

FAITH & VALUES

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Rob Brill 454-5423, rbrill@timesunion.com

VOICES OF FAITH

A time to cherish old times

By Tim O'Toole

Advent is a time of preparation. For some it started the day after Thanksgiving, with hectic shopping. For others it started the Sunday after Thanksgiving, with Advent candles burning bright and choirs singing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel."

For children there is excitement and anticipation, of toys to come and time off from school, of songs from around the world and participation in Nativity pageants.

Parents' expectations include puzzling over high-tech toys, falling back on the tried and true like Legos and Thomas the Tank Engine.

While you deal with the mundane details of the season, I suggest you reflect on Christmases of long ago, when tinsel had metal and some assembly was required; when oranges were

a seasonal treat at the bottom of a stocking, along with Hershey's Kisses and, each year, a new harmonica; setting up the O-gauge train under the tree, then laughing when the family dog stuck its wet nose on the third rail.

These memories remind me of simpler times. Families sang carols, drank eggnog, and tuned in holiday music on the radio.

Whatever your childhood memories, they had a formative effect on who you are today. Cherish them.

"O Holy Night" competed with "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer." We watched "Amahl and the Night Visitors" on a black-and-white TV.

While visions of sugar plums danced in children's heads, adults dreamed of Isaiah's prophecy, when the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the Prince of Peace shall put an end to war and rumors of war. Some things never change.

Not all families, back then or now, have shared equally in the riches and rituals.

Whatever your childhood memories, cherish them. There will be the mandatory office party with enforced levity; and family gatherings with suspect casseroles and dangerous deserts.

But don't lose sight of the fact that once upon a time, God looked favorably upon a young woman in Israel, shared with her and us the one perfect gift — that cannot be exchanged on Boxing Day — and reminded us that we are treasured parts of the Creation. We are loved, now and forever.

There are four Sundays of Advent, a time of reflection, anticipation and hope for a better future for all of us.

Come Christmas Eve, candles will fill church, chapel and cathedral with flickering light and paraffin fumes. Bells will ring, and choirs sing of joy and peace. Sanctuaries will be filled to the brim, and people will return home with bells and smells lingering in their ears and clothing.

Old memories will be rekindled and new memories will take shape. For unto us, a child is born.

► *Tim O'Toole of Albany sings in the choir at First Presbyterian Church.*