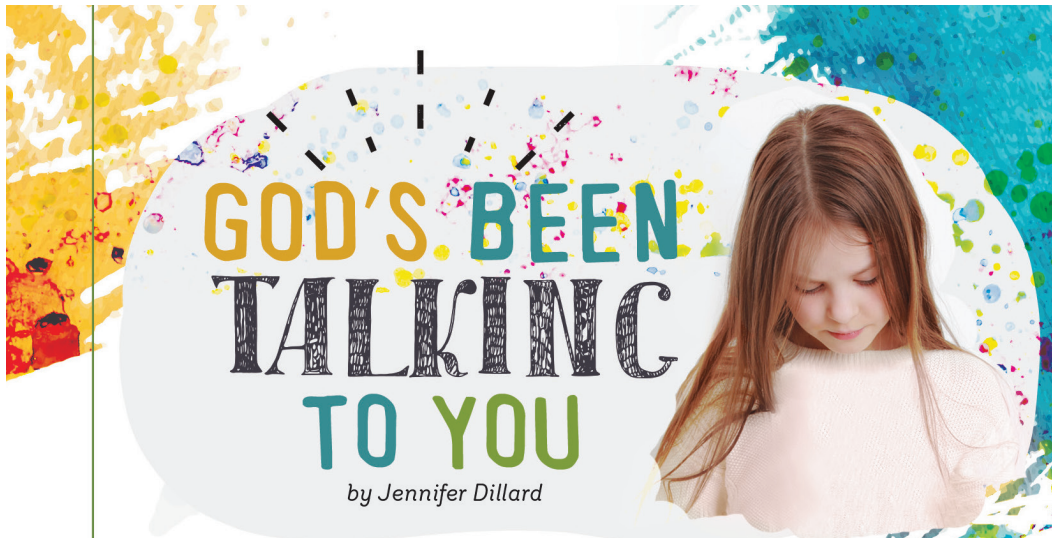


RISING GENERATIONS

THE UPPER ROOM



by Jennifer Dillard

"Who wants to give thanks for this wonderful breakfast?" asked Pastor Chuck. "Let's see..." He looked around our table.

I stared down at my plate of powdery beignets, hoping that he'd ignore me. I love field trips with our Sunday school class, and I was especially excited about this weekend in New Orleans. But I didn't want to start off our sightseeing Saturday with an awkward, stuttering prayer—in front of everyone.

I glanced up. Big mistake!

Pastor Chuck caught my eye. "Nicole?"

Rats! I took deep breath, nearly choking on the smell of fried dough. "I, I—um—" I stopped, my face burning.

"I'll do it, Pastor Chuck," called a voice from the other end of the table.

Katie Harper. Of course.

She was as good at speaking as our pastor—maybe better. And judging from her prayers, she and God were total BFF's. No awkward stuttering for her.

"Thanks, Katie," said Pastor Chuck. As Katie launched into her perfect prayer, I sank into my seat. Being shy around other kids was hard—but being shy around God was even harder.

After breakfast, we walked through Jackson Square. A man stood on the corner of the green park, his brass trumpet glinting in the sunlight. He finished a jaunty march tune and noticed our group watching.

"Where y'all from?" he asked.

"St. Martin's," answered Katie. "We're a church group."

"Then I've got



something special for you,” said the man. He began a familiar melody, long and low.

Amazing Grace. I had known that song all my life, but I had never heard it played like that before. I closed my eyes and let the music wash over me.

Suddenly I bumped into someone and, to my horror, I realized I’d been swaying to the music. Katie Harper was staring at me.

“You really like that music, huh?” she said.

“Um, yeah,” I mumbled, following the group down the street.

Next we stopped at the Aquarium of the Americas. Wandering the cool, light-filled halls, I felt like I was underwater, too. Rainbow-colored fish darted into coral caves, and sea anemones waved in the currents.

I followed the group, stopping on a bench before a huge glass tank. Sharks and sting rays glided through the water. I remembered Bible verses we had learned about God “who made the heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them.”*

“Thank you, God!” I whispered.

“What?” I jumped. Katie was beside me.

“Oh, nothing,” I said. I’m talking

to myself now? Well, not really to myself, but...I’m such a weirdo. At least, I’m sure Katie thought so.

She smiled. “Those sharks are awesome.”

“Definitely,” I said, surprised.

“Okay,” called Pastor Chuck, “let’s head out and grab some lunch.”

We drifted down the Riverwalk, a shop-lined walkway along the Mississippi River. I bit into a shrimp po-boy and leaned against the railing. The sun glinted off the slow-moving water. I sighed happily.

Katie walked up, carrying a bag. “Praline?” she offered.

“Thanks.” We stood silently, munching the sugar-coated pecans. A steamboat full of tourists chugged down the river.

Katie looked me and grinned. “You don’t say much, do you?”

I blushed. “Not really.”

“But you notice a lot,” she said. “You really got into that trumpet music. And I thought I was the only person who loved sharks—until I saw you watching them. Those hammerheads were cool!”

I smiled. “Yeah. But you know, it’s not so much the music, or the sharks. What’s awesome is what they say to me.”

*Psalm 146:6

She looked confused. "What do you mean?"

Now I've done it! I thought. I'm gonna sound like a freak!

I took a deep breath. "Well, I mean, I know it sounds weird. But...it's like those cool things let me see God a little. Like they're a little window into God's glory."

"Whoa," said Katie. "That's deep, Nicole."

I studied her, but she didn't seem to be making fun of me. I went on. "Like, see that osprey?" I said, pointing at a soaring bird. "It's flying, hunting for fish, just doing its thing, you know? But God made it happen."

Katie watched the osprey swoop to the surface of the river and back up. "Yeah. That is awesome," she said quietly.

I hadn't expected her to understand. I hardly understood it myself. But she seemed to get it.

We walked along silently, following our group. A bearded man in dirty clothes lay on a bench, rattling a cup of coins. A rank smell hit my nose.

"Whew," said Katie under her breath.

I reached into my pocket.

"Come on." Katie grabbed my arm. "Don't stop."

I shook her off and dropped some money in the man's cup. He said, "God bless you."

I smiled at him and moved along.

"Nicole! Who knows what he'll buy with that?" said Katie.

I shook my head. "That man might be dirty and all; and, no, I don't know what he'll do with the money. But if I can see God in a shark or an osprey, well...shouldn't I try to see God in a person in need?"

Katie went silent. We walked on for a while. I started to get nervous. "I hope I didn't hurt your feelings," I said.

"No." She took a deep breath. "I'm just thinking about... 'if I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love...'"**

"What?"

"You're teaching me to pray, Nicole," Katie said.

"Oh, right!" I said. "I can't say two sentences in front everyone without looking like an idiot."

She shook her head. "Praying aloud in front of the group might not be your thing, but you've been talking with God all day—and God's been talking to you."

Wow! I didn't know what to say. But I also knew that it was okay if I didn't say anything at all. ■



** 1 Cor. 13:1