

From our Churches

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Seth's Christmas Challenge

"Who wants to be in a stupid Christmas play anyways?" The angry voice came from the bedroom. "The guys are all gaming over at Pedro's house and that's where I'm going too!"

"But you said you'd be in it. And I'm not going to go by myself," came the plaintive whine of another voice – younger but also male.

"Well too bad! If you were smarter than me you'd know that there are more interesting things to do than a Christmas play!" The sounds of a brief skirmish, punctuated by shouts and periodic crashes of lego emerged from the back room.

Those kinds of exchanges were becoming more and more frequent. If it wasn't about something at church, it was something at school. Seth was getting more and more surly and irritating. Was it the nasty weather which kept him indoors more? Was it the influence of Pedro's "group?" Anita didn't want to use the word "gang." The time she had suggested that idea, Seth had flown right off the handle.

"Hey, we're not dealing, we're not using, we're not shooting anyone. Can't a guy have some friends that wear the same colours and not be called a gang-banger?" As his mother, she had, of course, been relieved to hear him say that they weren't doing anything illegal. But they did spend an awful lot of time on those games. Were they violent? Is that why Seth was so much rougher with Andre, his younger brother recently? They used to get along well all the time, but not this year. Not this Christmas season. Or maybe it was his age? Was there anyone in this world who didn't have a rough time as a teenager? Even the Bible had omitted stories of Jesus from that age. She remembered her own tumultuous adolescence. Hating her parents, fighting with her sister. Getting pregnant. Being determined to make it on her own and turning her back on those who said they cared but were nothing but annoying and frustrating. She still missed them sometimes and wondered why things couldn't have been different.

A louder crash and an angrier shout came from the back bedroom interrupting her reverie. Tiredly, she called out, "Seth, Andre...stop the fighting and get back to cleaning up your room." She lay on the couch with a fever and swollen knees. She didn't have much illusion as to how much cleaning was actually happening, but she hoped it might momentarily take their minds off the dispute. Her aching knees reminded her that she didn't want to get

off the couch to intervene. Yet she knew the simmering tensions would erupt again soon if there wasn't an alternative.

Seth's comments about the Christmas play weren't just about teenage angst either. They were about Christmas in general. She knew that like all poor kids her boys had really ambivalent feelings about the "special season." They knew there wouldn't be many gifts. There might not even be a turkey, or chicken, or anything. They had been at the food bank twice in the last two months, which had angered Seth. "Why don't you let me get a job delivering papers or something?" he had asked. He knew why. She was really hoping that he would stay focused on school. But her housecleaning work didn't really bring in enough to make ends meet let alone spend extra on presents.

Christmas wasn't about turkeys and presents she reminded herself. It was about God coming to this world as a baby. It was about peace on earth. She had been going to church for some time and had figured out this part of the message. But often it was the other stuff that was appealing. She had hoped that the connection with the church would provide community and good friendships for the boys. And it had, she reminded herself. There were lots of people who were on a faith journey just like them. Some of them had made better choices earlier on. Others were pretty narrow-minded. Some of them were wonderful but fairly clueless. A typical group of people she thought. The church community tried, though, and she had been able to count on them for some support and friendship. Having a place of worship to attend also gave her some hope. But on days like this...

She realized she hadn't talked to the boys yet. "Guys," she called feebly, just as their voices started to rise again. Had they heard her? Things were quiet so maybe they had. She called again, "Boys, come here a minute." The two of them came out looking a bit guilty and Andre was still wiping the remaining tears from his eyes.

"Sorry we were so loud, Mom," said Seth in a voice that didn't sound all that sorry. It sounded like he was ready for a lecture or a scolding. He was actually quite caring and sensitive even though anger, frustration and cynicism were showing themselves a lot more often these days.

"It sounds as though we need to figure out how everyone is going to get to where they need to go." Seth didn't say anything, but at least he was still listening. "I take it you don't want to go to the play rehearsal this afternoon?"

"That's right. I want to go to Pedro's house. We're working on level nine of Jendra's Cavern today."

"What time are the guys heading over there?" She still had his attention.

"I dunno – around 3 I guess."

"But the practice is at 2. You could take me there first and then go," Andre was practically shouting.

"That's what I said before!" Seth chose to ignore his excitable younger brother.

"Andre does have a point. Maybe if you take him there he could walk home on his own."

Andre's eyes got big. "Really? I know the way! I'm not afraid and I'll come home right away after the practice!" It didn't take much to get Andre thinking about other things. There was almost a smile on Seth's face now. They WERE good boys and they did care about each other. She marveled again at how fortunate she was to have such good children.

"While we're all here, I'd like to talk about some other things." She caught the eye roll in her peripheral vision but chose to ignore it. "As you can see, I'm not feeling well and I haven't been able to work much. The whole "money is tight" scene is as bad as ever. I don't want to make you guys feel bad and I don't want to feel any worse than I do, but I have to be honest. I don't know what's going to come for Christmas. I don't know about gifts, special food, stockings or even a tree. The only thing we can afford to do is go to church. And Seth has made it pretty clear how he feels about that right now."

Seth shuffled a bit uncomfortably. "I'm not exactly angry at you or at church or at Einstein here. It's just everything. I just wish we could be normal and not "low income." I'll take "brain wave" to the church and hang out there till it's done and then make sure he's back here before I go to Ped's house."

"Don't call me "brain wave!" said Andre.

"Whatever," said Seth absently. He seemed to be thinking about something else already as they headed for the church. "Just what does Christmas mean anyways?" Seth was thinking to himself. The whole story they told at church was interesting but hard to believe. Angel choirs? God having a child? Wise men from far away bringing gold and those other things. What was myrrh anyways? "I'd rather have a PS 2 although some gold would be nice." The rest of the story of Jesus was about how he lived and what he taught and how he died and rose again. Also strange in lots of ways. What did it mean for a 13 year-old with a poor sick Mom and a dumb little brother?

He wasn't entirely sure. Other people he knew weren't all that much happier – even with the trees or presents or turkeys. Although a turkey feast would be pretty awesome. He knew that blaming his Mom and Einstein weren't going to help. But what would? He didn't know for sure, but making them miserable would only make him feel worse. He didn't want to feel worse. And he wanted his Mom to feel better. And he wanted Andre to have a present for Christmas.

When he got to church Seth actually read his part as a shepherd even if it was cheesy and lame. He decided to talk to his Mom about the paper route idea again and make that a priority over gaming. If God was love and if that's what Christmas was about, that was where he was going to start.