

# The Magnificent Christmas Tree and the Story of an Infant Child

By Diane Dowsing Robison

*When our infant granddaughter faced a life-threatening surgery during the Christmas season, it was the devotion and love of friends — represented by a tree we had yet to buy — that symbolized the eternal meaning of Christmas.*

To me, the meaning of Christmas — that God walks among us and we are never alone — is magnified by the majesty of the Christmas Tree. Even as a small child, the sight of a tree dressed from head to toe and studded with lights caught my breath. I continue today to be filled with reverence when my eye catches the first glance of a Christmas Tree, standing as a worldwide symbol for the birth that changed the world. And although I love glancing way up to the highest bough, no tree is too small or too large. They all rejoice in the immutable promise of hope, and peace ... and love.

The feeling of reverence was never so true as that bitter-sweet Christmas long-ago when all celebration was put on hold. However, not a moment too soon, it would be our family tree — standing magnificently as the ultimate present — that would enfold me and renew my strength. Like the birth itself, the event surrounding that tree made clear that love given by others is the very gift that fulfills the promise of Christmas.

Almost three weeks into December, our first grandchild, six-month-old Kassandra Lee, was being held by *my* father as he gently handed her to the heart surgeon who would now attempt to save her life.

The memory of the two of them smiling at each other will be with me forever.

The unmistakable knowing look between my father and my granddaughter transcended the reality of what was happening and where we were standing. God was there. But then, there was an indisputable presence that had permeated our lives from the start of this journey, guiding us each step of the way to that operating room door. We all felt it.

The previous June — at Kassie’s tender age of six weeks — our daughter, Shawn Anne, had brought her firstborn to California for Kassie’s first visit. In the meantime, our son-in-law, Jim, was home in DC, just wrapping up his Army career. Awaiting Shawn and Kassie’s return to DC, this young family would finish packing up their small apartment and drive to Montana. With a natural talent for mechanics, Jim was immediately accepted to a school specializing in extremely large engines — airplane size.

Two days before Shawn and Kassie were to fly back to DC, I had scheduled an appointment with our family doctor. Infant Kassie was “wheezing” lightly but continuously when she breathed ... and much more so when she slept.

Upon examination, our doctor immediately sent Kassie to a pediatric cardiologist. Within hours, Kassie was in the hospital as they removed 11 fluid ounces from her tiny lungs. She had a hole in her heart between the two chambers.

Her tiny heart tried hard to circulate her blood, but some was slushing back through the hole, and her lungs were filling with fluid. With the lungs working too hard, her wheezing was dangerously labored. The doctors said that she would never have survived the cross-country road trip from DC to Montana.

As soon as Kassie had gained enough weight and strength, she was going to need a major heart operation to close the hole — a delicate procedure on an infant so young. As preparation for the next six months, she would be on mandatory life-saving medication several times throughout the day and night.

Within the first 24 hours of Kassie's diagnosis, plans were put in action to have Jim join us. Packing all their personal belongings in his truck — and with their black cat, Zack tucked-in next to him — Jim drove for two straight days to join us. This young family was now starting a life entirely unexpected from what they had envisioned.

Everyone in our circle of family, friends, and neighbors rallied around, making sure Kassie was continually held and promptly given her much-needed medicine. This included Kassie's new uncle, Ryan, my 16-year-old son, and his

closest friends. Never knowing who was going to be holding her, everyone was trained on how to give Kassie her medicine.

Christmas season was in full swing when Kassie was scheduled for her six-hour surgery in mid-December. I was going on a “low flow” of continual adrenaline, and a few weeks earlier had somewhat mechanically decorated our home while Bill put up the lights out front. We just couldn’t bring ourselves to buy and decorate the family tree. With our priority in another direction, the day-long tree tradition was too much energy; mentally and physically.

On the day of her operation, Shawn and Jim were exhausted, having spent two sleepless nights at the hospital during Kassie’s prep. That morning, my Daddy and his wonderful wife, Virginia, joined us at the hospital.

Daddy was holding Kassie and whispering in her ear as we all started walking to the surgical wing. I watched with awe and an incredible sense of peace as my father carried my granddaughter down to the surgical floor and handed her over to the doctor at the operating room door. Although well-medicated at that moment, I saw little Kassie place her small hand on Daddy’s cheek, look deeply into his eyes and return his smile as if to say: “Thanks G-Pa, I’m in good hands now.” I immediately felt my mother’s strong presence — she had not missed the occasion.

The surgery took longer than expected, and the hours moved painfully slow, but Kassie was triumphant. We were blessed and knew it. But with days of hospital recovery ahead for my tiny grandchild, I was like a sentinel guard, still alert and at attention.

A few hours after the operation, Bill needed to be at work for the evening news, so I was alone as I walked up the front path of our home long after dark. While the yard's colorful lights were blazing, I sensed something was different as I started to open our front door.

Stretched out on the red couch that surrounded the fireplace was my incredible son ... with only the fire lit and lights twinkling. The room was aglow with Christmas.

Before I could catch my breath, Ryan spoke as he raised his hand to point: "Gee Mama ... I think we need to put a tree right over there." Standing majestically in our living room was an incredibly large tree, draped with years of family ornaments, on wide, thick branches filled with lights.

I burst out in uncontrollable tears — deep sobs. Ryan immediately sat up straight, saying, "No, no, *please* don't be upset, Mama ... everyone did this because they wanted to make you happy!" The frightened expression on my son's face helped bring some minor control to my avalanche of emotion. It only a few minutes to convince him that I *was* happy. Deliriously happy.

Knowing how our family relished large trees for our beloved Christmas season, early that morning, three friends — Pam, Barbara, and Margaret — dragged into our home the biggest tree they could find. They proceeded to decorate this massive 12-foot tree with their teenage kids' help as they started arriving home from school. Word quickly got out, and the group was soon joined by the older college-age siblings, closely followed by each father carrying a bounty of refreshments.

The woman had forced Ryan to show them his mother's large box of family ornaments and tree decorations. Concerned that his mother might disapprove, Ryan valiantly tried to guard the box. Knowing him since kindergarten, the ladies easily overpower this six-foot athletic teenager — thus putting this major neighborhood event into action.

It was just getting dark when the families departed, quite pleased with their surprise. They left several bottles of empty wine bottles displayed under the tree — with two large sheets of green construction paper attached by wire and red ribbons. Everyone that day, "*the young, the old, the tall and the small,*" had signed the construction paper with various colors of ink, creating their own unique message. I cherish it still today.

Although now spread far and wide across the country, we're all still close and bound by love. To this day, each family continues to hold close their

contribution to the beginning of Kassie's life. She is now a most incredible woman, with a smile that still lights up my heart. Having graduated in marine biology and training as a vet tech for exotic animals, she continues to be my Christmas gift.

By creating that magnificent Christmas Tree the day of Cassandra's life-saving surgery, every one of our friends gave the greatest gift this family could receive: Unending, limitless love.

Once again, the meaning of Christmas is symbolized by a tree — and demonstrated through the journey of an infant child.

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