

An Advent Story

Today we start the season of Advent that shall take us through to Christmas and the birth of Jesus. Our assembly theme for the next three weeks will be Advent. Recently, I read a story about one family's experience of the period leading up to Christmas. I would like to share their story with you this morning.

"As our friends and next door neighbours know all too well, our daughter has autism. She is 10 years old and severely handicapped by this condition. Her autism is severe. Our family learned to slow down during the Christmas season a number of years ago when she was unable to tolerate anything to do with the celebration. The problem was that she could not cope with all the changes that took place in the weeks leading up to Christmas Day. She could not handle the Christmas decorations and twinkling lights in the shopping centres; or the changes in the supermarket displays; or the setting up of a Christmas tree at our house; or the sudden appearance of presents under the tree; or indeed, the appearance of the tree itself in our home and the fact that we needed to move furniture to set up and decorate the tree.

Year in, year out, our daughter's reaction to these changes would be the same. She would fall on the floor and scream, unable to move, afraid to open her eyes, almost constantly from the start of November until well after Christmas when it was all over. Outside the apartment we carried her throughout those weeks, her head covered with a coat so we could get through the supermarket or walk through the shopping malls uninterrupted. Inside our apartment, we sat with her, huddled in her bedroom, that was carefully ordered exactly in the same way since summer, with none of the Christmas trappings in sight.

Of course, some of the people living in the apartment block across the road set up Christmas lights in their windows and on their balconies to bring joy to the neighbourhood. Our daughter insisted on keeping the blinds to her bedroom window open at night. Throughout the two months leading up to Christmas she would try to stay awake to make sure that all of the Christmas lights across the road were functioning correctly. If one light went out, or if a set of lights came on or turned off outside the proper times, she would scream and cry in panic until it was fixed. One year we needed to speak to the residents of one flat and plead with them to replace a broken light globe.

For many years, Christmas Day at home was a nightmare. Our daughter would scream and cry as each package was moved and then unwrapped. We would try to find her a present she'd enjoy but she'd merely scream and cry in panic

at the intrusion on her carefully ordered world. The gifts would sit ignored until she outgrew them and we gave them to some little girl who could appreciate them.

Our daughter wanted nothing for Christmas. At the shops she would look straight at toys we thought she would like but would not react at all. She asked for nothing. She anticipated nothing. She just screamed and cried at all of it. In our world, Christmas was truly a nightmare.

This year, as had been our custom, we asked our children what they hoped to receive at Christmas. Our 14-year-old son sat down and made out his list. It was at this point that our autistic 10-year old daughter took a piece of paper and wrote down "Play Station". She then said to us "I want PlayStation for Christmas." We just about fell over. She followed up with "at the shopping centre, go to car now".

We drove to the shop she specified. She had never appeared to look at anything in there before today, and we had never thought that the shop had anything she might want. But she led us right to the PlayStation boxes, picked out the item she wanted and took it to the checkout. "Open at Christmas" she said. Back home she watched gleefully as we wrapped the package and then carefully placed it under the tree. So, a PlayStation sits there, wrapped, with her name on it, as she waits for Christmas morning.

This Advent season we are grateful for being able to appreciate the complexity and miracle involved in such small acts as wanting something for Christmas and expressing those wants to another person. We are grateful that our daughter is able to enjoy some of the commercialism of the holiday this year instead of running from it screaming. We are also thankful for the many ways our daughter helps us to stop and appreciate the true meaning of Christmas."

Dr. John Kennard

Based on an article written by Jenee Woodward

<http://www.textweek.com>