



December 6, 2007

Dear Friends,

Thinking about you as December unfolds, hoping the blessings of the season make the long lines at the malls and extra calories easier to bear!

December is always a nostalgic time for me. Being raised in a Jewish family, the joy my playmates experienced at holiday time was not part of our normal December routine. Potato pancakes and spinning a plastic dreidel simply did not come close to eating the roof of a gingerbread house or having a real live pine tree perfume up your living room. I loved lighting the menorah candles and listening to my mother say the Chanukah prayers, but I longed to sing Silent Night, sing it loud and sing it proud.

Eventually, I had a breakaway moment in this regard during the December of my tenth year. Mrs. White, my music teacher, announced that my class was invited to sing Christmas Carols at the Winterhalter Elementary Winterfest. Rumor had it that if a Jewish child said (or sung) the words "Jesus Christ" or any part or adaptation thereof, something very, very bad would happen to them. I thought this was pretty ridiculous. I knew from looking at his eyes in the picture over my friend Brenda's bed that Jesus was a perfectly wonderful fellow who would never dream of hurting anyone, least of all a little child. Nevertheless, when Mrs. White gathered her sheet music and walked to the piano to begin our rehearsal, a flurry of notes were passed from desk to desk that described, in no uncertain terms, the perils of betrayal for Jewish children -- you know who you are! -- and urged us, rather, to hum the verboten lyrics of each song in time with the music.

Mrs. W. poised her fingers above the piano keys, prevailed upon us to use our best vocal instruments, nodded her head in time with the downbeat, and began playing the opening bars of "O Come All Ye Faithful." Everyone knew what was coming. Children squirmed anxiously in their desks; some gagged on their saliva. One girl screwed her eyes up into their sockets, crossed every single one of her fingers, crossed her arms and her legs, then put her head down on her desk and started to cry. The tension in the room was really thick.

At the moment in question, when other children pursed their lips and intoned the telltale hum, I did something I had never done before: I singled myself out as an independent thinker and sang "Chri-ist the Lord" as loudly as I could -- using my best vocal instrument.

Everyone gasped, even the Christian children, most of whom sang "Hmm-umm the Lord" just to be on the safe side. Nothing, of course, happened to me except that several mothers called my house later that afternoon to make sure my mother was well aware of the risk I had subjected their sons and daughters to. But by this time, it was too late. I -- a Jewish girl -- had felt Jesus smile on me. I had experienced the true joy of Christmas. I was hooked. Looking back, that experience with trusting my inner voice has made all the difference in my life.