

Holiday traditions bring about childlike wonder in us all

By **REV. CARLA PRYNE**

Vashon-Maury Island Beachcomber Contributor

DECEMBER 27, 2011 · UPDATED 1:01 PM

Our Island has been alight with wonder these past weeks. In these short days, as power outages remind us that the dark and cold are ever near, the Island has been alive with light and wonder. For weeks, we have been singing and dancing and reading out loud to one another, in plays and ballet performances, concerts and book readings. We outdo one another in gingerbread architectural extravaganzas, and Island quilters and knitters, carvers and potters have been busily turning out creations of such loveliness. Best of all, the cold afternoons and quickly falling nights are met with colored lights everywhere, adorning our homes and fences, trees and tractors. The Island glows in the dark.

For Christians, the Nativity story is a story of light and wonder, of both mystery and simplicity: that into the midst of darkness comes God. God born into the human, into the earthly. Most wondrously, God comes to us in human form not as a wise man or a sage woman, but God gets started as enfleshed in our world as a wee newborn. How can this be? Often we can't get this with our mind alone. It takes a heart of wonder, a quality many of us left behind many years ago. We need reminding.

It is no surprise that this time of year, many of the traditions we enjoy both in and outside faith communities include children, and the playful spirit we associate with childhood: flying reindeer with red noses, talking snowmen, dancing candy canes. In the deep midwinter, we invite the young into our life to help revive that deep wonder within us, which knows exactly what to do with the dark.

Take Christmas pageants and Nutcracker performances as an example. An evening in such company is so wonderful not just because children are beautiful, but in part because they remind us that we have the capacity to cultivate the child within ourselves: curious, eager, open, laughs a lot, easily wounded but easily reassured. And Christmas pageants and Nutcracker performances come at a time of year when we're already vulnerable and hungry for new hope.

Such occasions also remind us of how quickly time passes. Staring at these beautiful children, we know that soon the little ones playing with the nutcracker will soon be the staid adults, telling the children that it's time to settle down. We know that very soon our children will not be dressed up as Mary and Joseph, they will BE Mary and Joseph themselves — not playing a role at all, but great with their own children and all the wonder and terror that comes with the role of parenthood.

What these occasions should ideally never be is sentimental. Cute? Maybe, but not sentimental. Rather, they should be both playful and profound all at once.

The writer Adam Gopnik (*New Yorker Magazine*, July 2008), referring to the work of G.K. Chesterton, made this observation: “Chesterton’s point is that childhood is not a time of illusion, but a time when illusion and fact exist (which they should) at the same level of consciousness. When the story and the world are equally numinous.”

When the story and the world are equally numinous. There it is: When we see the children singing or dancing or playing the roles of shepherds and wise men and women in Christmas pageants, they are not “performing” for us. They are not “performer” at all. Rather, we see them becoming — before our very eyes — enfleshments of the story that we know so well, but often cannot feel deeply, without either grief or sentimentality getting in the way.

The kids just do it, because the story and the world are “equally numinous” — that is, equally real and equally alive with the glory of God. Just as when you were very small, late at night cuddled up in your bed, and your mom or dad read you a story, the story was real, wasn’t it? You could go there.

Which comes, again, to us. This time of year of the winter festivals, we get to go there, we have the chance to be a child without becoming children again. Which is way better, because childhood ends so soon, and for some, way too soon. But we can be “as a child” until our last breath — full of wonder, curiosity, laughter, tears and the ability to be deeply consoled when tears are the right thing.

So, enjoy all the gifts of light and wonder and playfulness that this season brings. Love and celebrate the child that was you once and the child being born in you today. Is it you or Jesus? Hard to tell them apart.

— **Rev. Carla Pryne is the rector of the Church of the Holy Spirit.**