

Together

(Christmas Eve story)

Third-grader Martha burst into tears. “Justin!” her mother said. Martha could not remember her mother using the “Mom Voice”, full of threat and warning, on her dad before. From the back seat she could see his neck muscles tense. “It was a joke,” he said.

Martha sobbed, “It's not funny!”

“Really Justin, 'We'll have to do Christmas on a Zoom meeting'? To your child?”

Her father said nothing more until they got to her friend Sally's house. But when her father tapped on the horn only Mrs. Elston came out into the driveway. She wore a housecoat, fluffy slippers, a mask and a Cincinnati Reds baseball cap. Martha's mother rolled down her window. Standing a few steps away, Mrs. Elston said, “I am SO sorry but Sally can't come out. We've just learned that her dance teacher tested positive. **After** they'd rehearsed for an hour in the studio two nights before. Sally has to stay isolated until Friday.”

The tears welled up in Martha's eyes again. Her father said, “That's a real shame. We'll pray for Sally.”

“And for you, and the dance teacher,” her mother added. She picked up the plate of cookies they'd brought. “I hope she can still taste these! They're those jelly

center ones she loves!”

“She feels perfectly fine,” Mrs. Elston said. “But we just have to wait. Yet another nice feature of 2020. We have no control over anything.”

Martha's dad restarted the engine. Her mother said, “Please tell Sally we're sorry and we're praying.” Mrs. Elston nodded and—just as her father put the vehicle into gear Martha yelled, “I miss her!” The adults swallowed hard. They started home. Along the way they passed their church building. Though it was Christmas Eve, there were no vehicles in the parking lot and no lights to be seen. “That's just wrong,” Martha's father said.

At the house they hung up their coats in the closet and walked to the dining room table, the one they used only on special occasions. Martha's mother had already prepared their usual Christmas Eve dinner: fish, potatoes and cranberry relish, followed by crisp licorice cookies covered in powdered sugar, all traditional dishes from Norway, where her family had come from a hundred years before. They said grace and ate. Nobody said much more than, “Please pass the butter.”

After supper they walked to the den, where they had decorated their Christmas tree. Martha's father plugged in the lights. They scrunched together on the couch. Her mother got out her computer tablet and dialed her parents. Their smiling faces appeared on the screen. After they said hello Martha started talking. “It's not **fair**. We don't go to school. I don't get to see my friends. Sally might get sick and she didn't

even come out to the car. Dad tells me maybe Christmas won't be as big this year and then he tells stupid Dad jokes. Why does this have to happen?!?"

The adults stayed silent for a few long seconds. Then Martha's grandma said, "Let me tell you about my favorite Christmas ever. Martha, you don't remember my father. But when I was your age he worked at a factory. One spring day he came home and told us they were going to close the factory. Most of the people in our town worked there. But in less than a month none of them would have a job. And lots of other people lost their jobs, too. Because the stores and the banks and all the other businesses depended on the money paid to all those factory workers." She stopped and wiped her glasses.

Martha's grandpa put his arm around her shoulders. After a moment she continued. "My parents did what they could. We planted a huge garden. We ate a lot of green beans and tomatoes that summer! My mother took the bus to another town and worked as a maid for a rich family. My dad fixed trucks and mowed grass at the country club and, oh, he kind of did everything. When school started in September I was shocked at how many of my friends weren't there. They'd moved away. I would sit at my desk and think of them and get sad. At Thanksgiving we had turkey but not much else—and then we ate leftover turkey for so long I got sick of it. With Christmas coming my dad pulled my brothers and me together and said, 'Kids, we can't afford to buy you more than one present each. We'll open them on Christmas like any other year. And then we're going to go on a mystery trip.'

“‘A mystery trip?’ we all asked at once.”

“‘A mystery trip,’ he said—and then would say no more.

“For my one present I got a pretty yellow dress. My brothers each got a pair of pants. It only took about five minutes for all of us to open our presents—including mom and dad. My oldest brother had somehow gotten them a transistor radio. I don't think I want to know how. But it's the very same radio I have in my kitchen to this day. Do you know it?”

Martha did not realize she nodded. But her grandma saw it on the screen. She continued, “Then it was time for the mystery trip. We put on our coats and mittens and hats and walked to church. My dad carried something wrapped in a blanket. When we got close we saw other people walking. Closer still and we saw they were just about everybody from our church who hadn't left town, and all of them carrying something, too. The adults seemed to know what was going on, but none of us children did. We walked downstairs to the fellowship hall. And the wraps came off the bundles. They were dishes of food. Beans and franks, lime jello with pineapple chunks, mashed potatoes, pies, corn on the cob, cookies, baked apples. It was more food than we had seen since the factory closed.

I'll never forget the sound of the quiet sniffing I could hear when the minister said a prayer. Then we grabbed our plates and walked down the long table, filling them with all that good food. When we sat down, as hungry as the aromas made me,

I took a few moments to look around the room. I knew the name of every person in it. I had known them all my life. I loved them. They loved me. And for a few minutes we all laughed and talked and ate like it was just another year. Because as long as we were together, it **was**.”

Martha's grandma did not miss seeing her nod once again. “Martha,” she said, “as long as we're together—even if it's only on a screen—that's a good Christmas.”

Well, tonight we are together only through this screen. But we **are** together. That makes this a good Christmas. To a great extent Christmas is about being together. God together with us. Us together with each other. May God grant you and your household a sure and certain knowledge that we **are** together, with our church and with Jesus, in whose name we have come together. Amen!