

Dark Days, Bright Lights

By Beth Beall



At Christmas time we sing "Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la." But sometimes we, or people we know, don't feel so happy during the Christmas season. Let's hear the story of a child who has many different feelings this December. Then let's explore how we might pay better attention to our own feelings and the feelings of others as the winter days grow dark and the Christmas lights turn on.

For

Just for Kids

Season

Winter

Needed

Story on page three below; candle and lighter, *or* empty jar or can with labels removed (optional), tape, paper and pencil, *or* paper and crayons, colored pencils or oil pastels



Activity Plan

1. Prayer helps us to quiet down and listen for to God. You may want to begin by saying the following prayer silently or aloud. Or, simply say some words that come from your heart.

God of love, sometimes life is amazing, and sometimes it is very hard. Thank you for being with us on the good days and the bad days. Thank you for sending Jesus to be the light who shines in the darkness. Amen.

2. Read the story entitled, "My December Feelings: A Story by Kai" on page 3. You might read it on your own, or you might prefer to read it with someone else.
3. After you read the story, think about one or more of these questions on your own or with a parent or friend:
 - I wonder if Kai reminds you of anyone you know?
 - Kai used words like angry, glad, excited, sad and rotten to describe feelings. After reading the story, can you think of any other feelings Kai might have that didn't get mentioned?
 - If you could give one gift to Kai this Christmas, I wonder what you would give?
4. Choose an activity to help you pay attention to your own feelings or the feelings of others.
 - **Winter Solstice Prayer.** The winter solstice is on December 21 for those of us who live in the northern hemisphere. It is called the winter solstice because it is the shortest day of the year—the day with fewer hours of sunlight than any other day. Some churches have a service called "Blue Christmas" on or around the winter solstice. It is for people who are



feeling sad or lonely or in pain. ("Blue" is another word to use when you are feeling sad or lonely or in pain.)

On December 21, ask your family to help think of people who may be feeling "blue." Perhaps you know someone who has lost a job? Or whose family member has died? Or whose pet died. Or perhaps, like Kai, you know someone whose mom or dad or older sibling is away in the military. If it's OK with your parents, choose a time on December 21 to turn the lights down and light a candle. Say a prayer from your own heart, or say this prayer as a family:

Loving God, you sent Jesus to be a light in the darkness. Today we remember your children who are in pain. (You may want to name the people out loud here.) We want to share your love with those who are hurting. Help us to be bright lights in their darkness. Please show us how. Amen.

- **Create a jar of feelings.** Kai spoke of having a swirl of feelings inside, like the jar with the swirls of peanut butter and jelly.
 - Find an empty jar or can at home. Make a label for it, such as "My Jar of Feelings." Cut up a piece of paper into smaller strips. Write down as many feelings as you can think of, one feeling per slip of paper. They don't have to be what you are feeling right now. You might ask family members to contribute ideas too. Drop the pile of feelings into the jar or can. If you have a lid for the jar, have fun shaking it up and down!
 - Put the "Jar of Feelings" in a place where you will see it often, such as near your bed or on the table where you eat. At mealtime or at the end of the day, either on your own or with your family, pull out one strip of paper and ask yourself, "When today did I have this feeling?" If you didn't have that feeling at all, put the paper back inside and draw out another one. Keep pulling out strips of paper until you find one that describes a feeling you had that day.

- **Draw a starry night.** The painting above is called "Starry Night." It was painted in the year 1889 by Vincent Van Gogh (pronounced "van-GO"). When the artist painted it, he was staying in a hospital. He was in the hospital because he had developed a nervous condition that made it very hard for him to cope with life.

The view in the painting shows us what Van Gogh saw through his hospital window during the night. He couldn't paint at night, though, and so he painted from memory during the day. The image in the front left is a large tree. Perhaps you can also see the church and houses tucked among the hills? I wonder how Vincent felt at night when he looked at the bright stars in the dark sky?

If you'd like, get a piece of paper and some crayons, colored pencils or oil pastels, and create your own drawing entitled "Starry Night." As you draw, you might think of someone you know who is feeling sad or lonely during the Christmas season. Perhaps you'd like to give your drawing to that person.

“My December Feelings” A Story by Kai

Hello. My name is Kai, and I am nine years old. I have a mom, a dad, a little brother named Pete, and a guinea pig named Mac. Most of the time I think my family is pretty normal. We laugh, we fight, we mess around, we hug, and our parents tell us not to whine so much. But these days, everything seems weird because my mom isn't home with us. She's in the Army. She's been in Afghanistan for the past seven months. Christmas is only two weeks away, but Mom won't come home until March.

My family goes to a church where all the kids get to take part in a Christmas pageant. Since this month is December, we use our Sunday School time to learn Christmas carols, and we practice acting out the story of Jesus' birth. I have three favorite Christmas carols. In order, they are: 1) Angels We Have Heard On High, 2) Joy to the World, and 3) Silent Night. I like "Angels We Have Heard on High" the best because when everyone else sings, "In excelsis deo," I smile and sing "eggshells" instead of "excelsis."

But this year nothing feels the same. I feel sad when I sing the carols during our rehearsals, because Mom used to be the one to practice the carols with us. She'd make funny faces, like she was a holy angel singing the songs, and Pete and I loved it. Grandma and Grandpa will come to the Christmas pageant with Dad this year, but it just won't be the same without Mom.

My dad is trying really hard at home. He put up the tree and even tried to bake Christmas cookies. He doesn't know all the stories about the ornaments like Mom does, and his cookies got a little burned. Pete and I pretended they were good. He said that the cookies tasted pretty bad and that we didn't have to pretend. Then he took us out for ice cream that night instead. That was fun, because we don't usually go out for ice cream in December!

We try to Skype with my mom every week, but sometimes her internet connection doesn't work, and that makes all of us feel rotten. I know things are rough for Mom, too. I know she misses us a lot. And I know she misses our home. She has a chair in the living room that she calls her "teacup chair," because at night she likes to sit there with a book and a cup of tea. Every time we get a letter from Mom, we put it on her teacup chair. I can't wait to see her again, and to show her that her chair has been waiting for her. When my friends come over though, they ask about the chair and the letters on it. Then I have to explain it all over again, and sometimes I just want my friends to leave because they don't have to explain things like this.

I told Dad that I feel like one of those jars from the grocery store that has peanut butter and jelly swirled together in it. I feel like I'm filled with swirls of sad and happy, angry and excited. Dad said he feels that way, too. He brought home a jar of that peanut butter and jelly the other day. It sure looks funny. I asked Pete where we should put it, and he said, "Under the Christmas tree." So that's where it is.

I hope all of my friends have a Merry Christmas. I know that Jesus is with my family, and that he cares for us. I feel glad about that. But I wish my mom was with us too. It's really, really hard not having her here. I wrote this story because my school teacher asked us to write a story about the feelings we have in December. If one of your parents ever has to go overseas with the military, and they have to miss Christmas at home, I will be one person who might understand how you feel. Merry Christmas to my friends, and to my family, and especially to Mom.

