

A Christmas birthday

A Christmas story written by
The Rev. Dr. Don Fielding, guest minister
Red River Unitarian Universalist Church
Sunday, December 12, 2010



Once upon a Christmas day a baby was born. She was named Janice. Now, of course, babies are born every day and babies are born every Christmas day, and every day a baby is born is a special day. But when this baby became a child celebrating her birthday did not feel very special to her, and for a very special reason. Even though everyone knows the answer, the question was asked, over and over again, every year, all of those years of hers - kindergarten, first grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade, and fifth grade:

"Whose birth is on Christmas?"
"It's Jesus' birthday!"

No one ever said, "why, it's Janice's birthday!" and Jesus even had special birthday songs and everyone sang them, every year.

*Come and behold him,
Born the king of angels,
O come let us adore him.*

And,

*Joy to the world: the lord is come.
Let earth receive her king;
Let every heart prepare him room...*

"Prepare him room," Janice thought, "how much room does he want? Little lord Jesus, king of angels, blah! He's a thief, a cheat, an unfair, ugly selfish thing. This little lord Jesus, king of angels, steals my birthday every year!"

And so it was, that on Janice's tenth birthday, and her tenth Christmas, after all that had been wrapped had been unwrapped, after all that had been cooked had been tasted, after all the "oh's" and "wonderful's" and "perfect's" and "thank you's" had been made and exchanged, Janice's mother heard a sad, sad sobbing.

Dad and the boys were outside playing football. Grandpa had gone for a walk. It sounded like, it was...Janice. Looking through the branches of the twinkling tree, out the window facing her brother's shouts and her dad's laughter, with her hands over her face...Janice was crying.

Her mother's arms brought a turned-up face, with a long frown, and big round brown eyes...filled with tears streaming down her face. "I hate Jesus!" she sobbed, "This is Jesus' birthday. Everyone loves

Jesus. Everyone gets presents. I want a birthday too. Why did I get born on Christmas? I want a special day, just for me."

Her mother wiped her tears, hugged her, kissed her on the cheek, and said, "What day would you like?"

"What?" said Janice.

"Pick a day, choose a day to celebrate your birthday. Because you happened to be born on Christmas doesn't mean you have to celebrate your birthday on Christmas. I've just always thought you liked it, that you felt special."

"I always felt other people had a special day. I've got a special day alright; I got born on the king of angels' birthday. The king of angels gets praise and glory, and everyone gets presents. Roger and Michael and everybody at school and everybody in the whole world get their own special birthday, but me."

"Pick a day," said mother.

"Any day?"

"Yes."

It wasn't an easy decision. When does one choose to have a birthday?

Janice thought, "January is too cold, and too close to Christmas besides. Michael's birthday is in February. Dad's birthday is in March. Spring would be great, I love spring. But there's Easter - cheez, he ruins the whole year, Jesus gets April too! May would be a good month, the flowers are blooming and school's out, but, ugh, Roger will graduate in May. Summer! A swimming party! But then some of my friends will be gone during the summer. Mom's birthday in September. Oh-h-h-h-h, October! October is probably the most perfectly wonderful month of the year. It's our apple visit time. Oh, but I almost forgot, how could I? That's grandpa's birthday." She thought of those apple visits, they always visited the farm and picked bushels of grandpa's apples, took them home and stored them in the basement to eat all winter and spring. "That was the best trip of the year, the best fun - better than Christmas. Apple picking, cider drinking, popcorn popping, and long walks and talks with grandpa. How could I forget it was grandpa's birthday? Well, October will not do. I love grandpa, but I positively will not share my birthday with anyone. But grandpa must be with me on my birthday. He always has been on Christmas. Oh goodness, he's only been with me because it was Christmas. He's never here at any time but Christmas, not for anyone else's birthday. Well, he will just have to come; it wouldn't be a birthday without grandpa!" Grandpa always led her birthday song, even if he did lead all those other yucky songs about Jesus too. Grandpa told the best stories, hugged the best, and laughed the best of anyone in the whole wide world. He had to come. But October was out. "November. Cheez, Roger's birthday is in November. And there's December. Ugh, ugh, ugh - fifty million 'ugh' for the king of angels. Cheez, it's not easy to pick a birthday! What am I to do? I have to find a new birthday. Grandpa has to come. Grandpa! That's it! I'll ask grandpa, he'll know, he knows everything."

Janice ran out the door. Grandpa was just strolling up the sidewalk with his cane in his hand. Janice burst out, "would you come for my birthday if it wasn't on Jesus' birthday? Would you help me find a new birthday?" Grandpa just smiled a big smile, took her hand, turned around, and the two of them began a new walk - with Janice doing most of the talking.

That evening, when the whole family was all together and only bones remained on the turkey, grandpa tapped his cane on the floor and, smiling his big special smile, said he had a special announcement to make. For eighty-two years, he said, he had had birthdays during a rather insignificant month - except for Halloween, but now he and Janice had decided to exchange birthdays. Janice had

given him her birthday, a Christmas birthday, and he had given her his birthday, an October birthday, a day for her very own.

Well, after Christmas time passed. Days passed. Weeks passed. Months passed. January, February, and March passed. April and Easter passed. And grandpa passed.

The funeral was in grandpa's little Methodist church. Janice cried. It had been strange visiting the farm in April, and sad without grandpa. She walked for hours in grandpa's orchard. She remembered her walks with grandpa, she remembered her last walk with grandpa and how they had swapped birthdays. She had asked him how he could possibly give up his very own, oh so special, October birthday? She could still see his big smile and hear his words, "honey, I've known a lot more days and birthdays and Christmases than you. If you want October, I'll give you October. The days really don't matter, you see, special days are just excuses for giving special love. And take Jesus, your king of angels, and churches and all the 'god is love' talk, why, they're just excuses, they give people permission to do what they want to do anyway - to love. Like a birthday, that's just an excuse to show love to one person. Christmas is an excuse to show love to everyone. Christmas is kind of, well, kind of everyone's birthday. Maybe that's why everyone needs a king of angels, something or someone so special to make all stop and remember to take time to love each other."

Roger graduated in May. Summer passed. Last year's apples were gone. September passed. October, apple month, arrived. Dad owned the farm now. They were going to make their apple visit. One evening Janice and dad were doing the dishes, one of those times Janice really liked, when just the two of them did things together. He gently asked, "Do you still want grandpa's birthday?"

She looked at him. She never realized how very much he looked and talked like grandpa. "I don't know what to do about a birthday, but, no, I can't take his birthday not on this first apple visit without him."

Not another word was said, but they felt they were together. And when the kitchen was done, they hugged.

They had picked apples all morning, had lunch, and were picking again. That is, all but Janice. She had slipped away and was sitting under grandpa's special "sittin' tree," a big twenty-five bushels a year tree. Grandpa had cared for all of the trees, but this one was special. He had planted it, cared for it, pruned it, and picked it himself. And this season, no one had picked an apple from it. Janice sat where he sat so much, and thought and thought and thought. Then abruptly, suddenly, she jumped up, grabbed a big red apple, smiled to herself; she rubbed that big red apple against her shirt, rolled it in her hands, kissed it, and took a big bite.

The remainder of that afternoon Janice didn't join the rest of the family, and when they returned to the farm house they were tired, hungry, and very surprised. There in the middle of the room, like a Christmas tree, was a big branch full of big red apples. A chicken was roasting, bowls of popcorn were around the room, cider was poured, and under the tree were four packages, wrapped in boxes and paper and ribbon grandpa had saved from his last birthday. When the dinner and games and the singing were all over, Janice told them that they could open their present, after she had left for bed. Then she went upstairs.

The packages were as light as air, and when each had been opened, silence filled the room. Each seemed to need to find a place to be alone. After a bit, the boys, their gifts in hand, left for their rooms. Mom and dad snuggled by the fireplace as the flames made apple shadows across the room.

In each box had been a letter. The letters were all dated with grandpa's birthday, and under the date were the words: "our October Christmas." Each letter began "things I want to give that I can't wrap up!" Then each letter was numbered: one, two, three. Number one told why Janice especially loved that person; number two was one thing she was going to do for that person whom they would especially like; and number three was the same for each. She had written, "I want my Christmas birthday back, sharing love is the best birthday gift of all!"