there was singing in the children's choir (a.k.a., the Cherub Choir) on risers in the sanctuary, there was the mystical luminescence of the Christmas Eve candlelight service. Having been raised in the church, I knew all about the true meaning of Christmas. But, after all, I was just a little kid, and all of that religious stuff couldn't overpower my fascination with what lay hidden in those enticing packages under the tree.

Dad was just your basic blue-collar worker, and our family never had much money, but I cannot remember a Christmas when, come Christmas morning, our modest tree was not surrounded by a generous contribution from "Santa." Somehow Mom and Dad and Auntie Norma were able to find the wherewithal to overwhelm the senses of a little boy blinking sleep from his eyes.

Invariably each approaching Christmas was accompanied by an overpowering desire on my part for one special gift—one thing that, to me, was heads and tails more important than any three-pack of underwear, new Sunday-go-to-Meetin' shirt, or pair of slippers. One year I had my heart set on a stuffed dog. One year I *really* wanted a set of Tinker Toys. And one year I was desperate to get a doll for Christmas (yes, you're correct—I was a strange little boy). That year was the most special of all, for Mom took the old doll she played with as a girl to the Doll Hospital, and had the head and hair changed from female to male. On Christmas morning there was "Tommy," sitting in his wooden crib under the tree, smiling up at me.

Extra Love

I knew that my parents loved me. I knew that from my earliest days. I knew their love was expressed not just in hugs and kisses, but in Dad working hard every day to support us, in Mom always being there when I came home from school, and in her dedication to a clean house and three square meals every day. I knew, even then, that their love was expressed in their discipline of me, and that they always wanted to know where I was—and with whom. Even as a little boy, I knew their love was real.

But because our family had so little money, their love for me was expressed all the more in those special gifts at Christmas time. I knew that we really couldn't afford them. I knew that very often they did not purchase the gift, but gave of their time and energy to make it themselves, or restore something old to make it new just for me. I knew that every special gift for Christmas meant sacrifice for them.

Love Embodied

From an early age I knew that God loved me. From the first Sunday when my parents brought me to church in a basket, I heard the story of His enduring love for me. But one day when I was seven years old it struck me with a new and exciting force: God's love for me was so substantial and real that He sent to earth His one and only Son.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."

John 3:16-17

Suddenly the tiny figurine lying in the Nativity set manger became something far more significant—and real. Here was not just a nice thing, a pretty, pink-cheeked baby, part of the rich pageant of the season. Here was not just the center of a fascinating story about angels and shepherds and wise men and a flight to Egypt. Here was not just someone to sing about once a year while clinging precariously to the top row of rickety risers.

As if struck by a bolt of lightning, I realized for the first time that here was embodied God's sacrificial love—for me. Here was very God in flesh.

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

God's One Special Gift

Later, through patient nurturing, my infantile understanding of the baby Jesus of Christmas matured. Jesus was God in flesh, new, born of Mary in much the same way I was born of my own mother. Yes, it was a supernatural birth, in that His father was not Joseph, but the Holy Spirit. I got that. "Virgin birth." Even in my Midwest, mid-century, naiveté, I understood that part. But what I learned later was that the Son part of God, embodied in that tiny child, was already ancient at Bethlehem.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

John 1:1-2

In fact, He not only was *present* with God the Father from eternity past beyond our comprehension, He actually was the agent of all creation.

All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

John 1:3

This one, this small child whose birth we celebrate every year was—and is—all of this and more. He is King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. He is the "Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." But first, for us, in that lowly stable so long ago, He was God's one special gift. He was the one thing we so desperately wanted above everything else. Salvation.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

Colossians 1:15-20