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activated

Vol 16 • Issue 12

FOLLOWING THE STAR

A modern quest

Celebration, Not Perfection

Have a happier Christmas

God with Us

The true Christmas





EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION FULL OF WONDER

The story of the first Nativity scene is a well-known Christmas staple: Saint Francis of Assisi is traditionally believed to have asked the citizens of the village of Greccio, in 1223, to play the characters in the Nativity. What's certain is that these "living cribs" became highly popular and the tradition spread

around the world.

The trouble was that these were large-scale affairs that often required dozens of actors and a lot of preparation. During the French Revolution, religious reenactments were suppressed, and Nativities were reduced to miniature scenes that families could recreate at home.

Some of the most famous of these are the brightly colored "santouns" (small saints, in the local dialect) from Provence. In addition to the biblical players—Jesus' family, the shepherds, angels, and kings—these Nativity scenes usually include a collection of everyday characters and traditional trades.

There is one character you may not immediately recognize but is essential to any Provençal Nativity. He isn't bringing any gifts, but his arms are raised and his expression is of intense surprise and joy. He is *Lou Ravi* (the delighted one). In Italy, a similar Nativity figure is called *Lo Stupito* (the astonished one), and their shared characteristic is a strong sense of awe and marvel. They seem empty-handed, but actually, they're bringing the most beautiful gift of all: their wonder.

We who know the story of Christmas so well can easily grow familiar with its blessing. Jesus' birthday becomes a traditional, recurring event much like any other. When in fact, it's anything but. The truth is: God loves us so much that He came to earth as a human, in the form of His Son, Jesus, so we could get to know Him and learn to trust Him and love Him back.¹ May we always retain *Lou Ravi's* childlike wonder at this incredible gift!

From *Activated*, a very wonderful Christmas to you and yours.

Samuel Keating
Executive Editor

1. See John 3:16.



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Toll-free: 1-877-862-3228
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P.O. Box 9009, Aggrey Road P.O.
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Cell: +234 (0) 7036963333
Email: activatednigeria@activated.org

Activated Philippines

P.O. Box 8225, Paranaque Central P.O.
1700 Paranaque City, Philippines
Cell: (0922) 8125326
Email: activatedph@gmail.com

EDITOR Samuel Keating
DESIGN Gentian Suçi

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The *Best* CHRISTMAS

BY DINA ELLENS

THE YEAR WE HAD VERY LITTLE MONEY TO SPEND ON CHRISTMAS TURNED OUT TO BE OUR BEST EVER! After a recent move to a new country, we'd had to leave behind all of our Christmas decorations, and I wondered how we could decorate our home, especially since we were tight on cash and had extra setting-up costs. Thankfully, one autumn weekend while on a forest hike, my kids got the idea of collecting pine cones and using these to make Christmas decorations. We began right away, and by evening we had a large bagful.

After that, every Saturday afternoon we worked together on our pine cone project. First, the cones were sorted by size and quality. Then the kids tied wire to each of them and attached them to a long pole. This made it easy to quickly spray paint them with a drop sheet underneath. Once the paint dried, they trimmed and shaped the wire so

that it could easily be hung from the tree or a wreath.

Then it was decoration time. With gold and green ribbons and a glue gun, each pine cone was soon transformed into a unique work of art. The results were simple but beautiful, and visitors commented on how nice our living room looked.

The following year when the box of Christmas decorations came out of storage, the first thing on everyone's mind was seeing how the pine cones had survived. As each one came out of its wrapping, there were exclamations of, "Hey, I found this big one on our hike!" Or "I put the bow on this one!" Everyone was reliving the happy memories of the previous Christmas and the part they had played.

I realized then that it doesn't take a lot of money to create lasting Christmas memories. The fact that funds were low that Christmas was what inspired us to make the pine cone decorations, which ended up

becoming cherished mementoes of a Christmas when we didn't have much materially, but we had one another.

DINA ELLENS TAUGHT SCHOOL IN SOUTHEAST ASIA FOR OVER 25 YEARS. ALTHOUGH RETIRED, SHE REMAINS ACTIVE IN VOLUNTEER WORK AS WELL AS PURSUING HER INTEREST IN WRITING. ■

Heavenly Father,
Christmas began
With the gift of Your Son,
Who in turn gave the world
The gift of His life.
Let me remember, O God,
That Christmas remains
A matter of giving,
Not parties, not presents,
Not material wealth,
For Christmas is Christmas
When I give of myself.
—By Van Varner

CELEBRATION, NOT PERFECTION

BY TINA KAPP

IF YOU'RE LIKE ME, you have an idea of what the perfect Christmas should be like. Maybe you have a mental picture of the perfect tree and decorations, somewhere ideal to go on holiday, the perfect Christmas dinner surrounded by family and friends, drinks, Christmas cake, or whatever it is that you love. Maybe the music would be playing when you open your presents, and they would be exactly what you've always wanted ...

My Christmases have rarely turned out that picturesque or perfect. Yes, they have been both beautiful and fun, and I have created great memories, but phrases that describe my last few Christmases range from "a quiet Christmas" to "embrace the chaos." And none of them were anything remotely like my picture-perfect ideal Christmas—however, all of them are very special memories that I treasure.

Only recently have I truly decided that Christmas doesn't have to be perfect. It doesn't have to bowl me over with magic, as long as there's love, happiness, and time taken to celebrate Jesus' birth.

After all, the first Christmas was pretty messy. If we were to recreate it perfectly, we'd need to be homeless, tired, and traveling for the sole purpose of registering for taxes. That doesn't sound fun or perfect on any level! Add to that having a baby and settling for the night with cows and sheep, and you've pretty much

described what would be my worst day ever!

However, God worked a bit of His own special magic into that night, with angels appearing to shepherds and a new star appearing to lead the wise men to search out the newborn king. I bet Mary and Joseph always treasured that crazy night and often recounted the amazing story to Jesus when He was growing up. Life today can be pretty messy as well, but Jesus always shows up and adds His own special touch of wonderful.

When I'm discouraged with my Christmas, one thing that helps is finding a way to make someone else's Christmas a little better. When I was a child, my family used to visit retirement homes during the Christmas season. It was so nice to see how much happiness we could bring. The simple act of showing up helped the residents know that they weren't alone or forgotten, and that

1. "How to Have an Imperfect Christmas," *Canadian Living*, http://www.canadianliving.com/health/mind_and_spirit/how_to_have_an_imperfect_christmas.php
2. Sarah Bessey, "In Which I Celebrate the Imperfect Christmas," <http://sarahbessey.com/in-which-i-celebrate-the-imperfect-christmas/>
3. "Embrace Imperfection," Simple Mom, <http://simplemom.net/plan-your-peaceful-christmas-embrace-imperfection/>
4. www.just1thing.com



someone cared enough to sing for them or make them Christmas cards or whatever we decided to do each year.

There's nothing wrong with spending time creating a beautiful Christmas and having traditions or expectations of things that make it special for you and your friends and family; just remember—you can find beauty in the chaos. God often likes to show up in imperfect circumstances much like He did in that stable long ago, and He can help you focus on what it is that makes Christmas truly wonderful.

When writing this article, I googled “imperfect Christmas” and discovered I wasn't alone; so many people of all ages and backgrounds have made the same discovery of learning to be happy with their less-than-picture-perfect Christmas.

Professor Gordon Flett from York University in Canada made an interesting observation: “Christmas reflects huge cultural expectations that things have to be just right. We have a consumer-based society that

says if you have the perfect look or the perfect achievement, the perfect life will follow. People expend so much effort achieving this ideal. By the time the holidays arrive, they're stressed.”¹

A blogger named Sarah wrote, “Sometimes it's easy to be lured into the Pinterest Christmas, the myth of the perfect, designer, foodie, cool Christmas. The idea behind it seems to be that, if we decorate it beautifully, it will be beautiful, and somehow our surroundings are the best indicator for our inner peace and joy, our best defense against the reality of our own imperfections at Christmas. This year ... I'm celebrating my imperfect Christmas. Maybe no one wants to Pin it or sponsor it, but ... I'm sitting here now, in the glow of a thousand colored mini-lights, and I love my imperfect Christmas and my imperfect family so much. All is, somehow, mysteriously, calm and bright.”²

At Christmas we celebrate Jesus coming to earth in a pretty imperfect environment, but the love that His

birth means to us makes the day unforgettable. The best Christmas memories are not necessarily of things turning out perfectly, but often of the slightly crazy times surrounded by the love of family and friends. When we stop and think how much we have to be thankful for, we can truly enjoy a wonderfully imperfect Christmas.

I'll leave you with this last and beautiful thought by another blogger: “Christmas isn't about perfection. It's celebrating the One who saved us from our impossible need to be perfect.”³

TINA KAPP IS A DANCER, PRESENTER, AND FREELANCE WRITER IN SOUTH AFRICA. SHE RUNS AN ENTERTAINMENT COMPANY THAT HELPS RAISE FUNDS FOR CHARITY AND MISSIONARY PROJECTS. THIS ARTICLE WAS ADAPTED FROM A PODCAST ON JUST 1 THING,⁴ A CHRISTIAN CHARACTER-BUILDING WEBSITE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE. ■

a time of MIRACLES

BY IRENA ŽABIČKOVÁ

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, I lived and worked in a small volunteer center in the south of Russia. A week before Christmas, a snowstorm blew down the main power line for the whole region. Nobody knew how long the blackout would last, as the repair crew had to wait for the weather to clear before they would be able to reach the affected area up in the mountains and fix the cables.

In the meantime, everyone tried to survive as best they could: All the large supermarkets had closed, and small shops were lit by candles or powered by fuel generators. With no heating, houses quickly got very cold. People who had only electric cooking stoves made fires outside apartment buildings to cook their food. Once the city's water reserves emptied, the water turned off. Thankfully, some snow would fall during the night, which we'd collect to melt for cleaning and washing. We spent the evenings by candlelight telling stories, singing songs, and making figures for a manger scene.

As the days went by, there was still no sign of electricity. Finally it was



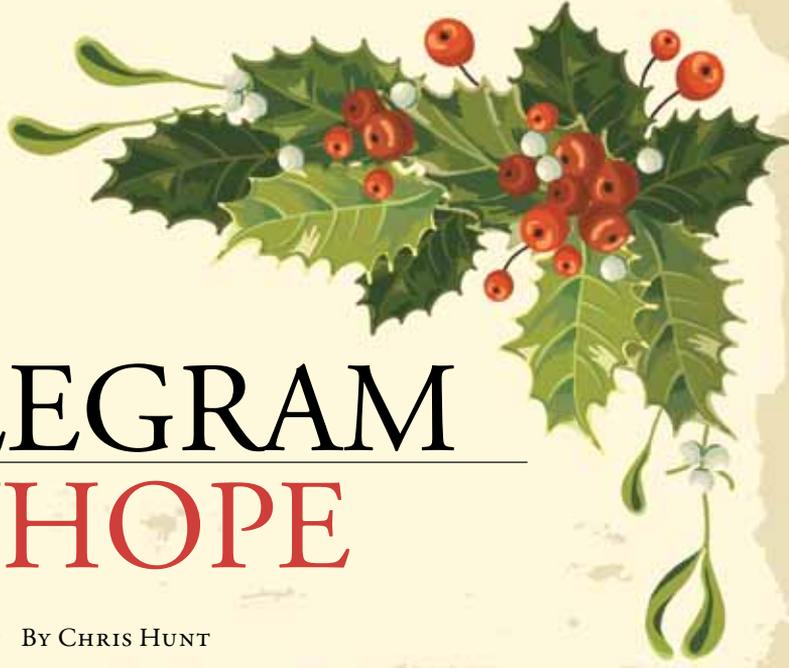
Christmas Eve, and we wondered if we should even bother putting Christmas lights on the tree, or if we should just go the old-fashioned way and put candles. One of our colleagues was undeterred: “I am putting the electric lights on and plugging them in. God is able to do a miracle and bring the power back in time.”

As we were preparing dinner on Christmas Eve, there was still no power. The evening came and all was ready, the table was set, the meal was served. We bowed our heads in prayer and thanksgiving

for the food and Christ's coming to earth as a little baby. As we ended our prayer and opened our eyes, we could hardly believe what we saw—all the lights in the house were on and the Christmas tree was lit up, sparkling majestically. The timing was impeccable! God might not have miraculously flipped the switch Himself, but I have a feeling He played a part in the electricity being turned on just in time.

IRENA ŽABIČKOVÁ IS A FULL-TIME VOLUNTEER WITH PER UN MONDO MIGLIORE¹ IN CROATIA AND ITALY. ■

1. <http://www.perunmondomigliore.org>



TELEGRAM *of* HOPE

BY CHRIS HUNT

THE WELL-KNOWN MOTIVATIONAL AUTHOR NORMAN VINCENT PEALE WROTE, “Christmas waves a magic wand over this world, and behold, everything is softer and more beautiful.” This quote evokes pictures of a roaring fire in a hearth, with colorful stockings hanging from the mantelshelf; an evergreen tree laden with baubles and tinsel, surrounded by a pile of cheerfully wrapped presents; a happy family sitting comfortably on a sofa, reading stories to their children while they sip hot chocolate. Through the window, we see snowflakes gently falling upon the white ground, sparkling in the moonlight. Is that the soft and beautiful world he imagined?

Unfortunately, “soft and beautiful” does not seem to be the right description for the images of distant sorrows that we see on the news and read about on the Internet, nor of

our sorrows closer to home such as economic stress, job loss, relationship breakdown, serious illness, or bereavement.

Nonetheless, “soft and beautiful” does make an appearance. The generosity of friends and thoughtfulness of family, the kindness of strangers, and the record fundraising drives by charities are all good examples.

But despite good intentions, human love is not always constant and can fail. There is something deeper to discover, in the words of Reverend Tom Cuthell: “Each year we retell the astonishing entrance that God made into our broken world and we are moved in the very bowels of our being by God’s capacity to surprise us with love. . . . The birth of Jesus is God’s heartfelt protest against letting things be, abandoning people to their own devices, leaving people to fall back on the threadbare poverty of their own resources. Jesus is the saving, dynamic help of God among us; he

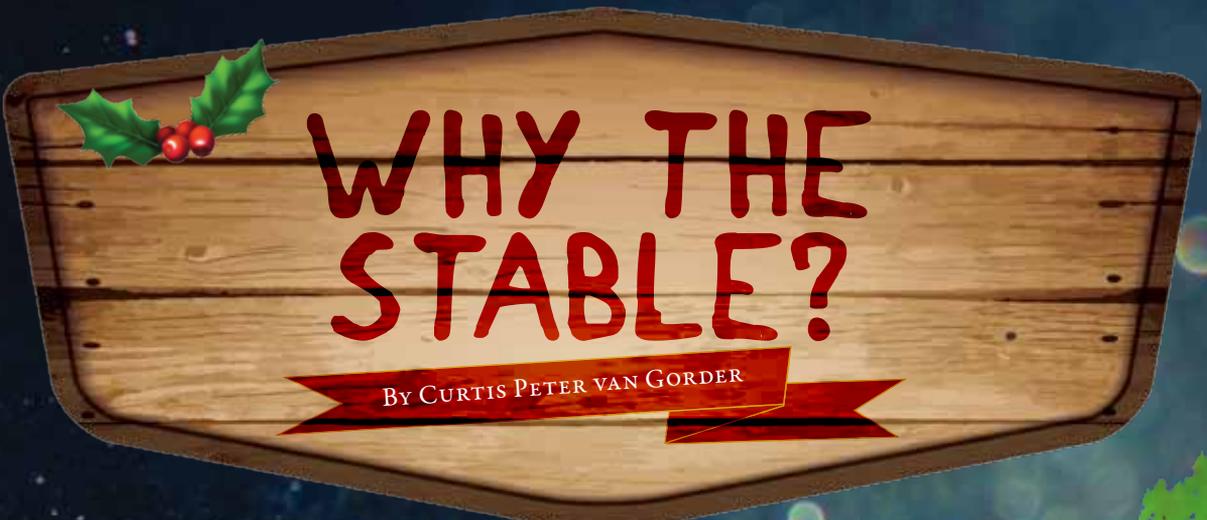
is the one Word on God’s telegram of hope.”¹

And so we might find ourselves agreeing with Mr. Peale after all, that Christmas *does* make life softer and more beautiful, although it’s not down to our celebrations, nor even entirely due to the love shared at this season. It’s down to the “one-word telegram of hope,” which isn’t only for Christmas, but lasts a lifetime and beyond.

CHRIS HUNT LIVES IN GREAT BRITAIN AND HAS BEEN READING ACTIVATED SINCE IT WAS FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1999. ■

Christmas reminds us that in the midst of adversity miracles happen, seeds are sown that will bear fruit in years to come, and Jesus’ message of peace for all still rings out. In the end good overcomes evil, the dead are resurrected, against the odds the vulnerable baby survives to rule the world.—*Bishop Joe Aldred*

1. www.st-cuthberts.net/crcmas99.php



WHY THE STABLE?

BY CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER

SHE BROUGHT FORTH HER FIRSTBORN SON, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.—*Luke 2:7*

The Lord of the universe could have picked anywhere for Jesus to be born. That raises the question of why God picked a humble dwelling where animals were housed and fed—possibly a stable, although it could have been a cave or even a guest room in a relative's house.

The room might have been full of sweet-scented hay—dried flowers and grass that had flourished in

sunny summer meadows before being cut down from their beauty—like Jesus Himself was. In Japan, traditional floors are made from freshly harvested rice grass called *tatami* because the smell is so sweet. Perhaps God savored the fragrance as well. The hay also reminds us of the transitory nature of life.

At His birth, Jesus was surrounded by simple creatures—maybe a donkey, birds, a cow, goat, or sheep. During His life, Jesus would seek the lowly and eventually tell His followers to preach the gospel to every creature.¹ He ministered to the meek and brokenhearted, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the fishermen, the children—those at the lower end of society. He came to seek and save the lost. He transformed men who were like beasts of burden into sons and daughters of God.

Then there were His earthly parents: a humble hewer of wood and a young girl. Jesus could have been born into an illustrious family, but He wasn't. Jesus would follow in His father's steps until He was 30, transforming raw timber into useful vessels, like He still transforms today those who come to Him seeking a new life.

A ragtag band of shepherds came to view the newborn Jesus at the invitation of angels.² God could have had the angels bid anyone come to the stable. He could have called the high priests, scribes, the doctors of the law, or the Pharisees, but He didn't. God sent the heavenly host to some of the people who were considered the least religious, due to the fact that their job of tending sheep often kept them from observing many of the important rituals of

1. See Mark 16:15.
2. See Luke 2:8–12.
3. See Isaiah 61:1.
4. See Isaiah 55:9.
5. <http://elixirmime.com>



their faith. Perhaps the angels invited the shepherds because they were the humble ones, the lost sheep whom Jesus had come to save.

The angels told the shepherds that this baby was not merely another newborn, but He was the Promised One who would bring good news to the meek; who would bind up the brokenhearted; who would proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of prisons to them that are bound.³

As they approached, they saw a young woman silently gazing at her child in a way that only a mother can. Although there is no record of the shepherds giving gifts to the baby, I don't believe they would have come empty-handed. Perhaps they carried the offerings of their vocation: milk to drink, cheese to eat, wool to warm Him, a piece of lamb for

a stew. Today in the mountains of Italy, shepherds bring such presents to new mothers. As the shepherds went on their way, they rejoiced in the knowledge that this Boy, born of simple folk and in poverty, just like them, was to be the redeemer of the humble—those people of good will, on whom the angel had given a blessing of peace.

God couldn't have picked a *better* place for the birth of His Son, the Messiah—Jesus. Even though it might have seemed humiliating to be born in such simple surroundings, it fulfilled God's plan. He often works in mysterious ways to perform His wonders.⁴ He did it then and still does it now.

CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER IS A SCRIPTWRITER AND MIME ARTIST⁵ IN GERMANY. ■

Points to Ponder CONSTANT CHRISTMAS

The angels who sang praises to God the night Jesus was born still sing today. If you listen carefully, you can hear them over the hustle and bustle of life. Join in.

Jesus was God's gift to the whole world, and not just for Christmas, but for every day, our whole lives through and beyond, for all eternity. It was the perfect gift, because Jesus can meet every need and make every dream come true.

The Christmas story tells us that it's okay to start small. Jesus started as a tiny baby born in a stable, but He ended up at the right hand of the throne of God. And because of Him, our small beginnings will have greater ends in His eternal kingdom.

Christmas is a state of mind. It's happiness, thankfulness, love, giving. Do those things, and every day can feel like Christmas.

Christmas comes and goes, but Jesus never leaves the heart. ■



GOD WITH US

BY VIRGINIA BRANDT BERG, ADAPTED

SOME PEOPLE CANNOT UNDERSTAND HOW GOD COULD HAVE COME DOWN AND BEEN WRAPPED IN HUMAN FLESH. That isn't strange to me, though. In fact it is quite easy for me to believe, because I see Jesus born in human hearts every day. He comes and lives in hearts and transforms lives, and to me that's a great miracle.

God's Word says that part of one of Jesus' titles is "wonderful." "A child has been born for us. We have been given a son who will be our ruler. His names will be Wonderful Advisor and Mighty God, Eternal Father and Prince of Peace."¹

He was wonderful in life, going

about everywhere doing good and healing all that were oppressed.² He was wonderful in His death: because He died for you and me, we can have eternal life.³ He was wonderful in His resurrection: because He rose from the dead, we will also be resurrected.⁴ And now He's wonderful in His life after death, because He lives to intercede for us.⁵

But it is not enough that Christ, the King of kings, was born in Bethlehem beneath the star that heralded His coming; He must be born within our hearts.

Perhaps you've seen the famous painting by William Holman Hunt in which Jesus is seen standing before a closed door, with a lantern in hand. It is said that some time after Hunt had finished what was to become his most famous work, someone told him that he'd made a mistake; there was no doorknob.

"I didn't make a mistake," Hunt answered. "The door is the door to

a heart, and it can only be opened from the inside."

Jesus can never enter a door unless it is opened from the inside. God's Word says, "To all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God."⁶ Welcome Him into your heart. He will transform your life!

VIRGINIA BRANDT BERG (1886–1968) WAS AN AMERICAN EVANGELIST AND PASTOR. ■

If you haven't yet received God's most wonderful gift, Jesus, you can right now by praying the following prayer:
Thank You, Jesus, for coming to our world and living like one of us. Thank You for dying for me, so I can have eternal life in heaven. Please forgive me for all the wrongs I've done, and fill my life with Your love.

1. Isaiah 9:6 CEV
2. See Acts 10:38.
3. See Romans 6:23; 1 Peter 2:24.
4. See 1 Corinthians 15:20–21.
5. See Hebrews 7:25.
6. John 1:12 NLT



FOLLOWING the STAR

BY KOOS STENGER

EVERY CHRISTMAS I PICTURE THE THREE WISE MEN AS THEY TRAVELED THROUGH THE DESERT IN PURSUIT OF THAT MYSTERIOUS STAR.

I can visualize them crossing the hot, sandy deserts by day and camping at night. Nowhere on earth are the heavens so laden with beauty and mystery as on a clear night in the desert! I can see them sitting before their tents and looking in wonder at the heavens, with no other lights to distract from the pure artistry of God. That new star had not been there before. It must have amazed them.

They had heard about the coming of the Messiah. They had studied about it in the ancient books, but now they read it in the stars.

“For this cause we were born. We must follow.”

And so they journeyed by faith and it finally led them to the humble manger with the newborn Child.

They fell down in worship and whispered, “It’s the King of kings.”

It reminds me of my own search.

I was no wise man, but I too had spotted a star. It was not shining brightly in the heavens; it did not illuminate the skies of my life, but its light touched my heart. Its influence was real and it made me restless.

Where does that light come from?

It was calling me to unravel its secret.

For this cause I was born. I must follow it.

So I did. I left my world behind. I went on a search for truth, with no

camels to carry me, but I was following the light of that star.

And one day, I found the stable.

It was a stormy day. The rain was pelting down on me when I talked to another traveler.

“You’re looking for God, aren’t you?” he perceived.

“Yes, I am. Where is He?”

He smiled. “He’s right here, ready to be the King of your heart, if you’ll let Him.”

That day the star began to shine in my heart.

The star that the wise men followed has disappeared, but the Christmas star in my own heart is still burning brightly.

KOOS STENGER IS A FREELANCE WRITER IN THE NETHERLANDS. ■



IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL

BY MARIA FONTAINE

IT'S WONDERFUL TO THINK ABOUT THE MANGER, the angels, and that night when Jesus came to earth. It's a thought that we focus on for a few weeks over the Christmas season, and we might even ponder it from time to time throughout the year.

But that was only part of a much bigger picture. Jesus didn't just pop down to earth so the angels could cheer Him on. That was a starting point in the immensity of eternity. Since those few short years that Jesus lived on earth, He and the Holy Spirit have been with every person that is seeking to draw closer to Him; He is working day in and day out, life by life, to answer our heart cries.

God's patience never wears thin when we fumble and stumble or wander off into troubles. He is attuned to every detail of *your* life

and *my* life, and He's committed to us forever. Jesus is in it for the long haul.

One of the greatest gifts we can give to Jesus in return is our sharing the good news of His salvation with those who are struggling and lost. We can anticipate the joys of heaven and experience the comfort of His Holy Spirit in times of struggle, while so many do not know of or feel confident in God's love and face endless striving to find purpose and to know that this life is worth living.

Even if what we can do to help others find God's beautiful love seems small compared to the need, the results can expand beyond what we can even imagine. After all, part of the wonder of Christmas is the magnitude of what resulted from such *small* beginnings. What began with a tiny little babe in a tiny little

manger, in a tiny little town in a tiny little country, became a vast and unending gift to a countless number of people for an immeasurable length of time.

God committed Himself to us without end and without limit. Anyone who opens their heart to Him is assured of security forever in the arms of the One who sets no boundaries to the immensity of His love. Suddenly, even the spectacle of the heavens filled with angels that night seems minuscule compared to the wonders God Himself came to earth to personally deliver to you and me.

MARIA FONTAINE AND HER HUSBAND, PETER AMSTERDAM, ARE DIRECTORS OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL, A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF FAITH. ■



ALONE

AT CHRISTMAS

BY VIVIAN PATTERSON

I'D BEEN TRYING NOT TO THINK ABOUT CHRISTMAS, dreading the day, hoping against hope that some angel would come into my life and make everything okay. I even tried pretending that it was just a normal day, nothing special, in hopes that would make the loneliness go away. But I couldn't avoid it: Christmas was all around me, and I was alone. No one to talk to, no one to laugh with, and no one to wish me a happy Christmas. With each minute that passed I was getting more depressed, and that's what I dreaded the most!

To cheer myself up, I searched for happy memories to occupy my mind. One that popped up was about my Sunday school teacher. He had been an easygoing, friendly man

who spent a lot of time with us kids and had a knack for making things fun. He had said that Jesus was the joy of his life. His words ran through my mind as I thought back to those childhood days: "Just take Jesus with you."

Would that work? I thought about it. I was alone—no one would know the difference. So I decided then and there to make Jesus my friend for the day.

We did everything together: drank hot chocolate by the fire, walked the streets together, talked about how pretty the world was, laughed, and waved at passers-by. I could almost feel His arm around me everywhere I went and hear His voice talking to me. In whispers beyond the realm of audible sound, He told me He loved me—yes, me—and that He would

always be my friend. Somehow I knew I would never be alone again.

As I lay down to sleep that Christmas night, I felt so happy, so peaceful, so content. It seemed odd, but then again it didn't. I'd spent the day with Jesus, and I just hoped that others had had as happy a Christmas Day as me.



I am not alone at all, I thought. *I was never alone at all*. And that, of course, is the message of Christmas. We are never alone. Not when the night is darkest, the wind coldest, the world seemingly most indifferent. For this is still the time God chooses.—*Taylor Caldwell (1900–1985)*



I am with you always, even to the end of the age.—*Jesus, Matthew 28:20 NLT* ■



The Most Important Thing

—A CHRISTMAS ADAPTATION
OF 1 CORINTHIANS 13

IF I DECORATE MY HOUSE PERFECTLY WITH HOLLY, strands of twinkling lights, and shiny balls, but do not show love, I'm just another decorator.

If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals, and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime, but do not show love, I'm just another cook.

If I work at the soup kitchen, sing carols in the nursing home, and give all that I have to charity, but do not show love, it profits me nothing.

If I trim the tree with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, attend a myriad of holiday parties, and sing in the choir's cantata, but do not focus on Christ, I have missed the point.

Love stops the cooking to hug the child. Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the husband. Love is kind, though harried and tired. Love doesn't envy another's home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens.

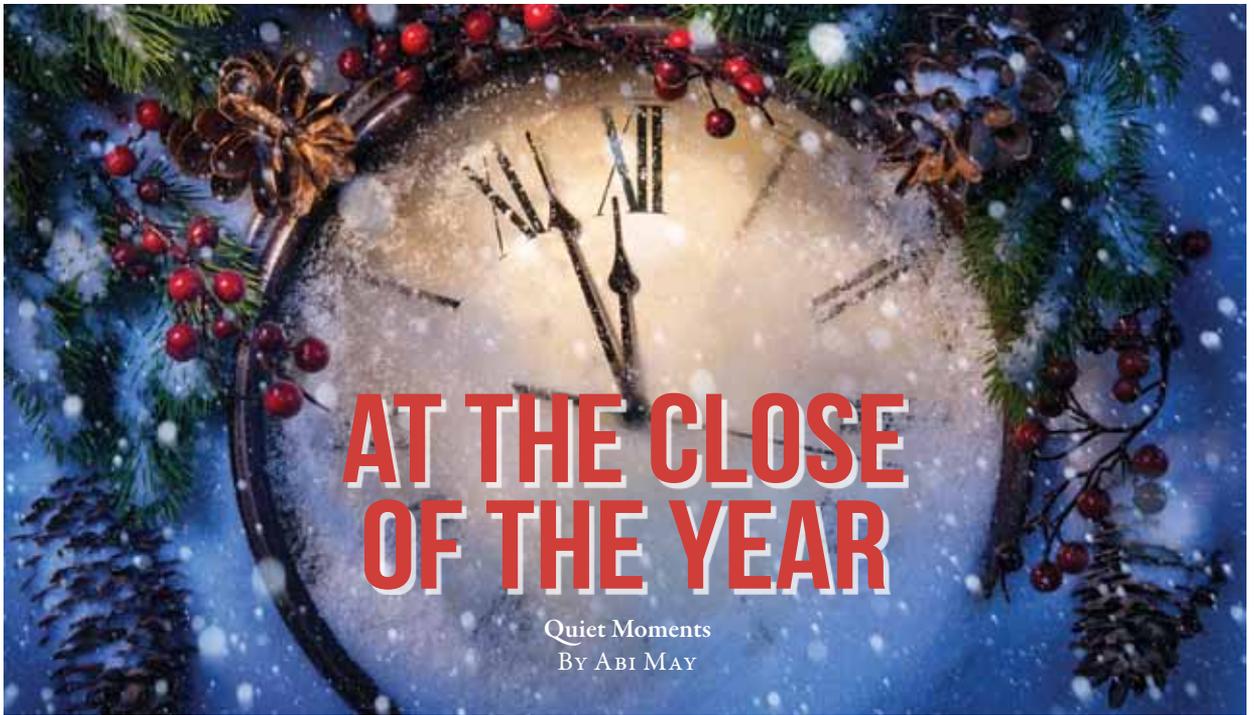
Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way, but is thankful they are there to be in the way. Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return, but rejoices in giving to those who can't.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. DVDs will get scratched, toys will be forgotten, scarves and hats will be lost, a new PC will become outdated, but the gift of love will endure.



As we struggle with shopping lists and invitations, compounded by December's bad weather, it is good to be reminded that there are people in our lives who are worth this aggravation, and people to whom we are worth the same. Christmas shows us the ties that bind us together, threads of love and caring, woven in the simplest and strongest way within the family.—*Donald E. Westlake (1933–2008)*

Give a gift of laughter,
Give a gift of song,
Give a gift of sympathy
To last a whole life long.
Give a cheerful message,
Give a helping hand,
Tell your weary neighbor,
"Jesus understands!"
Give a newsy letter
To a far-off friend;
Give a garden flower
With the book you lend.
Wash the supper dishes,
Help to dust the room;
Give a prayer to leaven
Someone's hour of gloom!
Give a gift of sharing,
Give a gift of hope;
Light faith's gleaming candle
For the ones who grope
Slowly through the shadow.
Sweeten dreary days
For the lost and lonely.
Give yourself, ALWAYS.
—*Margaret E. Sangster (1838–1912)* ■



AT THE CLOSE OF THE YEAR

Quiet Moments
BY ABI MAY

THE PATH OF THE PAST YEAR IS ENDING. We can look back at what has passed and recall the happy moments, the unanticipated joys, the good news that arrived like refreshing waters to a thirsty soul.¹ Then again, we may also heave a sigh of relief that the troubles of the past year have finally come to an end.² In between those high and low points, there were the average days when nothing out of the ordinary happened.



*The year is closed, the record made
The last deed done, the last word said,
The memory alone remains
Of all its joys, its grief, its gains
And now with purpose full and clear,
We turn to meet another year.*
—Robert Browning (1812–1889)

1. See Proverbs 25:25.
2. See Psalm 90:9.
3. See Revelation 22:13.
4. See Matthew 28:20.

The new year is about to begin, and undoubtedly it will be sprinkled with happy moments, joy, good news, some troubles, and many ordinary days. While we might be anticipating some major events, such as a new job, a move to a new home, the arrival of a new baby, most aspects of our future are hidden from our sight, as an old proverb wisely says: “The veil that hides the future from us is woven by an angel of mercy.”



I see not a step before me as I tread on another year; but I've left the past in God's keeping—the future His mercy shall clear; and what looks dark in the distance may brighten as I draw near.
—Mary Gardiner Brainard (1837–1905)



And what of right now? God is here with us in the present, just as He was in the past and will be

in the future. Let's finish this year by acknowledging the One who is the beginning and the end³ and will be with us always: at the start, at the finish, and all the way through.⁴



You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

—Psalm 16:11 NIV



Dear God, I thank You for the passing of another year, for the laughter and the tears, for the breath of the wind, the sunshine and the rain. Help me to embrace the challenges of the coming year with faith that You will see me through, as You have promised.

ABI MAY IS A FREELANCE WRITER, EDUCATOR, AND HEALTHCARE ADVOCATE IN GREAT BRITAIN. ■

FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

What will you give Me?



What can you give Me, the King of kings and Lord of lords, whose throne is heaven and whose footstool is earth?¹ What could you possibly give Me, the One who has everything? What could I possibly need?—Gifts from the heart. Any gift from the heart is a gift that I will treasure.

Each person is created with a unique blend of gifts, talents, and abilities. Some appear to be natural abilities—a quick or inquisitive mind, an aptitude for a certain skill or type of work, for example. Some gifts are clearly manifested in the physical, such as charisma. Others are gifts that often go unnoticed but can actually take you even further, such as the gifts of humility, optimism, compassion, and self-sacrifice. And then there is one of the greatest gifts of all: the ability to give and receive love. This is a gift that everyone receives a measure of, and it's part of having been created in God's image. Whatever your gifts, they work together to make you special to Me.

All of these gifts have been given to enrich your life and the lives of others, but what you do with them and how much you do with them is up to you. Nothing makes Me happier than to see you use them to benefit others and make them happy. When you do, the most wonderful thing happens: your gifts and talents grow, they are multiplied, and that love that was your motivation spreads from heart to heart and comes back to you.

What can you give Me this Christmas and in the coming year? Use what you have, what you've already been gifted with, to the full. That will be the perfect present for Me.

1. See 1 Timothy 6:15; Isaiah 66:1.