

At the Carnival

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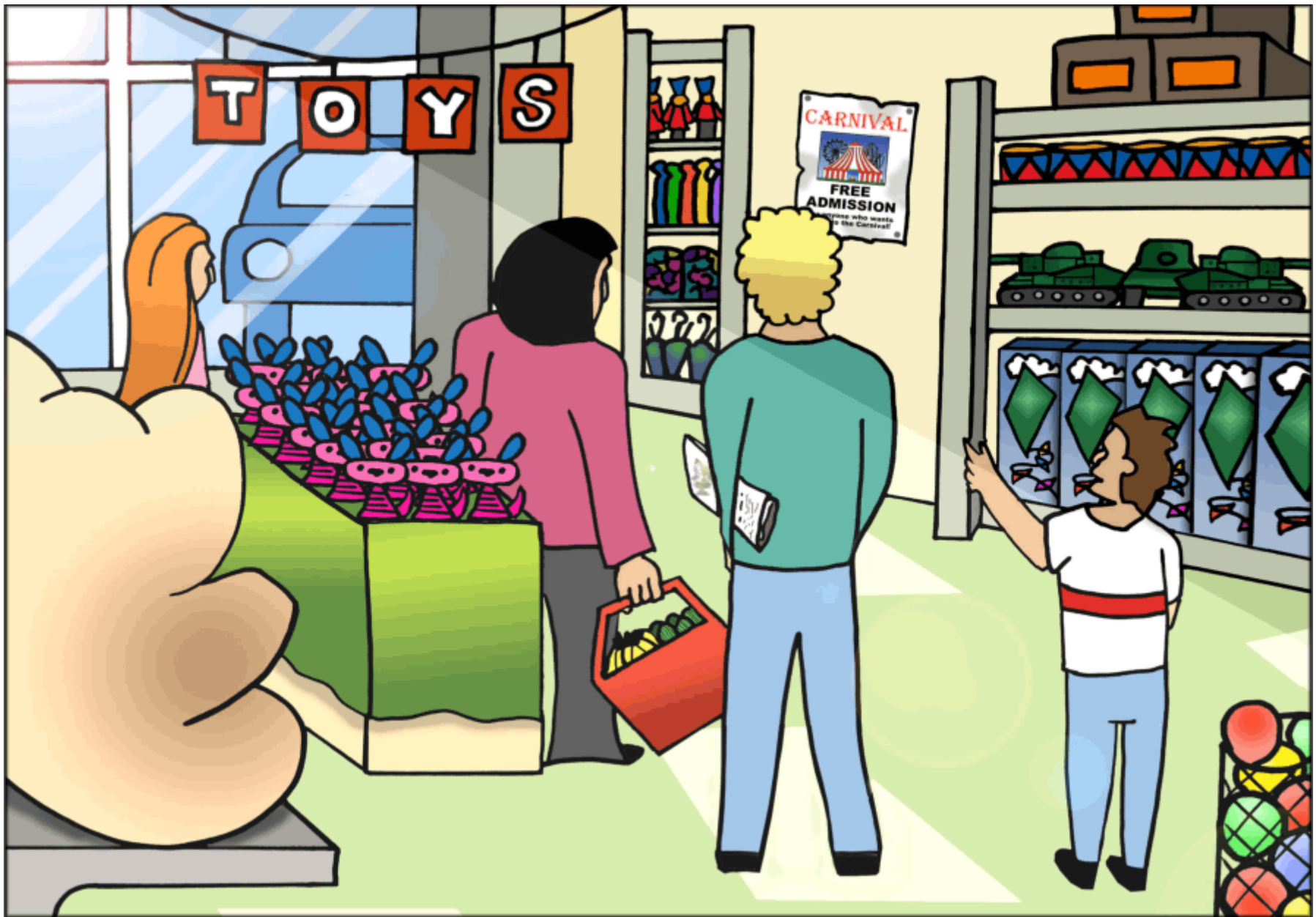
In a not so large town called Aspen, there was a carnival situated just past the last corner. This carnival seemed to have been in existence forever. Rumor had it that the owner was so rich he might own the whole town. People say that although they do not know why, they think the owner lives inside the carnival grounds. Many have said they occasionally see him drive out of town in his expensive limousine, and then not return for several days, even weeks. They can always tell when he comes home, because there seems to be a big celebration going on. At night, the Carnival is so brightly lit, it is like looking at fireworks. You can see in the distance the magnificent rides, and the joyful noise of people rings through the wee hours of the night.



Although the carnival is just right there within the reach of every resident, the strangest thing is that nobody seems to have been inside. And believe it or not, you can find some worn out advertisements in just about every store in Aspen that entrance to the carnival is free!

One day, a new family from a distant place moved into town. They had two school-aged children, a dog and a cat.

They searched far and wide for a place to settle before they decided on this town. Their decision was based mostly on the carnival being nearby. The family thought it would be good for the children to be able to go to an amusement park without crossing the whole country!



The children were excited. They couldn't wait to start school, meet new friends and go to the carnival. After a few days of getting settled in, the family ventured out to meet their new neighbors. They were happy to find that their neighbors were all wonderful. Some brought them welcome cookies, some were eager to tell them about their wonderful town, and some were just plain friendly neighbors. Next, the family went to the biggest store in town.

Although the store was big, everyone that went in and out seemed to know each other. The large selection of toys should have caught their eyes, but the one thing that really grabbed their attention was a worn out little piece of paper plastered on the back wall of the toy area. It read, "FREE ADMISSION for anyone who wants to go to the Carnival."



The family found what they needed and while checking out had the pleasure of meeting the storeowner. "What do you know about the carnival?" the dad inquired.

"The carnival, ah yes! You know it's free to anyone who wants to go inside," replied the storeowner. "People that have been there think it's great. But lots of folks that live here, I would say, have never seen the inside. It's just outsiders that visit the carnival."

"That seems strange, why is that?" asked the dad, unable to make sense out of the storeowner's response.

The storeowner looked up at the ceiling, as if contemplating, "I don't know," he finally answered. "But you know what is even stranger, the carnival has been here such a long time, it's taken for granted by the residents here. I can count on my fingers the number of people I know that went inside. But that was years ago. I remember when they came out, they were so happy. All they talked about was how wonderful it was inside the carnival. Then they... yes all of them, as if by some unseen force were driven away. Said they had to tell people everywhere they should try to see the carnival, especially people from other towns. So really, all those people you see visiting, they're all outsiders.



Most of the original folks here don't really want to be bothered. Some think those people are nuts. As for myself, I don't care for all that stuff. It may be wonderful there, it may be free, but I'm comfortable right here. I can get enough amusement and happiness from what I have. Who knows, maybe someday I'll pop in for a while. After all, the carnival is just past the last corner."

Another man standing next in line also commented, "I know what you mean. If you ask me, I think it's strange. I have seen the owner. He is the only rich person I know that smiles at you. He even knows my name. But nah, I think it is scary. What if he has something hidden that will trap you? And all these people that visit the place, they are so happy it's creepy!"

The family thanked the storeowner for serving them and everyone said goodbye to each other. Then they all left the store, quite intrigued by what they heard. One day, the children were playing with their dog in the yard, while the cat was inside the house just watching. Somehow, the cat got out and started running. The dog chased after the cat and the children chased after them both. Then the cat slipped through an open gate, and they were running and chasing and chasing and running. Suddenly, the children stopped. It just dawned on them where they were.



Looking wide eyed they gazed left to right, right to left, up and down, with their mouths wide open. They couldn't move out of amazement. Right there in front of them was the biggest carousel in the world! The white horses gleaming with their golden manes, and they had wings. They were not like your regular carousel horses made of wood, these were real, going clipity clop round and around, floating, no, flying low, in unison in a circular motion underneath an umbrella-like canopy of brilliant colors. The horses looked at the children invitingly, their eyes serene, as if telling them it is ok. Behind the carousel was a Ferris wheel that seemed to reach the sky, with spokes made of shiny silver. As it was spinning it produced bright lights that looked like fireworks, but it was daylight, and yet the lights were not blinding. It was just magnificent! Not far beyond the Ferris wheel, was a crooked looking rainbow. "That's weird, look, a crooked rainbow," said the girl as she ran towards it with her brother not far behind.



As they got nearer, the rainbow seemed to get wider and closer to the ground. They could see that it was not a crooked rainbow after all. It was a roller coaster sitting on clouds of different heights and sizes, and it started just above the ground in front of them. They were just about to get on when the boy saw something moving. "Look!" he cried pointing to a baby lion. "Let's go pet it!" As they ran nearer to the lion, many different kinds of animals appeared from everywhere. They seemed to be roaming around freely, with no one tending to them. There were chickens perched just about everywhere they looked, goats were happily nibbling grass nearby, and a camel strutted by as if going on a long journey. Then they saw an elephant squirting water playfully at all sorts of birds teasing him, flying in circles around him. Then, they saw their cat. It was nuzzled against a big lion. The lion was licking the cat like his own cub. And next to the lion was a gentle looking sheep, talking to the lion. "Listen, the sheep is talking to the lion," exclaimed the boy. "SHHH!" said the girl not moving. "Maybe if we just keep still, they won't notice us, let's call Kitty." The girl tried to call the cat, but it didn't seem to hear her. They both tried a few more times and were about to give up when... they felt someone was with them.

As they looked behind them, there was this man that appeared like a farmer, motioning something to the cat. At once, the cat came and jumped into the boy's arms. When he looked down, there was his dog too, patiently waiting. "We are very sorry, we didn't mean to break in, we were just going after our pets," said the girl. The farmer gently explained to them that it was all right for them to be there, and he offered them to stay and play and have fun. But the boy was hesitant. "We do not really know you, and we don't really understand where we are or the meaning of this. Our parents need to know where we are. We will need their permission."

"Very well," replied the farmer. "I'm sure I'll be seeing you again soon."

With that, the children went home, and promptly told their parents. Their mom and dad were worried at first, but after hearing all that happened, they became less concerned. Instead they were quite intrigued and curious. If all they heard was true, how come the townspeople don't know about this. If this was truly a wonderful place, and above all else free, why was it that no one would bother to find out. They thought and pondered about it for some time. Occasionally, they would ask the children if it really was a wonderful place, was it truly free? Well, the only way to find out was to go there themselves. But wait they thought, what if there was a catch. Maybe the carnival owner lets children in free so the parents will come next, and then they are trapped. Maybe the parents will be asked for money or made to work hard. Even so, the visitors that came and went always returned happy, and always seemed to have one purpose after each visit. They all wanted to tell others about the carnival, saying it had something they never experienced before. ~ ~ ~

So finally one day, the family set out to go to the carnival. The parents had felt for a long time that they were missing something, and the only way to fill that empty feeling was to go and see. "We can take Kitty and Pup," said the little boy, but their parents hesitated. "It will be okay, and maybe the talking lion misses Kitty," the girl assured her parents. The parents thought the idea about the lion was absurd, but finally agreed. So they started out for the carnival.

Upon reaching the gate, the pets bolted in and the children ran, but the parents stood for a moment and gingerly peeked in. They were startled and almost screamed when suddenly they found themselves face to face with a lion. "Come in," the lion said as it walked on ahead. They followed in, and just like the children earlier, they were filled with emotions and feelings that they never felt before. They saw things that didn't exist outside the gate. The carousel with living horses, a Ferris wheel gleaming and sprinkling the sky with fireworks, the crooked rainbow, and oh, all the animals, wild animals, acting like they were pets. They looked at the ground, but could not see dirt or floors. Instead they seem to be walking on a dense mist, and yet it wasn't moist.



“Mother,” called out the little girl, “Would you like some fruit?” The mother went to her, followed by her husband still looking a little dazed. “What is this?” the mother asked as she took one. The fruit was the size of her hand, it felt like jell and was colorless. She was hesitant to put it in her mouth. “It tastes like any fruit you want it to be,” said the boy. At that the mother tasted it while thinking of an apple, and it tasted like one. Then she thought of a banana, and it tasted like a banana.

“I can’t believe all of this. This is what we have been missing all along!” the husband finally declared. “We can live here, all of us can just stay here!”



Just then the farmer arrived, and the husband recognized him. It was the same guy he saw in the limousine that went out of town occasionally. “Do you like it here” asked the farmer in a voice that sounded like it was coming out from a gentle stream. “This place is for people who believe it exists. I have told the townspeople that it is wonderful here, but some choose not to believe. Others who came here saw and believed. They stayed for a while but then they found in their hearts the need to share what they discovered. They could not contain their joy, so they decided to spend their life telling others about the carnival, and telling everyone that most of all, it’s free. You are most definitely welcome to stay if you like. In fact there will be another big celebration tonight for all the people that came.”

The family stayed for awhile. But it didn’t take very long for the parents to make up their minds. They will tell others about this carnival. Their friends, brothers and sisters, their boss, even people that they didn’t know must hear about this great place. They will travel far and wide to tell everyone of this great joy.



The Kingdom of God is like the carnival in this story. It is entirely free, yet so many people miss out on the joy that comes from being part of God's family. The excuses are many. For some, it's the feeling that life is going fine just the way it is, "Why change? I don't need God right now." But these people may never find out how wonderful heaven can be, until it is too late. Others may think they must give up too much to become a Christian. The cost is too great. But salvation costs nothing. It is a free gift from God. Everyone who receives this free gift will see things like never before. They will experience a new life in Christ without worldly fear, and you will know them by their fruits.

The joy of Christ cannot be kept inside, it must be shared to all the world!