Advent and Christmas at the Farm

GRACE LEE BILLINGS

Far Fields Farm is a hundred-acre family farm on a hilltop in Washington, Connecticut. It is secluded, at the end of a long dirt road, and seems barely touched by the world. It is there that Grace Lee Billings and her husband Jack Johnson raised their three sons.

Like many young families, Jack and I stumbled into celebrating the holiday season—the Christmas tree, opening presents, and then crossing the road to Grandma and Grandpa’s house to join the rest of the family for a festive turkey dinner. Between family living near by, and the "selling of the holidays," the religious meaning of our Christmas deteriorated in direct proportion to the increase in the number of our children. What had been ten presents under the tree for Alex burgeoned to thirty or more presents after the twins were born. On Christmas morning two exhausted and grumpy parents watched the children thoughtlessly rip through the pile of presents. The culmination of a year had descended into a spectacle of hollow commercialism.

Then came the "darkest Christmas of them all." The boys, tiny as they were, sat in their jammies Christmas morning surrounded by their loot—trucks, hamsters, tricycles, books, games, clothes, candy, stuffed animals—when one of them said, "Is that all there is?" The question was probably an innocent request for information, but Jack heard it differently. He was furious, a rare happening indeed. Jack erupted in a tirade on their ingratitude, and called them spoilt brats. At the end of this colorful explosion the boys were convinced that this was their last Christmas. They told us a few years later, remembering the famous diatribe, that even one package under the following year’s Christmas tree would have seemed lavish. In reflective hindsight, Jack and I saw Christmas as a disaster of our own making. But was there an alternative?

The next November our friend Seton suggested that we celebrate Advent. For four years he had lived as a Benedictine monk at Mount Saviour Monastery in upstate New York. There he was known as Brother Aelred, but I preferred to call him by his baptismal name. When he left Mount Saviour he settled for a time in a house known as Sheepfold, near the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Connecticut, and later he established a small non-canonical monastery in a house called Dayspring, also in Bethlehem. A number of people in our area of Connecticut—the Farm is in Washington—liked to join him and his confrères for worship. Some of us were regular churchgoers, some not; I was raised an evangelical, Jack and the boys were members of no church.

Seton and Mark, who had also been at Mount Saviour, had always observed this season in their years in the monastery. They wanted to add it to the Dayspring celebrations, but they felt it needed to be done outside of "the Sunday Mass." Most of the regulars in the Dayspring gathering said that they couldn’t participate in four Sunday evenings, but a small group—our family, Nancy and Tom Ware, their three sons, the McDermott family, Seton and Mark—made the commitment. As our twins, Eliot and Nicholas, were still little, and might need to be in bed early, we decided to have Advent at the Farm rather than at Dayspring. The change of venue focused Advent on family rather than on church. From this small start we found our way.

In preparation, Seton, Mark, Nancy, Maureen McDermott, and I met at the Farm. We knew each other well, knew the Dayspring style, and enjoyed singing together. Now we needed to flesh out a program that was simple enough for the children but meaningful enough for the adults. We
decided to follow the same format each of the four Sunday nights, establishing a rhythm. The first Advent program that we devised worked so well that we kept it for the seven years that we celebrated together. Four adults were chosen to prepare a "homily," one for each Advent Sunday, keeping a single theme through the season. Our first Advent theme was the nativity scene. Each Sunday was to focus on a different part of the story: the angel's part, the shepherds' part, Mary's part, and finally the three kings' part. After planning some Advent music, and promising to meet to practice, we ended our meeting. As Seton went out the door that night he said, "Oh by the way, don't forget the feast of St. Nicholas."

In Switzerland, where I grew up, the sixth of December was a special day. All of the bakery shops were filled with gingerbread cookies covered with a bright paper picture of St. Nicholas dressed as a bishop. My friends put their empty shoes at the foot of their beds on December fifth, and prayed that St. Nicholas would fill them during the night with candy. Rather than candy, disobedient children were given a bundle of twigs (called une verge) to be used for disciplining them during the year. Parents warned their misbehaving children, "If you are not good, Père Noël will bring you a verge." The Swiss tradition celebrated December sixth as a feast day, while Christmas was more somber, a religious day, with a few presents.

I decided to celebrate December sixth with a high English tea. Eliot asked if there was a feast of St. Eliot so that he too could have a celebration, but we couldn't find one. In truth, we always celebrated December sixth as the feast of St. Eliot and St. Nicholas. By celebrating Advent and the feast of St. Nicholas, all of December became a very special month.

At the end of the tea, the boys wrote to Santa asking for only a few things. A French friend explained to her children, "Christmas is not your birthday. On your birthday you can ask for all that you want, but on Jesus' birthday you should think of others." Somehow our children understood this message. After some discussion and comparing of notes, Alex wrote out the short letter, usually beginning, "Dear Santa, How are you? We are fine. We would like . . . ." He addressed the envelope to the North Pole, and the boys ran it out to the mailbox. Jack and I made a point of retrieving this valuable letter before the mailman took it away the next day. This simplified the Christmas shopping, as Jack's parents and my mother each gave an item from the list of three or four things, while we gave the most important items (new skates, a radio). With the joyous and fancy St. Nicholas tea, Christmas was now both launched and limited.

Sometimes the boys and I went to the Abbey of Regina Laudis to see their Neapolitan crèche. To get to the barn where the nuns permanently displayed this Renaissance treasure, we had to walk through snowy woods. Inside the gray barn, and behind a huge plate glass window, we saw a miniature Italian village displayed on a hillside. Before us, in the most beautiful detail, were cottages, doves in cages, peasants sitting at tables with tiny tankards and plates, ox carts on the road, woodsmen cutting logs, children at play, all against a background of distant hills and valleys. In one corner, inside a half-open barn, was the Virgin—resplendent in pale blue and pink satin—showing her newborn son to the kneeling shepherds. Outside, under a magnificent Star of Bethlehem, the three kings approached with their camels and horses following behind. Every detail enchanted us. How we wished we too could have such a diorama in our barn!

But our barn told a different story. The boys and I rarely visited the cold and forlorn hayloft in winter. We did go up to collect hay to put around our own small crèche, displayed on a table in the living room. The loft, with its sweet smell of summer, was caught in the icy cold of December. In our plain cold barn we imagined the original manger scene with the Christ child
lying in his swaddling clothes in a humble shed, with the holy family gathered in awe around him. In our hayloft there was no place for the satin, gold, and velvet of the Regina Laudis manger, but the hay bales had tiny field flowers caught in them, and this seemed very festive to us.

However, the real heart of our Christmas celebration became the four Sundays of Advent. They made us understand and share the spirit of the season as no presents could ever possibly do. Our friends came to the Farm on those dark December nights, passing through unlit countryside, then coming down our long isolated road, and finally arriving at our house. Only the most necessary lights were turned on in the driveway and on the way to the front door. Inside the front hall, only dimly lit by a lantern, they left their coats and hats on the settle, then came quietly into the living room. There a huge fragrant evergreen wreath was placed on the floor, with a candle in the middle to light the room. The children sat around the wreath, while the adults sat on the couch and chairs in a circle around the room. On that first Sunday of Advent, as we waited for the last guests to arrive, even the children were taken by the darkness of the big living room, lit by the flickering candle. For us the darkness was directly from Isaiah: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light." The air was full of anticipation.

When all had arrived, and a lovely quiet gathered us in, Jack or Seton read an opening Bible verse. Then we sang the first verse of the hymn, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." As the four Sundays progressed, going from the very dark first Sunday toward the bright fourth Sunday, when Christ's birth was imminent, we added another verse to this opening hymn. With the light of each additional Advent candle and the brightening of the room, we wanted more song and more joy.

In preparation for the homily, one of the older boys read from the Old Testament. Then, using the flame from the center candle, he lit one of the candles on the wreath. On the first Sunday, to explain the Advent wreath, one of the boys read the words:

The wreath is round, and symbolizes eternity. It is green to show the ever-presentness of God. The four candles are for each Sunday of waiting, while the middle candle, from which the others are lit, shows humanity's eternal hope in the coming of the Messiah.

Now, with two candles lit, we could see more clearly the faces of those gathered nearest to the Advent wreath. As we lighted more candles each Sunday, we eventually saw the faces of all those in the room. As we shared those winter evenings, we also came to know each other better just as the candlelight revealed us more to each other.

A New Testament reading followed the lighting of the candle. The homily followed. This was not a deep, theological document. Nor was it exegetical and full of biblical references to be carefully noted. Rather it was a personal expression of the meaning of the theme. That first year our reflections on the nativity touched on the journeys of the shepherds, the holy family, and the kings as they progressed toward the manger in the barn. Later, the thoughts turned to the coming of Christ, and its implications in our own lives and times.

I was moved by the time and thought that people put into these homilies. I realized that the church had a wealth of talent among the laity that was rarely tapped. I never heard heresy or "unbaked thought." Rather there was great humility and reverence in the handling of these
themes.

The homily was followed by a "reflection," a time when any of us could add our own thoughts on the theme. Perhaps because of the dark even the children felt free to say a few words. One night one of the Ware boys—age six or so—said very simply into the darkened room, as if to state the obvious, "Well of course. God loves us." Frank McDermott, gentle scholar that he was, said in Latin, "Ex ore infantium" (out of the mouth of babes).

After the reflection we sang the beautiful song, "Maranatha." Then we sang the Lord's Prayer. A small group of us, who had taken time to practice together, then sang a less familiar Christmas song, perhaps "Maria Walks amid the Thorns," "Long is Our Winter," or the lovely "Dona Nobis Pacem." After this song we passed a basket with a small token or "tangible" to concretize the theme for the evening. The token served as a souvenir that reminded us during the week of the Advent celebration and its theme.

One of the first "tangibles" that we made was a tiny crèche of straw with a small cross stitched into it to symbolize the whole story from Christmas to Easter. These tangibles were small enough to hang on a Christmas tree. On the third Sunday of Advent, known as Joy or Gaudete (Rejoice!) Sunday, when the "waiting" is almost over, Kathleen McDermott made a cake with cranberry frosting which the children named the "joy cake." The frosting color was similar to the church's rose-colored vestments and altar hangings on this Sunday of rejoicing. The children favored this "tangible," but they also knew that by Joy Sunday our journey toward Christmas was soon to be over.

After a closing verse, we sang the joyous "People Look East." Then we passed the Peace. Seton held the hands of one of the children, saying, "The peace of Christ be with you." The child answered, "And with you." Then, taking his neighbor's hands, the child repeated, "The Peace of Christ be with you." And this new child answered, "And with you." Once all of the children had passed the Peace, it was passed to an adult, until everyone in the room had been blessed. When the Advent celebration was over, each family left quietly, going out in to the chill December night. I remember that once there was a full moon, and the rolling fields, covered in sparkling snow, seemed to adorn our festivities.

On the last Sunday of Advent, when all the candles had been lighted, and every verse of every song had been sung—with at least two singings of "People Look East"—one of us turned on the tiny white lights of our Christmas tree that we had just set up the day before. Then we turned on the lights in the rest of the house, lit a fire in the fireplace, and had a party. After all, it was nearly Christmas. The dining room table was set with every kind of Christmas cake and cooky, the St. Nicholas Advent wreath over the table was lit for the last time, and we feasted. Later Kathleen McDermott sat at the piano in the living room and played all our favorite carols.

Over the years more friends came until we shared Advent with thirty people. Somehow it never lost its magic and intimacy, perhaps because of the darkness and beauty of the Farm. Even in its repetitions, it never lost its sense of belonging to another time, another place. But the season was not over yet. There were still the twelve days of Christmas.

Because we celebrated Advent, Christmas was changed, and our old nemesis was transformed into a friend. Most of it came from simply taking the emphasis off the presents, and finding a way to share the Christmas story. Now the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth on the Farm became
two days we really enjoyed. In Geneva, my family celebrated Christmas on Christmas Eve when we lit our tree with real candles, and, though they only burned a short time, I still remember the tree appearing to be alive in the light of the flickering flame. At the Farm we found a way to observe two different family traditions. On the night of the twenty-fourth we entertained my family, then spent the twenty-fifth with Jack’s family.

We always enjoyed the days from December twenty-sixth to January sixth. We lit our Christmas tree every night, making the spirit or Christmas carry over into the new year. We went for walks in the big field behind the house where the grass was frozen and turned down under our feet. The branches in the trees rattled in the wind, as though the veins where the sap would run were hollow and their emptiness cried out. The sparrows congregated in the syringa bush, finding in its dense branches a perfect shelter against the cold. The dirt road to the Farm turned rock hard, and the salt from the town plows turned it white. During an ice storm the trees became ice palaces. All the grass, rocks, stone walls and steps were under glass. Then, as the temperature warmed, we heard the ice fall round the base of each tree, looking like a collection of the broken stems from wineglasses at Nature’s party.

When the twelfth day of Christmas came, the lovely long season that began with Advent and the St. Eliot/St. Nicholas tea came to an end with a party. In the countries with a Spanish heritage January sixth, called the Feast of the Three Kings, is a great day of rejoicing. In other countries it is called Epiphany, “the appearance of God,” when the Magi saw the Christ child. In my childhood, the bakery windows in Geneva displayed cakes with three tiny stone “kings” hidden inside. I remember the excitement of searching with my teeth, bite after bite, for the hoped-for resistance that showed that I had one of the “good luck” kings in my mouth. Those prized trophies stayed in my jewelry box for years.

Two illuminations in Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry—where my rigid, self-chosen faith had met my Farm world—illustrate different views of the three kings. The first shows a crossroads where the three kings meet. They are shown triumphant, “man as captain of his destiny,” with magnificent crowns and prancing steeds. Banners fly, leopards come as pets, and even a dog journeyed from afar to pay homage to the child born in a stable. But in the next view of the magi they are on bended knee or prostrate before the King of Kings, their crowns in the hands of their attendants, as though their own position in human eyes was nothing by comparison to their real worth in the eyes of the Christ child.

On January sixth the Advent group gathered in the late afternoon, and, this time, our celebration was in the entrance hall of our house. People either stood or sat for the very short service. We began by singing the hymn, "We Three Kings," men and women taking turns, and then all of us together singing the last verse. Seton read the Gospel story from Matthew 2:1–12, telling of the magi coming to Bethlehem. Then Michael Ware recited from memory T. S. Eliot’s The Journey of the Magi, another expression of the struggle of faith as life moves from the ordinary to the extraordinary. The poem begins:

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.
And the camels galled, sore-footed,
refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet....

A while later Jack stood at the front door, with its dark woodwork, and wrote in white chalk across the lintel: 19 C + M + B 80. As he wrote each letter he spoke the traditional names of the kings: Casper (sometimes referred to as Gaspard), Melchior, and Balthasar. Jack then repeated the initials with the new meaning the church had given them: Christus Mansionem Benedicat: Christ Bless this House. He then read the blessing:

Bless this house and each of our homes. Bless all who live in them, and bless all who pass through their doors. Bless this year for health, for peace, and for love. Bless each of our pilgrimages, and may each of us be a blessing to another along the way. Amen.

We sang again "We Three Kings," followed by the Lord's Prayer, and passed the Peace for the last time during this season.

In the old days the feast of the Epiphany was yet another cause for revelry, and we saw no reason to change the traditional theme: "When fools are kings and kings are fools." It was a time of jesters and riddles and prizes to be won. So after a buffet dinner we gathered for the serving of the King's Cake that Kathleen McDermott had baked. She cut this cake, every year running, in a magical way, so that only the children found a "king" in their portions. Then Michael Ware, the consummate actor and clown, donned a special red, white, and green jester's hat—with many points, each decorated with a tiny bell—and picked up a scepter with even more bells, to rule his court.

Before we could win a small prize, Michael put each of us to the test. Some sang, others recited or read a poem, some had to do a balancing act or to push a bean across the floor with their noses, and others had to stand still and say nothing for two minutes while the jester made hilarious faces and took wonderful poses.

The light-hearted joy of the evening bid farewell to the Christmas season. Everyone went home with a copy of the written blessing and a piece of chalk tied in a red ribbon so that they too could bless their front doors and their houses. As in Les Tres Riches Heures, the farm year and the church year were being played out in our lives. However, with the end of the Christmas season we were now braced for a somber time.