

The Magical Carriage Ride

My son, Paul, now nearly 19, doesn't sing anymore. In fact he hasn't sung since age 13 when he auditioned for his middle school choir and wasn't accepted by the director. Before his voice changed he was called "the boy who sings out!" by an admiring little girl at the church we attended in Dallas, Texas before moving to Pennsylvania when Paul was 11. When he was seven, the Ladies Guild at that church asked him to sing at their annual Christmas supper. Paul sang three carols a cappella, from memory, in his clear, boy soprano voice. The ladies were very touched and delighted!

Paul's favorite carol was "Adeste Fidelis" ("O Come All Ye Faithful"). He memorized it when he was five, the year of the magical carriage ride. That was the year we decided to take a leisurely horse-drawn carriage ride to see the magnificent Christmas lights and decorations along the mansion-lined streets of Highland Park. Dusk had just fallen and the chilly night air was asserting itself. We huddled with other sightseers near the entrance of a popular restaurant awaiting the arrival of the carriages. Horse-drawn carriages began lining up along the curb in front of the restaurant. The thin crust of snow on the ground crunched as the horses stamped their feet and snorted, eager to get on with the show. We stood in line with the other people bundled up in heavy coats, caps, and gloves waiting our turn. The carriages pulled in front of the restaurant one at a time, people boarded, and the horses trotted off into the night. When our turn came, my wife climbed into the carriage and I boosted Paul and his little sister up to her. Then I joined my family in the carriage. We all snuggled under the heavy blanket that the driver had tucked around us.

The driver was a friendly, ruddy-complexioned, 30-something woman wearing a Dickensian top hat, long scarf, and long black coat. She flicked the reins to get Bob, the horse, started on the tour. Then she turned on the boom box under the driver's seat to play Christmas carols for us as we rolled along. Progress was slow as she maneuvered our carriage around the other carriages and cars that had stopped in the middle of the street allowing their passengers to gape at the breathtaking lights. Thousands upon thousands of lights coated the branches of stately old trees. The cold, crystal-clear night air made the lights sparkle like a fireworks display frozen in time. The mansions were adorned with lights,

wreaths, garlands, and ornaments. Manger scenes and animated displays of Santa, reindeer, and snowmen were in the front yards.

About 30 minutes into the tour, the boom box went dead and the carols stopped playing in our carriage. The driver turned to us and said, "That thing has been giving me problems. I don't know if it's broken or the batteries are dead. I'm so sorry!" We could hear Christmas music coming from boom boxes in the other carriages around us. Suddenly, Paul's pure, clear voice rang out through the cold night air,

**"Adeste fidelis
Laeti triumphantes
Venite, venite in Bethlehem
Natum videte regem angelorum
Venite adoremus
Venite adoremus
Venite adoremus Dominum."**

He sang it over and over again as we rolled slowly down the streets. The carriages around us shut off their boom boxes and stopped to listen. Then some of the people in the other carriages began to sing along. Windows and doors opened and people emerged from some of the mansions to listen. "Adeste Fidelis" cut through the winter air to add another layer of brilliance to the sparkling Christmas lights.

Paul continued to sing the carol until we were back at the restaurant. The driver reined Bob to a halt, parked the carriage, and jumped down to help us dismount. I could see tear tracks on her rosy cheeks as she looked up to us. As we turned to leave she said, "I've been doing this Christmas lights tour for the past three years, but this was the best night I can remember. God bless you!"

I hope that one day Paul will sing again. But for now, I look back on that magical carriage ride as a precious Christmas gift never to be repeated.