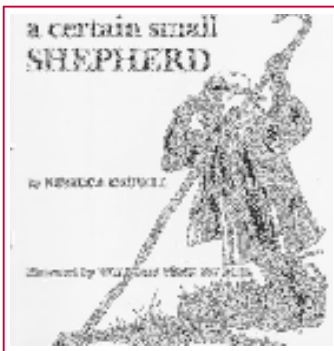


How to Prepare for Christmas



This is the story of a strange and marvelous thing that happened on a Christmas morning at Hurricane Gap, and not so long ago at that."

So begins a small book entitled *A Certain Small Shepherd* by Rebecca Caudill. Our family reads that story every year during Advent. It was my wife's idea. She brought the small paperback home one day (over 17 years ago now). "To help us make ready," she said.

"This is the story of a strange and marvelous thing that happened on a Christmas morning at Hurricane Gap, and not so long ago at that."

From *A Certain Small Shepherd*

So now, each evening between December 1st and 25th our family gathers in the living room. We sit in a loose circle, children scattered on the couch and floor, and we read out loud. This is how we prepare; it is how we make ready for God.

Reading aloud is perfect for Christmas. Perfect, because reading slows you down. It settles you into a more human pace. And human is exactly where God wants you to be at Christmas. After all, human is where Christmas happened. And so it is the best possible place in the world to be - if you want to receive God.

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We read by lamplight. If there is a chill, we light the gas logs. From each of our present collection of four or five books, we read a section, sometimes only a paragraph, sometimes several pages. In this way, we space the readings across the whole of the Advent season. My wife and I take turns reading, but she has the best voice; clear, strong and vibrant. But the real secret is her tempo; she uses every word, one at a time, not too fast, not too slow. When her limber voice carries

through the room, we are carried along with it.

A Certain Small Shepherd is my favorite, maybe because it was our first Advent book. Or maybe it is because the main character is a small boy who cannot talk. It is the story of Jamie, the son of a poor but good farmer in the Appalachian mountains. Read it slowly.

"Jamie was born on a freakish night in November. The cold that night moved down from the North and rested its heavy hand suddenly on Hurricane Gap. Within an hour's time, the naked earth turned brittle. Line Fork Creek froze solid in its winding bed and lay motionless, like a string dropped at the foot of Pine Mountain.

At the foot of the Gap, where Jamie's house stood, the wind doubled its fury. It wailed like a banshee in the chimney.

"For sure, it's bad luck trying to break in," moaned Jamie's mother and turned her face to her pillow."

"Bad luck has no business here," Jamie's Father said bravely.

Jamie's mother died that cold November night when he was born. But Jamie survived to join the family that now consisted of Father and his two sisters, Saro and Honey.

"Jamie ate and slept and grew.

Like other babies, he cut teeth. He learned to sit alone and to crawl. When he was a year old, he toddled about like other one-year-olds. At two, he carried around sticks and stones like other two-year-olds. He threw balls and built towers of blocks and knocked them down. Everything that other two-year-olds could do, Jamie could do, except one thing. He could not talk.

The old women of Hurricane gap sat in their chimney corners and shook their heads.

'His mother, poor soul, should have rubbed him with lard,' said one.

'She ought to have brushed him with a rabbit's foot,' said another.

Every time I listen to Jamie's story, I am pulled in. It seems I cannot help it. But I know what does it. It's the reading out loud. Words slow me down. The tempo of sentences draw me back to human speed. Before I know it, I have paused. Before I know it, I have lingered where I so often avoid - I am in the present moment. And when I do that, I open up, much like a human is supposed to. That's what happens when words touch ears. It is a wonderful to behold. I watch it happen to my children, every year, those evenings in December.

My children relax. Their posture unlocks; their expression broadens. It is as if the heart rises in the chest and opens their face. Despite the distractions, we quiet down. Despite the holiday rush, we settle in. It is so remarkable, that at first,

I thought something strange was happening. But now I know better. It isn't strange at all; it is normal; it is what happens when humans encounter words.

When my family gathers to read aloud, we are, for a few moments, submitting to the 'human speed limit', that is, to the pace of the spoken word. When we return to this more normal pace, we begin to see and hear what is around us; we begin to see and hear what is inside of

us. Sometimes, we even begin to see and hear what is above us. Reading is perfect for Christmas, because the pace of words is the human pace.

Resistance

As good as our reading tradition has been, it isn't easy to pull off. We get resistance. Our children forget from year to year what the exercise will do for them. "Do we have to read tonight?" one is bound to say, anticipating boredom. "Yes," I tell them, "this is a good thing - you'll enjoy it." They look at me with unbelieving eyes. I offer an unconvincing nod. Unconvincing, because I often want to avoid the reading too.

But I don't avoid the reading because I have forgotten the humanizing power of words. No, it is because I remember. I know that reading matches the cadence of my heart. I know it will call me out. The reading will stir me. It will rouse me to feel. It will dare me to hope. These things, which I know to be good, I also know to be painful.

When my family reads, we slow down to the human speed. Despite myself, I slow down too and then something 'strange and marvelous' begins to happen in the hollow of my soul. I become more normal. I drop my guard. My heart swells; my face unlocks. I begin to connect with Jamie's story; I begin to connect with my own. That's what happens when you walk the human pace. You begin to think and feel like a human. It is a good but dangerous thing to do.

At three, Jamie could zip his shirt and tie his shoes.

At four, he followed Father to the stable at milking time. He milked the kittens' pan full of milk.

But even at four, He could only make strange grunting noises.

As Jamie grows, he become more and more frustrated with his inability to speak. There are words he wants to say; feelings he wants to express and stories he wants to tell. But he cannot. When Father decides to send him to school, many in Hurricane Gap shake their heads. Even Miss Creech, the teacher asks, "What will he do all day?" "He will listen," his father says.

And Jamie does listen. He learns how to count and to read. But when Miss Creech asks a question and he is the only one in the class who knows the answer, he cannot, he cannot spell it and he cannot find anything to point too. His schoolmates mock him.

When it came time for the annual Christmas play, Miss Creech assigned the parts. The roles of Mary and the Angels went to the big girls. The big boys were made wise men and shepherds. "The rest of the boys and girls would sing carols," she said.

Jamie for a moment listened to the sounds of the words he had last heard. Yes, Miss Creech expected him to sing.

The first day (of practice) he stood quietly. The second day he shoved Milly, who was standing next to

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him. The third day he pulled Honey's hair. The fourth day, when the carolers began singing, Jamie ran to the window, grabbed a ball from the sill, and bounced it across the floor."

"Wait a minute, children," Miss Creech said to the carolers. She turned to Jamie.

"Jamie," she asked, "how would you like to be a shepherd?"

"He's too little," said one of the big shepherds.

But that afternoon Jamie became a (certain) small shepherd. He ran home after practice to tell Father.

Father couldn't understand what Jamie was telling him. But he knew that Jamie had been changed into somebody important.

It takes us about two weeks to get to this point in the story. I see it coming but I am defenseless. The same thing happens every time. My throat knots, my eyes burn. I want so bad for Jamie to be turned into somebody important. I want so bad to be turned into somebody too.

My kids know about this. So they watch me. "Look," one of them will say, "Daddy's nose is getting red!" We will all laugh. But we all feel it - the reawakened longing for redemption. O Come Emmanuel, we think, O Come.

Reading reconnects my family to the bitter-sweet experience of being human. And human is exactly where God wants us to be. Human is

ground zero for the incarnation. Human is where Christmas happens. Human is the best possible place in the universe to receive God.

Prepare for Christmas this year.

Do not rush past Christmas this year. Slow down to the human pace and thereby put yourself in the human place. That is where God is coming.

Maybe you will choose to read aloud like we do. Or maybe you will, like Simeon, watch and pray for the Christ. Perhaps you will inquire like the Magi, sing like the angels, or ponder like Mary. All of these activities proceed at the human pace, and all of them put you in the human place of looking upward. Find one and give yourself to it.

But whatever you do, do not exceed the tempo of the spoken word, so that when you encounter to incarnate Word you will be ready. Unlock. Let your heart swell in your chest and open your face upward. Be human, let God come in. Who knows? He might turn you into somebody important, somebody who will tell the story of how God put into human flesh, the Word that made the world.

That's what happened to Jamie. But if you want to hear about that, you'll have to read the book for yourself.

The Edwards' Current Christmas Reading List:

- Luke Chapter 2
- The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey, by Susan Wojciechowski
- A Certain Small Shepherd by Rebecca Caudill
- The 24 Days of Christmas, by Madeline L'Engle
- Jotham's Journey, by Arnold Ytreeide

*By Roger Edwards
a counselor and teacher
at The Barnabas
Center.*

Training Opportunities at The Barnabas Center

Barnabas Training— Basic *'equipped to help others'*

Barnabas Training Basic- A seminar to equip you to help others who are experiencing life struggles. Provides a conceptual model and practical relational skills that open the heart.

Held at The Church at Charlotte on Carmel Rd.

January 20 & 21st

Friday Evening 6:30PM—9:30PM

Saturday 9AM— 4PM

\$125

For info Call the Barnabas Center or email
Gschmidt@thebarnabascenter.org

Love Your Kids Like God Loves You a seminar for parents of young children

Saturday, February 11th

*Hosted by: Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church
Taught by Roger Edwards*

Topics

- Imitating God's Love
- The Two Fundamental Questions Our Children Ask- Answering with Love and Discipline
- Parenting as a Team
- Putting it into Practice- making a plan to get on track

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for Christmas

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Upcoming Opportunities and Current Events

Date	Upcoming Opportunities and Current Events	Facilitator
Weeknights. Groups are on-going.	Barnabas Adolescent Counseling Groups- of up to 6 teens, providing a confidential place for comfort and connection. Both male and female groups (w/ female volunteer).	Kevin Wimbish, adolescent counselor
Jan-May 2006 lead	Spiritual Formation- A women's group focusing on better hearing the voice of God, and the personal invitations and affirmations of the Spirit through the study of Scripture.	Lisa Godman Amy Cole
Jan, 8, 15, 22, 29 Sunday School Class	"Leave, Weave and Cleave: God's Prescription for Marriage" - 1st Presbyterian	Palmer Trice
Jan 11- Feb 15 Weds. nights -	"Leave, Weave and Cleave: God's Prescription for Marriage" - Church at Charlotte	Palmer Trice
January 18, 2006 - 15 Weds, 7:00-8:30pm	Healing Hearts— A women's group for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse	Lisa Godman Annie Schleyer
January 20-21, 2006	Barnabas Training—Basic- A seminar for those wanting to be equipped to help others who are experiencing life struggles. Provides a conceptual model and practical relational skills that open the heart. Held at Church at Charlotte.	Barnabas Staff
Begins January 31	Honor's Program— A Group for Men— ministry to sexually addicted men who want a better path. Please call (704-365-4545) or e-mail (info@thebarnabascenter.org)	Barnabas Staff
February 11th, 2005	Love Your Kids Like God Loves You, A seminar for parents of young children. Held at Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church. See Box on page 3	Roger Edwards
Begins February 2	Honors Program Women's Group— for women in a relationship with a man who has struggled with sexual compulsivity or in a relationship that is recovering from sexual betrayal.	Barnabas Staff
Feb 12, 26 and March 5	"Leave, Weave and Cleave: God's Prescription for Marriage" - Christ Church -	Palmer Trice
Begins Week of Feb. 15th Bi-Weekly.	Barnabas Training Level 4: Peer Supervision- A confidential group for participants involved in caring relationships, to share situations, and gain feedback. Prerequisite: BT Level 2.	Barnabas Staff
Feb 17-19	"Integrity, Humility and Love" Quail Hollow Men's Retreat	Palmer Trice
Begins February 18, 2006	Barnabas Training Level 1— the next step beyond Barnabas Training Basic— 8 weeks plus a closing dinner	Barnabas Staff