

CHANGE YOUR LIFE. CHANGE YOUR WORLD.

activated

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JOY TO THE WORLD

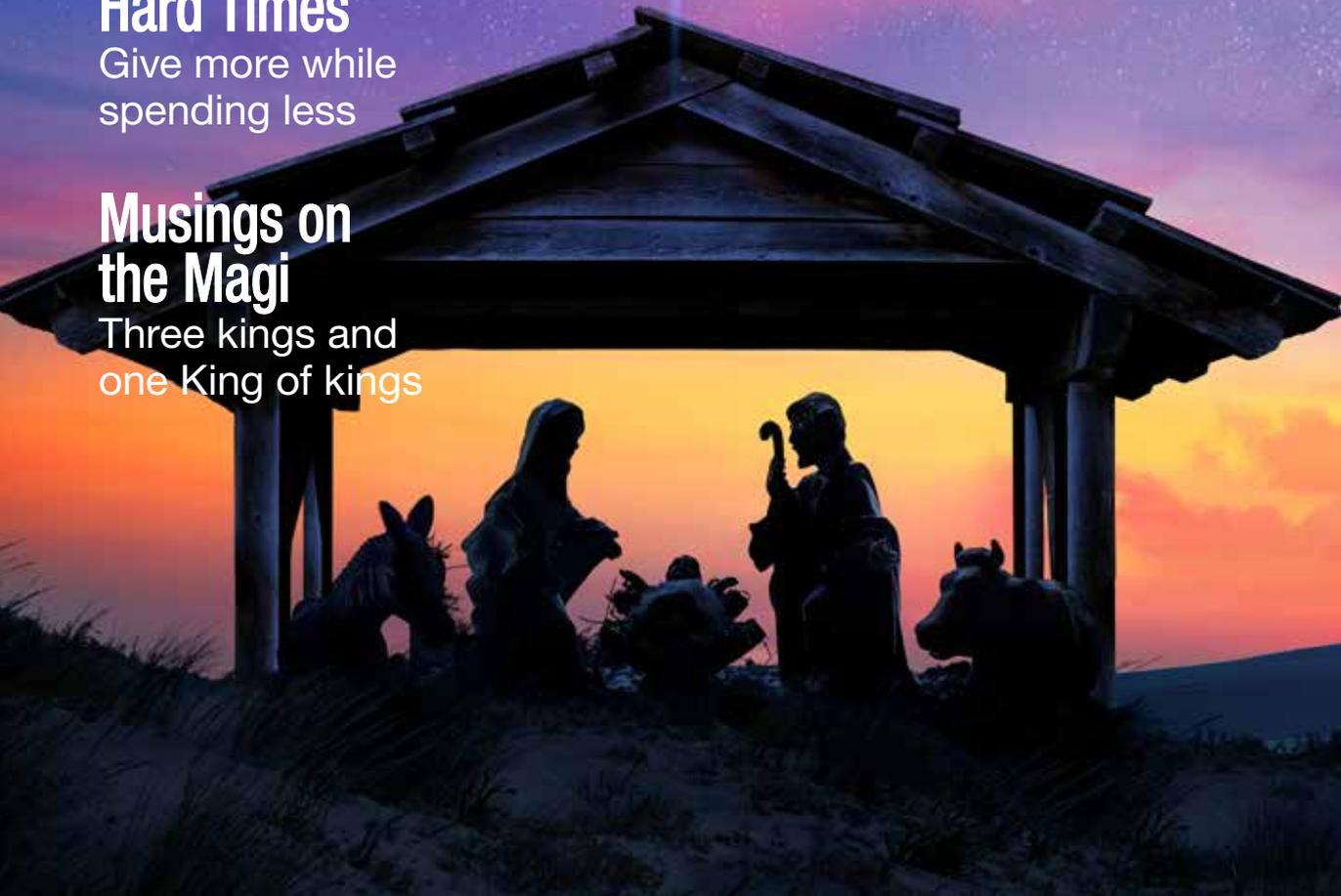
Timeless traditions

Gift Ideas for Hard Times

Give more while
spending less

Musings on the Magi

Three kings and
one King of kings



EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE PRESENCE

Throughout the Old Testament, God's kindness and mercy flows through the text, like this verse in the Psalms: "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love."¹

But what happened 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem took God's love and mercy for humankind to an entirely new level! God offered His only Son to the world, who showed Himself to us as a weak and helpless child and chose to take on human form in order to save humanity.

Ever since then, countless men and women of faith have drawn on the events of Christmas to share Christ's message and love with others, as well as to improve the world around them. People like Dickens' character Fred: "I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round, as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys."

For most of the world, this year has been unlike any other, and for many of us, this holiday season is shaping up to be unlike any we have known in our lifetimes. But some things never change, and the joy and hope contained within the Christmas story are timeless.

So whatever your circumstances, why not take some time to meditate on God's wonderful gift to all of us—His Son, Jesus? And then even if we can't celebrate Christmas in exactly the ways we are used to, let's try to celebrate His birthday in ways that He would like. Let's pray for our ailing world, let's try to do more this year than *think* about those less fortunate than ourselves, and let's spend time sharing His love and truth with others. By doing so we will be spending time with Jesus Himself, for He said: "Whenever two or three of you come together in my name, I am there with you."²

May you enjoy His presence with you and yours this Christmas!

1. Psalm 103:8 NIV

2. Matthew 18:20 CEV



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LET IT SHINE

BY LILIA POTTERS

THIS CHRISTMAS SEASON THE WORLD ACHES AND GROANS BECAUSE OF THE LOSSES AND TRAGEDIES OF THE YEAR. Many lives have been broken, and many dreams have been shattered. People the world over need to see the light of love that came down on that very first Christmas to brighten their lives, about which the prophet Isaiah wrote, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined.”¹

Today it may seem that this light has been shuttered, as the shadows around us have deepened. But darkness can never triumph over light. We have but to flip a light switch or light a candle, and darkness will be driven from the room.

It can be the same in life. We can let the light and love of Jesus into our hearts and then shine it onto those around us by reaching out with kindness and concern. His light will shine brightly against the backdrop of suffering, tragedy, and loss that permeates much of the world, bringing hope and promise for the future.

It may seem that the difference your small acts of kindness can make would be too small to be noticed

and too little to matter, but you’d be surprised. Even one candle can be seen a mile away when it’s very dark.

There is a story about a man who, as he walked along the beach, picked up stranded starfish and tossed them back into the ocean. A curious passerby asked, “Why do you do that? There are hundreds of those starfish on this beach. What difference does it make?” The man bent down and picked up another starfish. As he tossed it into the water he replied, “It made a difference to *that* one.”

You can make a difference too by letting God’s love shine through you, so that those whose lives you touch will be encouraged and regain hope for the year ahead. As with the starfish, you may not be able to reach out to everyone, but you can make a difference in the lives you do touch. And it doesn’t stop there, because they, in turn, can make a difference in the lives they touch.

It *can* happen, and it can start now if we all make this our Christmas prayer:

Dear Jesus, fill our hearts with the light and love of Christmas. Make of us a string of living lights that will light the world around us with Your love and hope. Amen.

1. Isaiah 9:2

LILIA POTTERS IS A WRITER AND EDITOR IN THE USA. ■



BY CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER

CHRISTMAS IS A TIME OF JOY AND CELEBRATION. Many countries have unique customs and traditions that help make this a happy season.

- **IN MEXICO**, starting nine days before Christmas Day, children go through their neighborhoods reenacting Joseph and Mary's search for lodging. Two children carrying figures of Joseph and Mary lead a procession to a particular house singing Christmas carols as they go. They knock on the door and ask for a room. At first they are refused, but then they are allowed in. A feast and celebration follow. Blindfolded children enjoy using a stick to try to break the *piñata*, a large brightly decorated papier-mâché figure hung from the ceiling and containing candy or small gifts.

1. <http://elixirmime.com>

- **IN IRELAND**, a candle is lit and put in the window on Christmas Eve to welcome any weary travelers.
- **IN SCOTLAND**, on the night after Christmas, boxes of food are wrapped and given to the poor.
- **IN RUSSIA**, some Orthodox Christians fast during a period before Christmas. Then, at the sight of the first star in the sky on Christmas Eve, a 12-course supper begins.
- **IN GREECE**, children go from house to house on Christmas Eve, knocking on doors and singing songs that herald the arrival of the Christ Child.
- **IN GHANA**, West Africa, the houses are decorated with bright paper ornaments made by the families for the occasion. A tree in the courtyard of each house—often a mango, guava, or cashew tree—is also decorated.
- **IN ETHIOPIA**, members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church celebrate

Christmas on January 6, following the ancient Roman calendar.

- **IN SOUTHERN INDIA**, Christians decorate their houses with clay lamps at night.
- **IN THE PHILIPPINES**, Christmas carols start filling the airwaves as early as September.
- **IN CHINA**, Christians build artificial trees—called “trees of light”—and decorate them with paper chains, flowers, lanterns, and other ornaments.
- **AMERICANS** decorate their houses with brightly colored lights. In some parts of the country they also line the streets with candles.

In many countries, nativity scenes are displayed to remind everyone of the birth of Jesus. In Italy, the family prays as the mother puts the figure of the Christ Child (*Bambino*) in the manger.

Around the world, bells are rung on joyous occasions. What more



joyous occasion could there be than that of celebrating God's love gift to the world, His only Son? Throughout Norway, people ring in Christmas by ringing bells at 5:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve.

And there is the Christmas tree, of course. There is considerable speculation as to how and when the evergreen became a symbol of Christmas, but many believe it can be traced to medieval Germany, where the *Paradeisbaum*, or Paradise tree, a type of evergreen, was decorated with red apples and used in a popular play about Adam and Eve that was put on at Christmastime, which ended with the promise of the coming Savior. The fact that the tree is always green symbolizes the eternal life that Jesus promises those who believe in Him. Just as the evergreen thrives even in winter, so Christ was triumphant over death.

Christians in times past decorated their homes with the holly tree at Christmastime. They called it the "holy tree," as the prickly leaves reminded them of the crown of thorns that Jesus wore when He was crucified, and the red berries reminded them of the blood He shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

Perhaps the most widespread of all Christmas traditions—the giving of gifts to loved ones—has its roots in the gifts the wise men presented to Jesus. They had seen a sign in the heavens that signaled the Messiah's birth, and they went to worship Him and presented His family with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The gift of gold signified His royalty. The gift of frankincense signified His divinity. It was an aromatic resin from which incense and perfume fit for kings were made. Myrrh, the third gift, was another aromatic resin, from which

perfume was made to embalm the dead. This signified Jesus' humanity and that He would die for us. Jesus' birth, suffering, death, and glory were all revealed in the wise men's gifts.

But *why* all these traditions? Let's travel back to the first Christmas Eve, where some shepherds are taking care of their flocks on a hillside near Bethlehem. A bright light bursts forth and angels announce the birth of Jesus in song. The shepherds are so excited that they run and tell everyone they can about what just happened. Imagine the joy that Mary and Joseph experienced when they held God's Son in their arms! That same unspeakable joy can still be felt today by all those who open their hearts to receive God's love in Jesus.

CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER IS A SCRIPTWRITER AND MIME ARTIST¹ IN GERMANY. ■



BY JOYCE SUTTIN

WHY THE BABY?

AS CHRISTMAS ROLLED AROUND AGAIN THIS YEAR, I began to wonder why God sent Jesus to earth as a little baby in Bethlehem. We have told and retold the story, and I have practically memorized Luke 2. There's Mary riding on the donkey, Joseph frantically looking for an inn, the shepherds seeing angels in the field, and wise men from the East following a star.

I remember playing the part of Mary or an angel, or even getting dressed up like a wise man when there weren't enough boys in my Sunday school class. I walk through stores and sing the Christmas hymns under my breath. I know them all so well.

But I found myself wondering today why God chose to send Jesus as a baby to such a young unwed mother. I wonder why God chose the stable and humble shepherds. This was the only begotten Son of God, for goodness' sake! It could have been

so much more dramatic. Every eye could have seen His coming then, as the Bible says they will someday see His return. So why a baby, why a fragile little child, a helpless thing, wrapped in rags and placed in a cow's feeding trough?

The last few weeks have been hard for me, with bouts of migraines and insomnia. I've tried to appear at my best, but I've felt so weak these past few days. I've wondered how I could get through and get even the most necessary things done.

And I answered my own question today as I realized why God chose to send Jesus the way He did. The Bible says He was in all ways tempted like us. Maybe He needed to experience what it was like to be so weak and small, to have to depend on others, to cry for help, to feel how prickly the straw was, how cold the night air felt.

In spite of all of that, He went on, preparing for the work God

sent Him for—which was also not so grand and glorious at first glance and ended with Him dying on a wretched cross. He chose to come, knowing what He would experience. He was human and He can relate. Jesus chose to become human to relate to us in our weakness and smallness and most uncomfortable moments.

That is part of what makes the story so amazing and so beautiful. That is one of the reasons why we recreate it in churches and display our Nativity scenes. The very humility of it all is the miracle, God's Son taking on human form. The very humanity of it all makes us feel God's love in a unique way.

JOYCE SUTTIN IS A RETIRED TEACHER AND WRITER AND LIVES IN SAN ANTONIO, USA. CHECK OUT HER BLOG AT [HTTPS://JOY4DAILYDEVOTIONALS.BLOGSPOT.COM/](https://joy4dailydevotionals.blogspot.com/). ■



BY MARIA FONTAINE

CHRISTMAS REFLECTIONS

I RECENTLY HAD SOME TIME TO RELAX IN QUIET SOLITUDE, and I decided to spend it sitting in front of our small manger scene. I lit some candles and one small lamp and listened to instrumental Christmas music playing in the background.

I'm so blessed to be able to celebrate Jesus in this way and thank Him for His inexplicable, incomprehensible, boundless love and sacrifice for me, and what it has led to in my life and the lives of others. It's also an opportunity to pray for God's people all over the world, many of whom celebrate in poverty and hunger.

The poor can relate to how Jesus was born under very poor circumstances. They see a God who understands them, who—even though He is the King of the universe—came in human flesh to their weary, pain-filled world because

He loves and cares. Those of us who are more fortunate can relate as well. The wise men were also welcomed by the Christ Child, as God opens His arms to all who will come.

When we take time to dwell on what Jesus gave up and reflect on what He did for us, the awe and the wonder of it can sink deep into our hearts and stir us to thank Him for the many ways that He has made us His, made us new, made us alive.

Everyone involved in that first Christmas was brought to our Lord's side through supernatural signs orchestrated from heaven. Even though the wise men likely weren't there at the same time as the shepherds, including them in the manger scene is a beautiful symbolism of everyone, rich and poor, paying homage to the King of the universe.

This baby, who people at the time would have known as simply Mary's firstborn son, was in fact God incarnate, the same yesterday, today, and forever. He came to earth to be a strength to the poor, a help to the needy and distressed, and a refuge from the storm. In the midst of so much turmoil, He came to bring peace. In the midst of so much pain, He came to bring healing. In the midst of so much despair, He came to bring hope. He is our best Friend, our Savior, and our Role Model, our Teacher and our Deliverer, our Refuge and our God.

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

BY PHILLIP LYNCH

MUSINGS ON THE MAGI

ONE PART OF THE NATIVITY STORY THAT HAS HELD PARTICULAR FASCINATION FOR ME IS THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN, also known as the magi.

Matthew is the only Gospel that mentions these mysterious men, and he gives only scant details, simply calling them “wise men” and describing the gifts they brought: gold, frankincense and myrrh.¹

We’re told that they came from the East, which is a broad term. They could have come from as close as Mesopotamia, or from as far away as the lands that today are India or Central Asia. The common assumption is that they were from Persia, which was then part of the Parthian Empire, an implacable enemy of Rome.

1. See Matthew 2:1–12.
2. Matthew 2:11
3. See Luke 2:21.
4. See Luke 2:22–24.
5. See Luke 2:8–13.
6. See Matthew 2:13,19–20.

About two years may have passed between the time the wise men first saw the star and the time they arrived in Jerusalem. We assume this to be the case because Herod learned from them when the star had appeared, and then in his effort to kill the “king of the Jews,” ordered the death of all the male infants in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or younger.

Would it have taken two years to travel from Persia to Jerusalem? A camel caravan traveling in a straight line would make the journey in about 25 days, so apparently they traveled rather slowly, or took a circuitous route, or it took considerable time before they set off on their journey. I suspect all three elements were in play, not to mention the need to cross a hostile border between empires that warred regularly.

The Persian magi had a reputation for studying the stars, but I wonder how they knew that the star they sighted signified that the “king of the Jews” had been born. Nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures does it say that this special king would be heralded by a new star. Was there something in their own lore that said so? And why would the birth of a king in a small enemy kingdom somewhere to their west be so significant to them that they felt compelled to embark on a long, perilous journey to see him? What information were these wise men privy to?

Matthew tells us that they saw Mary and the child “in the house,”² not in a stable as is commonly depicted. Luke also tells us that Mary and Joseph had been living normal

lives since Jesus’ birth. When Jesus was eight days old, they had taken Him to be circumcised,³ and when He was 40 days old they had taken Him to the temple in Jerusalem to dedicate Him to God and to offer the customary ritual sacrifice for Mary’s cleansing after childbirth.⁴

And what about the star? It seems that every year I read about people poring over astronomical data from the time of Jesus’ birth, trying to locate a comet, supernova, or some other celestial event that could correspond to the Christmas star. I doubt they will ever find one, because this was unlike any other heavenly body—ever. Matthew tells us that the wise men had observed it from their vantage point in the east, and that they deciphered what it meant. But then they may not have seen it again until after they were on their way from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, which is little more than an hour’s camel ride away. As the wise men approached Bethlehem, the star reappeared and “came to rest over the place where Jesus was.” What kind of star suddenly appears and hovers over a house? I wonder if the star was not really a star at all.

Luke’s gospel tells us that a very bright light appeared in the sky the night Jesus was born.⁵ Could it be that this “multitude of the heavenly host” appearing in the night sky lit it up so brightly that the stargazing wise men mistook it for a stunning new celestial body? Luke says that after the heavenly choir finished singing to the shepherds they rose into the sky—and the wise men said

they had seen the star *rise*. Could that have been the brightness that appeared over Joseph and Mary’s house? Why not? Angels seem to have been fairly regular visitors to this couple.⁶

And lastly there are the gifts. It’s because there are three gifts that the tradition has arisen that there were three men. But there could have been as few as two or as many as...well... many. Now, gold I understand, but why frankincense and myrrh? These two resinous substances were more expensive per weight than gold and were gathered from trees grown in, among other places, present-day Yemen.

The Jews used frankincense and myrrh in the blend of resins and herbs that they burned on the incense altar in the temple. That blend was so special to God that any Jew burning it in his home was to be exiled. There is indeed significance that incense used in the worship of God in the temple would have been offered by the worshipping wise men. I am not sure what Mary and Joseph could have used them for. Maybe they sold them in Egypt to cover their living expenses. They had to pay for their sojourn somehow.

So the wise men came, worshiped, and after being warned by God that Herod intended to have Jesus killed, returned to their country by a different route.

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ONE BY ONE
THE PRISONERS
FILED INTO THE
SMALL MEETING HALL.

Each one wore the same gray outfit and had the same closely trimmed haircut, but their faces showed that each was an individual with his own story of what had brought him to this place. “I am arranging for

the most hardened and dangerous criminals to watch your program,” the warden had told us. “Many of them will never see freedom again. They are the ones who most need to hear what you have to say.”

It was three days before Christmas. After passing through the many gates and checkpoints of this maximum security prison, our children were about to perform and speak to these inmates. One man in particular caught my attention. He was one of the last to enter the hall, and he seemed to be the oldest. His step was halting, his hair turning white. *What is an old man like him doing in here?* I wondered.

“Mom, did you see that old man in the back?” my son asked. “You should try to talk to him.”

“Yes.” *But how?* I wondered. We weren’t supposed to mingle with the prisoners. *Please, Lord, make a way.*

The children did very well in their presentation. It was beautiful to see the sullen faces light up with smiles and the men nod in agreement, reflect on the message of the stories being told, and finally bow

FREE
AT
LAST

BY LI SHUPING

their heads in prayer. Many were moved to tears. After final bows, Christmas greetings, and farewells, the long gray line of prisoners started moving again, this time in the other direction.

I quickly made my way to the back to try to find the old man.

I knew I would only have a few moments before he stepped into the line. Our eyes met as if he had been waiting for me. “Your children were wonderful,” he said. “They have so much love, so much joy. When your daughter started singing Psalm 23, I couldn’t help but cry. I’m 68 years old, and I was a Christian myself once. I know that Psalm.” His hoarse voice started to sing in the local dialect, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not...”

His eyes grew red and watery, and he couldn’t finish the line. “I have done something very bad. That’s why I am here,” he whispered. I was close to crying myself.

I took his arm and said, “God loves you and His love is everlasting. Jesus has already forgiven you and will love you forever and forever.” It was all I could think to say in the moment I had with him, but this simple truth had a profound effect. A smile came over his tear-streaked face and he straightened himself, as though a heavy burden had been lifted off his shoulders.

“Thank you for reminding me of that.” Then it was his turn to join

“
Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall be as wool.—Isaiah 1:18
”

If you haven’t yet found the door to eternal life, love, and freedom from guilt and remorse over past mistakes, you can right now by praying this prayer:

Jesus, thank You for coming to my world to lead me back to Yours, so I can be with You forever in heaven. I receive You now as my Savior and ask You to forgive me for all the wrong things I’ve done. I want to experience Your love and comfort now and forever. Amen

the line of prisoners filing out of the meeting hall. He waved as he turned the corner, and then he was gone.

As we were driving home, I thought, *This man had committed a serious crime that no doubt hurt others, but God still wanted to remind him of His love and forgiveness.*

How many people, I wonder, are walking around in the world today just like that man, imprisoned by guilt and remorse over past mistakes and wrongdoing? They feel condemned for things they’ve done, things they said, or the things they should have done or said but didn’t. Yet all it takes is a simple reminder of God’s unconditional never-ending love, mercy, and forgiveness to bring back hope and light the darkest place of the saddest heart.

LI SHUPING SICHROVSKY WORKS AS A MISSIONARY AND CHRISTIAN COUNSELOR IN TAIWAN. ■



BY KEITH PHILLIPS

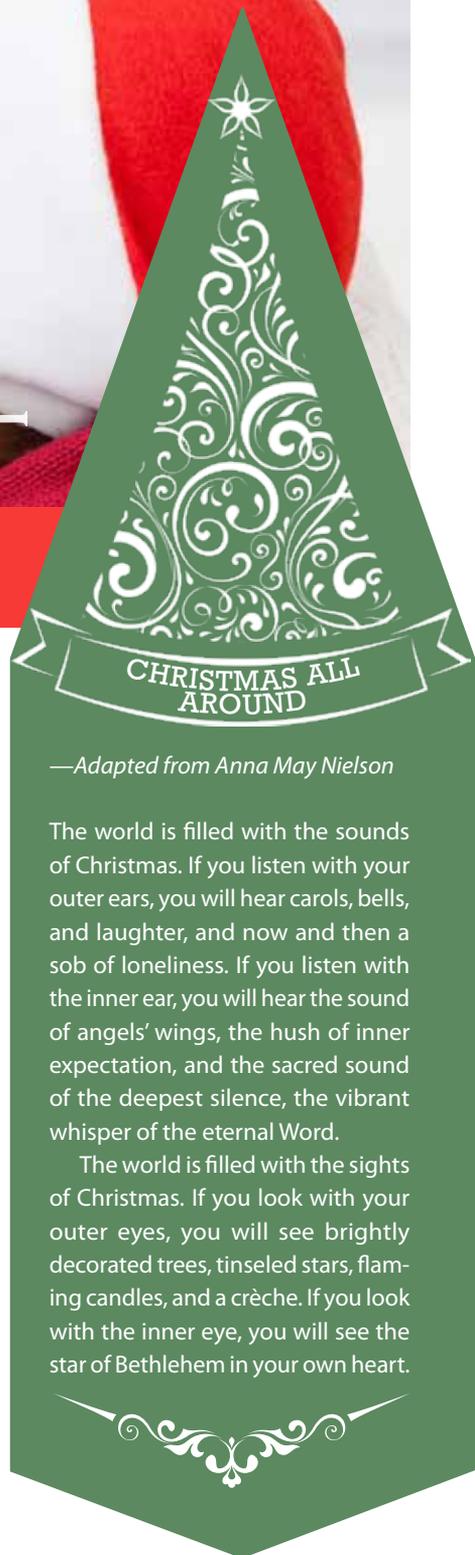
A DIFFERENT CHRISTMAS

FOR MANY MILLIONS OF US, this year has been unlike any we've ever had. Not since World War II has so much of the world's population been so affected by the same crisis. Those who haven't felt the virus' full impact and the worldwide economic downturn themselves are surrounded by people who have. Manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers whose annual bottom lines depend on Christmas sales are wondering if the holiday season will make up for previous losses. People who have lost their businesses worry about their own families and those of their former employees. Out-of-work parents wonder what kind of Christmas they will be able to give their children.

Yes, this may be a different Christmas for many, but that doesn't mean it can't be a good one. Adversity has a way of bringing out the best in people, and so does Christmas. Put the two together, and we have a special opportunity.

It's an opportunity to sort things out—to separate what really counts from the lesser things that usurp their place in the business-as-usual world, especially at times like Christmas. It's an opportunity to change our focus from the commercialism that has taken over Christmas to the true, enduring reason for the season. It's an opportunity to find new ways to express our love to those dearest to us and to show compassion to others even less fortunate, of which there are always many. We may not be able to give materially in the same measure as we have in past years, but one thing is almost certain—whatever we give will be appreciated like never before.

KEITH PHILLIPS WAS *ACTIVATED'S* EDITOR-IN-CHIEF FOR 14 YEARS FROM 1999 TO 2013. HE AND HIS WIFE CARYN NOW WORK WITH THE HOMELESS IN THE USA. ■



—Adapted from Anna May Nielson

The world is filled with the sounds of Christmas. If you listen with your outer ears, you will hear carols, bells, and laughter, and now and then a sob of loneliness. If you listen with the inner ear, you will hear the sound of angels' wings, the hush of inner expectation, and the sacred sound of the deepest silence, the vibrant whisper of the eternal Word.

The world is filled with the sights of Christmas. If you look with your outer eyes, you will see brightly decorated trees, tinsel stars, flaming candles, and a crèche. If you look with the inner eye, you will see the star of Bethlehem in your own heart.



GIFT IDEAS FOR HARD TIMES

HOW TO GIVE MORE WHILE
SPENDING LESS

TIME. You would probably be surprised at how many people on your gift list would enjoy an evening of company more than a boxed gift.

NOTES OF APPRECIATION. Instead of commercial Christmas cards with generic messages, take the time you would normally spend shopping for gifts to write those people personal notes telling them what makes them special to you.

CUSTOM GIFT CARDS. Make gift cards promising to do repairs or cleaning jobs, babysit, run errands, teach a skill you have, or perform some other service.

MAKE OR BAKE. When you exchange gifts in your office or social circle party, you could suggest that people bring simple baked goods or a homemade gift instead of more expensive retail items.

SHARE YOUR CHILDREN. Make recordings of your children singing Christmas carols, reading stories, or telling about their latest activities for

grandparents and other relatives who won't be able to spend Christmas with you, or frame and send them some of your children's best artwork.

OPEN YOUR HOUSE. Know a university student who can't afford to go home for the holidays or someone else who doesn't have any family locally? Invite him or her to spend the holidays with you and your family.

THINK LOCAL. By doing your Christmas shopping at independently owned local stores that are having an especially tough time in the present economic climate, you can in a sense be giving double—once to the recipient and once to the shop owner.

VOLUNTEER AT A SHELTER OR CHARITY. Make others' Christmas special by spending yours with them. Volunteer as a family or group of friends and you will also strengthen your ties and create a shared memory.

GIVE YOUR GIFTS AWAY. Skip the family gift exchange and instead give gifts to a poor family in your

community. Local charitable organizations can help you find a family in need. Then take your children shopping and help them pick out Christmas gifts for the needy children. Or you can pool the money you would normally spend on gifts for each other and help alleviate poverty in the developing world by donating to the needy.

☆☆☆

A thoughtful Christmas gift doesn't have to cost a lot of money or require hours of searching through crowded malls. All that is needed is your big heart and an imagination.
—Linda Kling

☆☆☆

If instead of a gem, or even a flower, we should cast the gift of a loving thought into the heart of a friend, that would be giving as the angels give.
—George MacDonald (1824–1905)

☆☆☆

Christmas is most truly Christmas when we celebrate it by giving the light of love to those who need it most.
—Ruth Carter Stapleton (1929–1983) ■



PEACE AND GOOD WILL

BY LI LIAN

ON THE NIGHT OF JESUS' BIRTH, angels appeared to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks. "Glory to God in the highest," they proclaimed, "and on earth peace, good will toward men!" These days, many of us may think of peace and good will as rather abstract virtues. Nevertheless, they are the secret ingredient that give Christmas traditions their meaning.

Can you imagine trying to enjoy a special Christmas dinner in the middle of a family quarrel? Or receiving an expensive Christmas gift with a note scribbled on it, asking for its equivalent in return? A Christmas tradition may be followed for centuries, but it is the peace and good will behind the tradition that mean the most.

In the face of approaching deadlines, mounting stress, conflicts between coworkers, financial problems, family troubles and inner turmoil, where can we find this peace and good will that we long

for? Although moments of relaxation and recreation can provide us with temporary relief, where can we find truly lasting inner peace and good will, that isn't dependent on certain events or outward circumstances?

People living at the time of Jesus' birth may have faced similar issues. It is not hard to imagine that on a lonely hillside, several ragged shepherds keeping watch over their sheep may have been contemplating their current situation in life: their poverty, the cold weather, the threat of wild animals, sicknesses of their children, their low status in their community, and wondered if they could ever hope for a better future.

The light that shone down from heaven that night brought the answer. The angels' triumphant message of peace and good will was for those shepherds as it is for us today. Through Jesus, the Prince of Peace, we can find inner peace. A peace that enables us to stay calm in the midst of difficult

circumstances in our uncertain world; a peace that comes from knowing that we have Someone who is always with us, loving us, encouraging us and guiding us through our unique path in life.

Through loving and connecting with Jesus, we find good will. Good will between ourselves and God. Good will that helps us to reach out to others. When the good will in our hearts is combined with practical action, it allows those we interact with to have a chance to feel a touch of Jesus' love and concern.

Jesus' love and the peace and good will He gives are at the heart of what makes Christmas meaningful. Without them, no other perfectly wrapped present would make much of a difference at all.

LI LIAN IS A COMPTIA CERTIFIED PROFESSIONAL AND WORKS AS AN OFFICE AND SYSTEMS ADMINISTRATOR FOR A HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATION IN AFRICA. ■



BY MARIE ALVERO

CHRISTMAS RESET

LAST CHRISTMAS I WAS A FEW MONTHS INTO A NEW JOB. My new office was an hour from my home, my hours were from 2:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m., and I worked on Saturdays. I was always exhausted and out of sync with everyone in my life. And I had to work on Christmas Day!

I felt guilty about not being able to give my family, church, and community the same effort as usual. I typically plan and host some charity/community projects, get involved with our church's Christmas outreach, and do numerous "Christmassy" things with family and friends. But last year I felt like I was in a parallel universe, one where everyone was having one Christmas experience, and I was having another.

Have you ever faced a Christmas that looked nothing like your past

1. Luke 2:10-11

Christmases? Did you feel a bit unte-thered too? I typically get so wrapped up in all the supporting events and activities that they end up being the whole kit and caboodle. Much the way a kid ruins their appetite by snacking on goldfish crackers before dinner, I fill up on Christmas-this and Christmas-that, to the point that Jesus is a bit of an afterthought. But not last year. Last year was a reversal. I did no decorating. I did no baking. I did almost no shopping. I did no hosting.

But I did do a lot of praying, a lot of thinking on my long commute, a lot of letting go of expectations for the season. Jesus was born, that's a fact regardless of how I'm able to celebrate it. When the angel appeared to the shepherds on the night He was born, he said, "I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."¹

Even if December 25th looks like any other day, Jesus still came. Salvation and a relationship with Him are still freely available. His presence is real every day.

I feel like my Christmases going forward had a reset, a priority shift that might not have come any other way. Honestly, it's very liberating to look at Christmas without any expectations of traditions or wanting it to match or top past Christmases. It doesn't need a supporting act to make it glorious. Celebrate as big or as small as you want. Nothing can change the fact that unto you (and me) is born a Savior.

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FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

MY GIFT TO YOU

Love—this is My special gift for you. Love that knows no boundaries. Love that does not judge you by the color of your skin, the way you look, or how you speak. Love that gives. Love that shares. Love that cares. Love that is vibrant, warm, and kind. Love that is unconditional and forever.

Love that is patient in a world of intolerance. Love that is understanding when others fail to see into your heart. Love that is kind and tender when all else around you seems cold and hard. Love that comforts you in your sorrow, that consoles you when you're lonely, that gives you a helping hand when you're down. Love that is full of happiness and laughter. Love that brings peace in the

midst of stormy weather. Love that always finds a way.

My love is always there for you—any place, any time, day or night. My love will descend to any depth to save, go any length to rescue. It knows no stopping place, no limit.

My love brings peace of mind when you are confused, rest when you are weary, and strength when you feel you cannot go on. My love will calm your fears and give you courage in the face of despair. My love can heal when your body is broken; it can soothe your heartaches and pain. My love will ease your mind when it is troubled and weary; it will bring peace in the midst of tension, worry, and strain.