One Christmas, several years ago when I was serving another children’s home, one of those true Christmas miracles occurred.

It was the week before the annual Christmas pageant and several dozen youngsters and staff where gathered for rehearsal in the campus church sanctuary. You know the scene well.

Angels in recycled white choir robes were fidgeting with their gold tinsel halos. Miniature shepherds were trying to cinch up their too-long bathrobes with pieces of rope. Bored wise men shook their empty gold painted boxes adorned with rhinestones. Frenzied staff tried to hustle children into their places. In the middle of it all, a bewildered Mary and Joseph.

The teenager chosen to read the scripture was selected because her name was Mary.

From appearances Mary was probably not the young lady you would have picked to read scripture for the holiest night of the year. Her jet black dyed hair was in a severe style, and her black nail polish and slouching manner said defiant teenager, not enthusiastic liturgist.

She had been at the children’s home just a few weeks and was clearly letting everyone know she was not happy to be there. It came her turn to read, and as other teenagers giggled, she took her place at the lofty church pulpit and began reading with indifference.

“And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manager…”

Before she could get to the next verse in that beloved text of Luke, Mary stopped and looked out at us and said with absolute wonder,

“Hey, this is the Christmas story isn’t it?”

Stunned at first, then with aching realization, I knew this was the first time she had heard, much less read, the biblical account of Christ’s birth. Mary read on, now with the joy of a child hearing a marvelous story for the first time...“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace…”

I think of Mary every Christmas. I’m at Thornwell now, watching similar Christmas pageant rehearsals each year. And I think of where Mary might be. She would be a young woman now. Perhaps with a child of her own. And I wonder, does she read the Christmas story to her own child? I like to think she does.

As I watch our Thornwell children portray angels, shepherds and wise men, I know that in this place they are hearing and singing about God’s great gift for them, the gift of Jesus Christ. It is a story that changes lives, heals broken hearts and nurtures these beloved children. I’ve seen it happen time and time again.

Thank you for being a part of the Thornwell story this Christmas. Your gifts make it possible for us to give children a loving home, warm beds, nutritious meals and a chance to reclaim their childhood.

You are the voice of the angels singing “Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all the people…”

Blessings to you and yours this holiday season!

President, Thornwell Home for Children