The Same Old Story

Every family has one. You know, that story that you tell over and over again. It's part of your family; part of who you are. For the Franklins, it was the story of the Christmas Angel. It was a few weeks before Christmas, and 5-year-old Timothy was begging his mom to tell the angel story. His older sister Rachel was less than enthusiastic. "Aw Mom, not again. Every year we have to hear the same old story about that stupid angel." Any of you parents can appreciate the fight that ensued. Timothy saying, "The angel is not stupid," and his sister replying, with great wisdom, "Is too." The middle child, Paul, refused to get into it.

After letting them go a few rounds, Mom interrupted, declaring that as long as there was even one person who wanted to hear the story, she would tell it. So she let Timothy crawl into her lap as she told about the first Christmas that Mom and Dad were married. They were still in college, living in student housing, so it was a pretty meager celebration. No decorations; no presents. But on Christmas Eve, they walked past a Christmas Tree lot where the owner was giving away the last of the trees for free.

Rachel interrupted the story to tell the part she knew was coming next. "But the only trees left were the ones no one wanted. They were small and broken and crooked."

Not to be outdone, Paul chimed in, "You took one that was small but straight. And it only had five branches. But it was the best you could do."

Timothy, who hadn't yet heard the story enough times to help tell it, asked, "But what about the angel?"

Mom told how she and Dad put together all the spare change they had to buy just one ornament for the tree. The angel on the top. She had a little doll face with yellow yarn hair. Her gown was green avocado burlap. Her wings were made of white felt, stretched over wires. And

she smiled with joy and delight. It was the perfect ornament for a leftover tree in student housing. Mom ended the story by declaring that “it’s been on our tree ever since.”

It made a good story when the kids were little. But many years later, Christmas was a little more plush. The rest of the tree was covered with shiny ornaments, and the angel was more than a little bit out of place. So one year, Mom decided to replace the angel with a new one – and she was beautiful. A delicate porcelain face, white silk dress and gossamer wings. And the new angel was perfect – until the kids, now adults with kids of their own, came home for Christmas.

Timothy looked up at the tree and demanded to know, “Where’s the Christmas angel?” Rachel recited, “It’s been on our tree ever since!” The oldest grandchild, who had heard the story every year groaned. “Not the stupid angel story…” But the youngest grandchild had never been to Grandma’s house for Christmas before. “What angel story?”

By this time Timothy had unearthed the old angel from a box in the basement. He moved the new angel to make room for the old one and said, “Mom, you have to tell it. You always said if there was even one person who wanted to hear it, you would share the story.” And everyone gathered around to hear it one. more. time.

The Christmas Story that we tell tonight is a little bit like the angel story. We’ve all heard it before. Most of us have heard it a million times. We hear it in church, some of you more than once today, because you were here for the earlier service. We told it in the pageant that our adults and kids shared two weeks ago. We hear it told and retold on TV. Linus reads from Scripture every year in the Charlie Brown Christmas Special. And although lots of Christmas specials are about Frosty the Snowman or Santa Claus or how Christmas almost didn’t happen, there are a handful that really tell the nativity story.

And of course, we hear the story retold through our beloved Christmas hymns. One Madison radio station started playing nothing but Christmas music before Thanksgiving. So we all had plenty of opportunity to hear O Little Town of Bethlehem and O Come All Ye Faithful. The hymns are as familiar to us as the story itself.

We love the hymns, the TV shows, and even the nativity story, told straight out of the Bible. We love them, but they're old. Like the avocado green Christmas angel. And it's tempting to want to make it new, to replace it with something shiny and fresh. But it's already the best story ever told. So we don't really want a new story; we just want to hear it with fresh ears.

It reminds me of the story about Henry and Maria. You can't imagine a couple more in love than these two. She plans cruise vacations because he likes the sea. And he hates grocery shopping, but does it to give his wife a break. For 60 years, they've been doing all the little things for one another that make a happy marriage. But in all that time, Henry has never quite figured out how to buy a Christmas gift. For 60 years, he's done his Christmas shopping at Walgreens, just after 7:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve. And for 60 years, he bought Maria the same gifts – a box of chocolates and a bottle of perfume. For 60 years, Maria pretended to be surprised. After all, it wasn't the gift she loved. It was Henry.

But one year it all changed. By Thanksgiving, Henry had Maria's present bought, wrapped, and ready to go. But he kept it hidden until Christmas Eve. When Henry and Maria sat down to open presents with the family, it wasn't their five-year-old grandson who was most excited; it was Henry. He fidgeted with nervous energy, barely able to contain himself. Finally, he insisted that Maria open her present from him.

It was a big box, and Maria was opening it carefully – so she could save the paper. Henry declared, "I'll buy you all the paper in the world. Just open it!" Maria finally got into the box,

and Henry looked like he would explode. In the box was a pink quilted bathrobe, with a chain of daisies embroidered across the pocket. Maria smiled and said, “Oh Henry, dear.”

Henry told all about finding this bathrobe in the department store, and how he thought it looked just like his wife. So he ran to find a clerk about his wife’s height, so she could help him get the right size. “I just had to get it,” he said. “I didn’t even look at the price tag. It looked just like you, and I knew I had to give it to you.”

Maria gave Henry a great big hug, and she never told him that the reason the robe looked like it was made just for her was that she had been wearing an identical robe, every morning for the last five years. She quietly hung the new robe in the closet and took the old one to Goodwill.

It’s hard to believe Henry could get so excited over something that was part of his daily life. But he now saw the robe in a new light. He saw it with the joy of giving. He saw it with the delight of sharing something wonderful with his wife. And even though the robe was old for her, his enthusiasm made her see it in a new way too.

You want to know how to make the Nativity story new and exciting? Share it with someone who’s never heard it. Give someone the gift of knowing that this story means something to you. We couldn’t tell a better story than the story that God loves us so much he sent his son to live among us. A story that the precious babe would one day teach us things we never knew about God’s unfailing grace and unconditional love. A story about a messiah, the savior, who came to reconcile us with God. It may be the same old story, but it’s our story, and it’s part of who we are. Amen and amen.