

## Will We Carry Forward the Christmas Story?

Beloved friends, fellow carriers of loving Christ light: welcome to this moment in time and space – this Christmas Eve of 2023 on which we find ourselves gathered in the kind warmth of community.

Let us pray. O God, you reach out to us this evening through storytellers – messengers “*filled with your grace and filled with your truth*” (John 1:14). As we recall the familiar sacred nativity story and hear a newer Christmas story, grant to our hearts and our minds utter openness – that we might once again receive your Christmas message and welcome it to inform our living at the cusp of a New Year. Amen.

We have just heard the story of Jesus’ birth read from scripture and voiced by all of in the singing of nativity carols. My Christmas gift to each of you this year will be a reading of one of my favorite Christmas stories. I hope that it will move you in some way that meets a quiet need in your soul. I have made my own abridgement both so that it won’t take twenty minutes to share it with you and to encourage you to borrow or purchase a copy of your own to which you can return.

When my own parents cut a balsam Christmas tree from the grounds surrounding their home this fall and brought it to my sons and me at Thanksgiving, I was reminded of this story, which Santa gifted to me one Christmas when I was seven or eight years old. The story takes place in the Appalachian mountains during World War I. *The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree*, by Gloria Houston.

*It was getting on toward Christmas in the valley of Pine Grove. The wise folk said the old woman in the sky was picking her geese, for the Appalachian Mountains lay blanketed in snow... It was... the Christmas Ruthie would never forget.*

*"Come, my pretty young'un," Papa had said one day early in the spring. "It is time to choose the Christmas tree for the village church."*

*"But, Papa, Christmas will not come for a long while," said Ruthie...*

*"We must choose a special tree and mark it for the coming year. It is the custom in our village... for one family to give to all the folk in the village and up every hill and holler a Christmas tree for Pine Grove Church. This year it is our turn."...*

*"What kind of tree shall we have, Papa?" said Ruthie.*

*"We shall have a balsam Christmas tree... The balsam grows up the rocky craigs where only a venturesome man may go. The balsam is a perfect tree. It grows up high, near to heaven."*

*So Papa and Ruthie rode on Old Piedy's back across the high cliffs and along the craigs, looking for the perfect balsam Christmas tree... Finally they saw it. Growing on the edge of a high cliff on Grandfather Mountain. ...Its green color was dark and rich...*

*"This will be our perfect Christmas tree," said Papa. "And as is the custom, the selfsame year you shall be the heavenly angel in the village Christmas play. It is fitting that you should mark the Christmas tree." Papa took the red ribbon from Ruthie's coal-black curls. He lifted her high in his strong arms. "Tie this to the tip-tip-top." Then he kissed the dimple in each of Ruthie's cheeks.*

*Summer came, and Papa was called away to be a soldier. He went to fight in a war far across the sea.*

*That year the timber was not cut. So Mama had no money to buy coffee, sugar, or cloth for new dresses. Together [Mama and Ruthie] tended the little garden, growing vegetables to eat.*

And every night Mama tucked Ruthie into her little bed and listened as she said the same prayer. *“Please send my papa home for Christmas... And please have old St. Nicholas bring me a doll with a beautiful dress, the color of cream, all trimmed with ribbons and lace.”*

One day that fall, when the dried corn shocks rustled in the breeze, a package came from Papa. In it were soft silk stockings for Mama and blue satin hair ribbons for Ruthie...

*“I’ll be home for Christmas,”* the letter said. *“The war is finally over. The Armistice was signed today!”*

...Ruthie listened for the squeaky whistle of the little train the mountain folk called Tweetsie, as it chugged through the valley and up the mountainside. One day Mama and Ruthie harnessed Old Piedy to the sled and went to the station... But when the other men from the village stepped down from the train, Papa was not with them.

Soon there was only one more day until Christmas Eve. Over at the school Miss Jenny and her pupils were practicing the Christmas play... Miss Jenny chose the boy and girl who would be Mary and Joseph. Then she called Ruthie’s name.

*“This year you shall be the heavenly angel... This is the year your papa will give the church its Christmas tree.”*...

Miss Jenny showed her how to hold her arms just so. *“If you were a dress with great big sleeves, it will look like you have wings.”*

*“Mama, Mama,”* said Ruthie, as she ran up the front steps that day. *“I must have a new dress with great big sleeves. I am going to be the heavenly angel when Papa gives the Christmas tree.”*

*"Oh, my pretty young'un," said Mama. "I have no cloth to make a dress... and I have no money until your papa comes home." Mama kissed the dimple in each of Ruthie's cheeks and hugged her daughter tightly.*

*That night, the preacher from Pine Grove Church knocked on the door. "Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, Miz Green... And Tom is not yet home from the war. Chad McKinney has been saving a prime cedar on his bottom land for Christmas next. He'd as leave cut the tree this year."*

*"This is the year our family gives the tree," said Mama. "Tom chose it before he went away to war... Tom is as good as his word. Our family will give the tree this year,"...*

*Late that night Mama wakened Ruthie... [and] hitched Old Piedy to the big sled Papa used to haul fire logs down from the ridges.*

*The moon shone silver as Mama and Ruthie made their way up the hill. Ruthie carried the lantern. As they came to the dark woods the winter moon made strange shadows on the snow.*

*"Mama, I'm afraid," said Ruthie.*

*"No need to be afraid... We're off to get the perfect balsam Christmas tree." Mama began to sing "I wonder as I wander out under the sky." Ruthie joined in... Soon she forgot to be afraid.*

*...Slowly they led Old Piedy along the ridge to the highest craig on Grandfather Mountain. They could see the village sleeping in the valley far below. Finally, at the edge of the highest cliff they saw the balsam standing alone.*

*"There it is, Mama," Ruthie cried. "See, there's my ribbon bow tied to the tip-tip-top." Ruthie ran up the rocky craig as Mama and Old Piedy followed.*

*The blade of Papa's ax shone in the moonlight as Mama lifted it high. Thwack! Crack! the sounds echoed through the rocks and hills.*

*Then Mama picked up the saw and said, "Take hold of the end, my pretty young'un. Pull as hard as ever you can."*

*Mama pulled. Ruthie pulled... Back and forth until the perfect balsam Christmas tree fell softly into the snow. Ruthie and Mama lifted the tree onto the sled... Then they made their way down the ridge...*

*Through the soft snow they led Old Piedy to the church. Together they lifted the perfect balsam Christmas tree... and stood it... near the belfry wall. Just as the sun was rising over Doe Hill, they hurried home.*

*Tucking Ruthie into her little bed, Mama whispered, "The folk shall have their Christmas tree, and you shall be the heavenly angel this year."*

*Ruthie fell fast asleep, but Mama sat long by the firelight sewing as fast as her nimble fingers could move. First, she cut the ribbons and lace from a wedding dress the color of cream. From it she fashioned a smaller dress with flowing sleeves. Then she took a soft silk stocking, stuffed it with lamb's wool... From the scraps of Ruthie's dress, she made a tiny dress just like it...and dressed the stocking doll...*

*The sun was high in the winter sky when a knock came at the door. "Good Christmas Eve, Preacher Ollis," Mama said. "Do come in to spell yourself."*

*"Did you hear the news about the Christmas tree? A wonderous balsam, from up the high craigs, was found on the belfry porch this morning."*

*"Do tell! Do tell! What a wonder," said Mama.*

*"And that's not all. It's being told hereabouts that folks who live up the holler heard the angels singing high up on the ridge late into the night..."*

Ruthie hid her face in Mama's patchwork quilt so the preacher would not hear her laugh.

Daylight was fading when Mama helped Ruthie into the prettiest dress Ruthie had ever seen. "If you hold your arms just so," said Mama, "it will look like you have wings."

At the church the ladies of the valley had decorated the perfect balsam Christmas tree... From up and down the River Road, and from all the hills and hollers, the folk were coming to celebrate the Christmas tree... Ruthie climbed up and stood on the preacher's big chair... "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy," said Ruthie the heavenly angel.

When the program was over, Ruthie went to sit with Mama on the front pew. Mama held her close... One of the magi reached to the tip-tip-top of the perfect balsam Christmas tree. He lifted the tiny angel down. "Why, Ruthie, this tiny angel looks just like you."... Ruthie hugged the tiny angel and kissed its silky cheek, which felt just like the silk stockings Papa had sent to Mama.

...Slowly the people began leaving the church... St. Nicholas was standing there. A man in Army uniform stood beside him. "And here is another present for you, Ruthie," said St. Nicholas. But Ruthie was so busy looking at the tiny angel that she did not notice until strong arms picked her up. "Let me look at you, my pretty young'un," said Papa's voice.

...The village folk gathered around the church steps... [and] began to sing "Silent night. Holy night. All is calm. All is bright." ...But Papa, Mama, Ruthie, and the tiny angel hardly heard. They just hugged each other some more.

And since that time, every year...a tiny angel has stood on top of the perfect balsam Christmas tree....

*That's how it happened. The Christmas of the heavenly angel and perfect balsam Christmas tree.*

Why have I chosen to share this story with you this Christmas Eve? I feel it converses deeply with the story of Jesus' birth. At the core of Christmas, God (which is divine love) made Godself known in a new way through the vulnerable birth of a child in the midst of very difficult circumstances.

As Ruthie's Mama had not anticipated a war pushing her to need to do all the gardening, all the child-raising, and all the Christmas tree cutting and hauling on her own... so Joseph had not anticipated a census that would push Mary and him far from home and into a situation of him serving as midwife to Mary and Jesus.

As the village of Pine Grove surrounded Ruthie and Mama that very hard Christmas, so angels and shepherds surrounded Mary, Joseph and Jesus with their kind company.

And as Mama encouraged Ruthie from the other side of the saw, "*Take hold of the end, my pretty young'un. Pull as hard as ever you can,*" (confident that her child could do that to which she gave her heart and effort), so Joseph stood countless times at a work bench, mentoring Jesus into the carpentry trade that sustained their family.

Love was made known through Jesus' family on that first Christmas, through Ruthie, Mama and their community. May we find courage in our commitment to doing the Christmas work of making Love known in our time and spaces, because Love is counting on each of us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll  
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)  
December 24, 2023 (Christmas Eve)  
Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-14  
& *The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree*