

Telling the Story

By Janet R. Stafford

The family enjoyed supper in the old part of the house. Built of stone, probably in the 1700s, the single room building held a stove with an oven, a large dining table with chairs, a sink of more recent vintage, and cupboards for storage. On the other side of the room was a sitting area: a large fireplace that had once been used for cooking, a braided rag rug, chairs and a sofa, and a piano. Maggie Smith and her friend Emily Johnson thought it was charming and knew it would become the heart of the house.

To establish a tradition in their new home, Maggie took her husband Eli aside after supper. "We have let Christmas slip by," she said. "We didn't go to church nor did we hear the Christmas story at home."

Eli immediately got a sinking sense in the pit of his stomach. He could sense what was coming next.

His wife continued, "I think it might be a good thing if you read it to us."

"I'm not really the type," he hedged. "Nate's got more religion than I do. Let him do it."

"Nate read it last year," was her blunt reply.

Of course, Nate Johnson had read it last year. It hadn't even been his turn to read. But Eli had not been home in December 1862. The guilt of being away from Maggie when she needed him most began to eat at him. That almost immediately was followed by a powerful memory of the horrible field hospital in Virginia. He had awakened to moans and cries of the wounded men who were housed in the church's dark interior. The smells and images from Salem Church still haunted Eli as thoroughly if they were ghosts and he an abandoned house.

Maggie watched as her husband's expression change. "Are you all right?" she whispered. "If it bothers you, you needn't do it."

Eli forced himself away from the powerful one-two punch of his own mind and emotions. "No," he replied, a bit unsteadily. "It's fine. I'll read."

About a half hour later, he was seated in a large wing-back chair of green velvet. Maggie's Bible sat on his lap.

Carson had just finished getting a roaring fire going in the huge stone fireplace, when Eli's son, Bob, and the Johnson's son, Natey, abruptly plopped themselves down on the rug in front of him. The rest of the family perched on the chairs and sofa. It all made Eli feel rather awkward. This was not his setting. Clearly, he was about as far from sentimental Christmas illustrations of a good father at Christmastime as a man could get.

Eli took a breath and called up a smile, which he aimed at the boys. Then he opened the Bible and found the Gospel of Luke. Thank goodness Maggie had marked it for him. But one glance at the wording caused him to decide to try something else. The poetry of the King James was nice, but it just wasn't him.

So, he said to the children, "Why don't I *tell* this story to you?"

The boys cheered. He and Nate had a little routine of telling them a story every night, and they loved it.

But Maggie warned, "Eli..."

He said calmly, "They need to hear it as a story, sweetheart."

Then he turned to the boys and began. "A long, long time ago, during the time of the Romans, the Emperor told everyone in the Empire that they had to be counted. You see, he wanted to know how many people he had under his thumb. So, everyone everywhere went to the city of their birth to register. That included a young man named Joseph, who lived in a faraway place called Nazareth. That meant he had to travel all the way to a town called Bethlehem because that's where he had been ..." Eli signaled now for the boys to answer.

“Born!” Bob and Natey answered.

“Yep! And he also had to take his betrothed with him. Her name was Mary, who was going to have a ...” He paused, waiting again for the boys to respond.

“Baby!” they chirped.

Eli grinned. As he got into the rhythm of the story, the guilt, the fear, and the memories started to back off.

“Now, that baby was liable to come any day, but they needed to go to Bethlehem, so off they went. They registered, and then, what do you know? There was nowhere for them to stay! The only place they could find was a ...”

“Stable!” the boys chorused.

“And that very night Mary had the baby. It was a little boy. And they wrapped him up in swaddling clothes and put him in a ...”

“Manger!”

“And they called the baby...”

“Jesus!”

Eli closed the Bible and carried on from memory. “Well... it just so happens that a bunch of shepherds were out in the fields that night watching their flocks of ...”

“Sheep!”

“And suddenly – ” Eli paused for effect. “An angel appeared to the shepherds! And the glory of the Lord shone everywhere. And it scared the *bejeebers* out of them.”

“Eli...” Maggie warned again, knowing how easily profanity slipped from his mouth.

But he held up a hand. “I know what I’m doing, my love.”

Completely immersed in telling the story, Eli looked the boys in the eyes. “But the angel said, “Don’t be afraid. I’m bringing you some good news! You see, over the hill in Bethlehem, a baby has just been born. He’s the Savior you’ve been waiting for. And here’s how you’ll know it’s him: he’ll be wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a ...” He signaled for them to respond.

“Manger!” they shouted.

“And suddenly all the angels in heaven began to sing and praise God.” And then he warbled, purposely in an off-key falsetto, “Glory to God in the highest! And peace on earth and good will toward men!”

The boys giggled, as did everyone else in the room, since Eli’s performance was both charming and amusing. He had his audience in the palm of his hand, and it felt good.

He asked, “Can you tell me what happened next?”

“They went to find Jesus,” Bob replied.

“Yeah,” Natey responded, “Jesus.”

“And when they found the baby,” Eli went on, “it was just as the angel had said. Little Jesus was wrapped up and lying in a hay-filled manger. After the shepherds saw the baby, they told Mary and Joseph what had brought them there. Then they ran off and excitedly told everyone what had happened. And everyone who heard the story was amazed! But Mary – oh, Mary, the baby’s mother, kept it all in her heart and wondered what it all meant. End of story.”

“What about the Wise Men?” Bob enthused.

“Hm, well, that’s another story, isn’t it? Maybe Uncle Nate and I’ll tell that one to you tonight.”

As the boys gave a happy, “Yay,” shout, Eli realized how good he was feeling. It was as if the dark cloud that had settled over his heart and mind earlier - the one that held all his memories and nightmares about the war and about abandoning his family - all that had lifted from his heart. The simple act of telling two little boys the old story of hope and beauty had done it. The awareness warmed him to his core. Maggie had been right. He needed to tell that story.

When he saw the tears in Maggie's eyes, he was further moved. He took a breath to keep his own emotions from overflowing, "Merry Christmas," he said to everyone. "Now, how about singing some Christmas carols?"

His stepdaughter Lydia immediately rose, went to the piano, and began to play. The others stood and gathered round her.

As the group started singing, Eli struggled to his feet, wishing that he could get rid of his limp and his cane. But he knew it wouldn't happen. Ever. He was stuck with it, just as surely as that bullet fired by that crazy girl had stuck in his leg long enough to do the damage.

Maggie's arrival at his side pushed the thought away. He didn't care about his leg or cane when she put an arm around him. "Well, done, my darling," she whispered. "I love you."

"Thank you for asking me to read," he replied, circling her shoulders with his arm. He gently kissed her on the cheek and added, "Merry Christmas, Maggie."

She smiled. "Merry Christmas, Eli."

December 26, 2020