



## The Littlest Christmas Tree

by Marlene Bagnull

“Is Daddy going to come?” I asked as my mother put the finishing touches on my angel costume.

“You know he never goes to church,” she replied.

“But can’t he come just this once to see me in the pageant?” I pleaded.

She sighed. “I doubt it. Try not to get your hopes up. I’m afraid you’ll only be disappointed.”

Despite her warning, I did begin to hope—and pray. But I was terribly disappointed the night of the pageant. Daddy didn’t come. I was silent the whole way home.

“Would you like to put up the Christmas tree tonight?” Mother asked, trying to cheer me up.

“I guess,” I said without much enthusiasm.

Carefully Mother unpacked our little artificial tree and placed it on the buffet in the dining room next to the couch where I slept. Daddy didn’t help us decorate it. Nor did he ask about the pageant.

It was a long time before I fell asleep that night. I kept looking at our little tree, wishing it was a big, live tree and that Daddy believed in Jesus so we could really celebrate Christmas together as a family.

Daddy died when I was ten years old. The following Christmas I talked Mother into getting a real tree. We bought the biggest tree I could find. I spent hours decorating it. Each strand of tinsel had to be draped just right. Mother put our little artificial tree in the window. It looked small and insignificant next to the magnificent balsam pine, and it triggered memories I wanted to forget.

The years passed quickly. I got married and moved away from home. As if to make up for the pain of the past, I went all out trying to make Christmas as special as possible for my children. It became a family tradition to go tramping through the woods in search of the perfect tree. We decorated it together, baked cookies together, and most important of all, went to church together. Our home was happy and filled with a lot of love.

Our children are now grown. Arthritic knees make it impossible for me to go in search of a live tree. Instead, my grandkids help me put up an artificial tree. It’s much larger than the tree from my childhood. It looks almost real. Yet I feel sad when I think of the past and of that littlest Christmas tree. By now it would be a valuable antique, but I don’t know what happened to it. I do know what’s happened to me.

I now know Christmas is not about finding the perfect tree. It is about the One whose birth we celebrate – the One who has healed the painful memories from my childhood and who gives me strength to face the challenges of growing old.

Tears will be shed by many this Christmas as they look back on years past and on present circumstances that do not fit the pretty pictures on Christmas cards. I’ll weep too, as I feel their pain and wonder if Daddy is in heaven. But I’ll also recommit myself to sharing the Good News that God loves us so much He sent His only Son as a helpless infant. He knew Jesus would be despised and rejected - that He would go to a cross to pay the price for our sins. The best gift anyone can receive this Christmas is to accept Him as Lord and Savior.

