

## **Trains, Christmas and Home**

As we enter the Christmas season, precious memories come to mind. One of my earliest recollections of Christmas came when we lived at Gateway Boulevard in the Washington D.C. area. It was as traditional as you would imagine. We lived in an older house, with wooden floors and a grate on the floor where the heat would come up and make you feel warm and cozy on a winter morning. The Christmas tree went to the ceiling and it was highly decorated. Under the tree were so many presents that it almost looked like the tree was growing out from them. But the most outstanding thing under that tree was the train set!

Why were trains so important to American youth born in the fifties? The train station in Washington was much like any other grand central station in every major city in the United States. It was the place where my siblings and I would hold Mother's hand and look up into the never ending ceiling that would have challenged (in my young mind) the Sistine Chapel for beauty. As we ventured through the huge expanse we approached the ticket office. You could see a well-dressed man collecting money and giving out tickets for a long ride across the country. We would get a little something to eat and wait in our high-backed cherry wood seats for our train. Over the public address system we would hear the echoing voice tell us the train and number that would take us to our destination, followed with a musical, "All aboard!" Our stomachs would flip-flop as we scurried to our train. The step was so high that I had to be lifted up. Then the train ride was something to remember -- the sounds, the feel of it all, the clippity-clop and gentle rocking as we traveled down the tracks and the blur that would begin to focus as we slowed down to a soft stop a hiss and rising steam past our window. There was a mystique and wonderful feeling to it all. And for those who were reared in the generations since, it is long gone in what was very much a part of our American culture.

So as I reminisce about the train being set up on the floor just in front of the Christmas tree, I see it in my youthful memory -- the smoke rising up out of the engine -- the careful attention we had to give to make sure the balance was maintained so the cars would not fall off the tracks -- and the play tunnels it would travel through. Then I recall getting on my knees and looking through the windows into the little train, imagining I was on it, taking a long cross-country trip.

Think of how often trains register such a longing, fascinating and nostalgic hold on us. One the first books American kids learn to read is "The Little Engine That Could." One of my children's favorite books was "The Polar Express" and now it has become a tradition for our grandkids when they come over to watch the movie based on that book. A couple of Christmases ago, Miles sat on my lap and we watched it through twice in one sitting!

I have to tell you, we actually had a reprise of the first train Christmas by having another one just before I entered my teen years. It was great also! Why do we treasure trains and travel so much, especially around this time of the year? May I suggest three reasons?

### **1. Trains take us to different places.**

There is wanderlust inside most of us. One of the great benefits of living in America is freedom. And the freedom of travel is fantastic. We are not limited to where and when we may go somewhere. If a city boy wants to see how cowboys live, all he has to do is get on a train headed west and before you know it, he can see cowboys herding some cattle. If a country boy wanted to, he could take a train that would take him into the very heart of Chicago. No matter how poor you are, most everybody can afford a train trip every now and then. Sometimes just getting out of our environment is a reminder that with God's help we can become anything

God wants you to become. There is something about a long train ride that is conducive to dreaming.

The last real train ride my wife and I experienced was sometime around 1975 when we left the Chicago area and rode to Alton, Illinois, just outside St. Louis. I was determined that on that trip I was going to read for the first time the classic, "In His Steps" by Charles Sheldon. With the sounds of the train in the background and glimpses of the countryside outside, I read and finished this book that revolutionized my way of thinking. So when I think of living a life as Jesus would live, following in His steps, I often go back to the train where I first dreamed this wonderful dream. Trains hold a special place in my memory because it isn't just about the destination -- it is the journey of your dreams that make the trip so special. "*For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps*" (I Peter 2:21).

## **2. Trains bring families together.**

When we were kids the train trip was almost always to my see my grandmothers, one in Arkansas and the other in Texas. Of course, that always included the fun visits with uncles, aunts and myriad of cousins. So trains were an early friend, in that they took me to see family. Maybe that is one reason they became such a favorite toy. Being re-united with family is so meaningful. I love the story of the young man who had been in prison for many years and wanted to know if Mom and Dad still wanted him to come home. He said, if you want me, as the train slows to a stop on that last mile, just put a white handkerchief in the tree in our back yard; I'll see it from the train and know you want me to come home. If not, leave it off and I'll just stay on the train. You know the story: when the train began to slow and he looked out the window, he blinked back the tears as he saw small handkerchiefs tied to every tree branch and white bed sheets waving a welcome in the breeze. Ah yes, trains brought families together. Many of the young GIs from World Wars I and II came home on a train. How can we not have great memories when we think of families being rejoined? God's Word reminds us, "*God setteth the solitary in families...*" (Psalm 68:6).

## **3. Trains remind us that sooner or later we must say good-bye.**

Growing older makes us face reality. We must all say good-bye. In my study of history, I often return to one of my favorite characters, Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln has been good for me. He makes me want to be a better person and attain worthy goals. So every now and then I need to read about him. One of the most fascinating journeys a train ever made was the funeral procession of Lincoln. This train took his hearse all over the country so that when it was all said and done a great many American said good-bye to their fallen President.

One of the most touching stories in our congregation is the love story of Lt. Col. James Cain and his dear wife, Beverly. She always wanted to take a long train ride with her husband. So just before Beverly lost her ability to travel, they took a train ride from Houston to El Paso and back. A dream of a lifetime -- fulfilled. After Beverly passed, I was having a conversation with the Colonel and he was sharing with me the tender moments of taking the ride and just holding one another as they ride along. It was their way of saying good-bye. And how appropriate that it should be a way of saying good-bye for a couple of kids born in the fifties and reared in the heart of our country. Here's the good part of saying good-bye on a train: a train can take you far away, but a train, as we said earlier, has the ability to take you home. I am beginning to get excited about seeing loved ones who have taken that train ride to glory.

We know that soon, we too will hear an “All aboard!” and that train will take us home. Home to Jesus, to parents, to children and friends. God promises that, “...*man goeth to his long home...*” (Ecclesiastes 12:5).

-Pastor Pope-