

CHANGE YOUR LIFE. CHANGE YOUR WORLD.

ACTIVATED

Vol. 24 • Issue 12

THE BEST GIFT

It's available for you too

Six Things I Love About Christmas

What makes your Christmas?

Christmas Hope

A boy, a mother, and a tree

When You Aren't Ready

Four words to refocus



EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

A NEW HOPE

On the night Jesus was born, Luke tells us that there were shepherds out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks. An angel appeared to announce the birth of the Savior, and then the sky was lit with a multitude of angels praising God and saying “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”¹

That night signaled a new beginning in the relationship between God and humanity. Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem was the end of an era dominated by brokenness and the dawning of a new chapter filled with healing, forgiveness, and the promise of redemption and a fresh start to all who receive Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Christmas is a festive occasion, but it can also be a time for reflection, discovery, and change. I bet the shepherds’ lives were never the same after that night, and neither have the lives of countless billions been the same since.

On a personal level, this illustration of new beginnings is applicable to my own life. After around a dozen years involved in the production of the *Activated* magazine, this is my last issue as editor. But don’t worry. *Activated* will be back next month, with Gabriel and Sally García as editors, and I look forward to continuing to follow its story.

From myself, and on behalf of everyone at *Activated*, may you have a very happy Christmas and a new year filled with God’s blessings and care!

1. Luke 2:14



For more information on *Activated*, visit our website or write to us.

Website: activated.org

Email: activated@activated.org

Local contacts:

South Africa:

Email: activated@helpinghandsa.org

India:

Email: activatedindia@activated.org

Nigeria:

Cell: +234 (0) 7036963333

Email: activatednigeria@activated.org

Philippines:

Cell: (0922) 8125326

Email: activatedph@gmail.com

EDITOR Ronan Keane

DESIGN Gentian Suçi

© 2023 Activated. All Rights Reserved.

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. Other Bible quotations are from the following sources: Contemporary English Version (CEV). Copyright © 1995 by American Bible Society. Used by permission. New Living Translation (NLT). Copyright © 1978, 1996 by Tyndale House Publishers. Used by permission.



DIVINE SURPRISES

BY RUTH DAVIDSON



THE BIBLE IS FULL OF SURPRISING AND UNEXPECTED EVENTS, and the Christmas story is no exception.

The first chapter of Luke sets the scene. Zacharias was performing his normal duties inside the temple according to the custom of the day, while the congregation was outside praying. As he stood burning incense, an angel suddenly appeared, standing by him.

When Zacharias saw him there, he was startled and afraid, but his uneasiness was soon assuaged by the comforting words of the angel: “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.”¹

Zacharias wasn’t the only one who was to be startled by the sudden appearance of an angel! Six months later, the angel Gabriel visited Mary as well. “Rejoice, highly favored one,” he said, “the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!”²

“Mary was confused by the angel’s words and wondered what they meant. Then the angel told Mary, ‘Don’t be afraid! God is pleased with you, and you will have a son. His name will be Jesus.’”³ This was a monumental

announcement, considering Mary had not been with any man.

Then when Mary’s fiancé, Joseph, learned about her pregnancy, he planned to put her away secretly, to protect her reputation. But while he thought on these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to *him*, telling him not to hesitate to take Mary as his wife, “For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”⁴

On the night Jesus was born in Bethlehem, there were shepherds keeping watch over their flock. “Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them.”⁵ The angel told them not to be afraid, and that the Savior had been born in the city of David. And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God.

Of course, the greatest and most wonderful surprise appearance of all was the little babe Jesus wrapped snugly and lying in a manger, who changed the course of history—Emmanuel (God with us), King of kings, Lord of lords, Savior of the world.⁶

RUTH DAVIDSON (1939–2023) WAS A MISSIONARY TO THE MIDDLE EAST, INDIA, AND SOUTH AMERICA FOR 25 YEARS, AND AN AUTHOR AND CONTRIBUTOR TO THE WEBSITE WWW.THEBIBLEFORYOU.COM. ■

1. Luke 1:13

2. Luke 1:28

3. Luke 1:29–31 CEV

4. Matthew 1:20–21 NLT

5. Luke 2:9 NLT

6. See Luke 2:8–14.



SIX THINGS I LOVE ABOUT CHRISTMAS

BY MARIA FONTAINE

MOST PEOPLE HAVE A FEW THINGS THAT MAKE CHRISTMAS SPECIAL TO THEM. Here are a few of mine. ★

THE SPIRIT OF GIVING

I love the spirit of giving that permeates Christmas. It's often a time when even the least generous people become more giving. It's a time when children can learn the joy of giving as they share what they have. It's also a time when everyone can give something, whether they have a little or a lot, and find reward in doing so.

Giving was always a part of Christmas for me, from the time I was small. I grew up as a pastor's daughter. A few months before Christmas, the families in our congregation would buy boxes of gelatin or instant pudding, one box for each member of their family. We would empty the boxes of their contents, wrap them in Christmas paper, and cut a slit in the top to make a mini piggy bank. In the months leading up to Christmas, we would each save what we could and add that to our personal Christmas bank for Jesus' birthday.

Then during the Christmas Eve service, each person would take their little box wrapped in Christmas paper and filled with whatever money they had saved and place

it under the tree as their gift to Jesus. The money would be sent to the missionaries our church supported.

We did this every year when I was a child, and it was a tradition that became very meaningful to me. It helped me remember that when we give to others in need, we are giving to Jesus.¹ It also taught me to give what I could, because that's the true spirit of Christmas. ★

SHARING JESUS

I love the fact that Christmas is a time when talking about Jesus comes more naturally and is often more appreciated, even amid the commercial aspect of the holiday. Because much of the world celebrates Christmas in one way or another, it's an ideal opportunity to share "the reason for the season" with those who haven't heard. It's the perfect time to explain that Jesus is God's gift of love, sent to bridge the gap between God and us; that He is "the way, the truth, and the life"² and "the door" to salvation.³

SHARING OURSELVES

I love how Christmas gifts carry a little bit of the giver with them. I think my upbringing gave me a pretty practical and pragmatic view of gift giving. When I give a gift, I try to give something that is tailored to the recipient and will hold special meaning or value for them. It sometimes takes more thought and creativity to come up with something meaningful, but those are the gifts that seem to be the most appreciated and remembered.

1. See Matthew 25:34–40.

2. John 14:6

3. John 10:9



As Henry van Dyke said, “The finest Christmas gift is not the one that costs the most money, but the one that carries the most love.”

GET-TOGETHERS AND ACTIVITIES

I’ve always loved gatherings with family and friends at Christmastime. When I was growing up, all of us children participated, either in our church’s Christmas play, or by singing Christmas songs or reciting poems.

It’s a precious gift to gather and do something special with those that you love at Christmas, to share spiritual fellowship of some kind, to be together in one place celebrating the One who is so worthy of celebration. It doesn’t need to be elaborate to be meaningful.

MUSIC

Another thing that I love about Christmas is the music. So many Christmas carols contain deep truths—inspired lyrics set to beautiful music. Any song that brings attention to the Greatest Gift is wonderful.

I was listening to some Christmas carols when a friend who doesn’t speak English well dropped by. She couldn’t understand the words, but she said she recognized most of the melodies. That reminded me that many carols have been translated into various languages, so that the same songs are being sung and listened to around the world.

4. Swedish traditional carol, author unknown

Many years ago, I attended a Christmas Eve candlelight Catholic mass in Israel, celebrated in Arabic. It was beautiful to worship with the Christians there, to hear the same songs I knew and loved, even though I couldn’t understand the words or sing along. Enjoying the beautiful carols with those fellow Christians was heartwarming. ★

LIGHTS

A lot of people like Christmas lights, but I really like them! And I enjoy when the trees and bushes in people’s yards and around restaurants and other businesses are decorated with strings of Christmas lights.

I’m praying that each of you reading this will have a love-filled, light-filled Christmas, and that we will each do our part to light others’ lives with the love of Jesus.

Now light one thousand Christmas lights,
On dark earth here tonight;
One thousand, thousand also shine,
To make the dark sky bright.
He came to bring us love and light,
To bring us peace on earth.
So let your candles shine tonight,
And sing with joy and mirth.⁴

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



Christmas thoughts

POINTS TO PONDER

It is Christmas every time you let God love others through you. Yes, it is Christmas every time you smile at your brother and offer him your hand.—*Mother Teresa (1910–1997)*



It is good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when its mighty Founder was a child Himself.—*Charles Dickens (1812–1870)*



Christ did not come to do away with suffering; He did not come to explain it; He came to fill it with His presence.—*Paul Claudel (1868–1955)*



The joy of brightening other lives, bearing each others' burdens, easing others' loads and supplanting empty hearts and lives with generous gifts becomes for us the magic of Christmas.—*William Carey Jones*



The hinge of history is on the door of a Bethlehem stable.—*Ralph W. Sockman (1889–1970)*



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)*



Blessed is the season which engages the whole world in a conspiracy of love.—*Hamilton Wright Mabie (1846–1916)*



The only real blind person at Christmas-time is he who has not Christmas in his heart.—*Helen Keller (1880–1968)*

Christmas is not a date. It is a state of mind.—*Mary Ellen Chase (1887–1973)*



My idea of Christmas, whether old-fashioned or modern, is very simple: loving others. Come to think of it, why do we have to wait for Christmas to do that?—*Bob Hope (1903–2003)*



Christmas living is the best kind of Christmas giving.—*Henry Van Dyke (1852–1933)*



It is Christmas in the heart that puts Christmas in the air.—*W. T. Ellis (1845–1925)*



Peace on earth will come to stay,
When we live Christmas every day.
—*Helen Steiner Rice (1900–1981)*



Christmas waves a magic wand over this world, and behold, everything is softer and more beautiful.—*Norman Vincent Peale (1898–1993)*



This is the message of Christmas: We are never alone.—*Taylor Caldwell (1900–1985)*



Welcome, all wonders in one sight!
Eternity shut in a span.
Summer in winter. Day in night.
Heaven in earth, and God in man!
Great little one, whose all-embracing birth
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth.
—*Richard Crashaw (1613–1649)* ■

CHRISTMAS HOPE

BY SALLY GARCÍA



IN FEBRUARY 2010, an earthquake and tsunami struck Constitución, Chile. The next Christmas, some friends and I planned to take boxes of aid to the many families who were still living in makeshift camps ten months later. Margarita, one of the volunteers, had taken up a collection of Christmas decorations in her office building, so we included a few of those in each box, along with a copy of the Christmas issue of *Conéctate* (the Spanish edition of *Activated*) and a CD of Christmas music. One person in Margarita's office had donated a Christmas tree, which we also took with us, even though we didn't know exactly what we would do with it.

While a few of us gathered all the children for a live Christmas show of songs and skits, another team fanned out to visit the various cabins that made up the camp. At one home, two volunteers found a woman near tears. Her family had lost almost everything in the tsunami, and a recent robbery had taken the rest. She said her little boy had been watching other families put up Christmas trees, and he kept asking when she was going to get one for them. It was all he talked about.

The volunteers told her they would see what they could do, and scrambled back to our van so excited that an onlooker would have guessed they held a winning lottery ticket. "We found the perfect family for that Christmas tree!" they exclaimed.

They rushed back with the tree, and soon had it up and decorated in the one-room shack. The woman watched with joy as her son's wish came true.

The little boy and his sister returned from the Christmas program, and their mother had them close their eyes before leading them inside. When the little boy opened his eyes and let out a shriek of delight, we knew God had led us to the right family.

Months later, another volunteer was at the same camp when a woman explained how at one point, she had been so discouraged that she felt she couldn't go on. But then some people showed up at her door, out of nowhere, with the Christmas tree her son had wanted so badly. And that was the day she had decided not to give up.

SALLY GARCÍA IS AN EDUCATOR, MISSIONARY, AND MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN CHILE. ■

GOD HAS NO HANDS

By Annie Johnson Flint



God has no hands but our hands to do his work today;
God has no feet but our feet to lead others in his way;
God has no voice but our voice to tell others how he died;
And, God has no help but our help to lead them to his side.



THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

BY AMY JOY MIZRANY

IT'S CHRISTMAS, and I love to sing! It's almost a subconscious action at this point—whether I'm walking or sitting or on my phone, I'll be singing. It's something I do throughout the whole year, but when Christmastime rolls around, I sing even more. I love the beautiful lyrics of classic Christmas carols, and I like that I can sing so freely about a message so precious without anyone thinking it's weird, because *it's Christmas!*

One song in particular will always get stuck in my head for weeks and weeks afterwards. It has a great melody and is just fun to sing. It goes...

What is Christmas, do you know?

Is it pretty gifts and shiny toys

All wrapped up so nice and bright for little girls and boys?

Is it pretty mistletoe,

Cheery lights, and sparkling Christmas trees?

No, these do not Christmas make.

I'm sure it's more than these.

Then it crescendos to the chorus, which states that Jesus was born all those many years ago, and *that* is what makes Christmas.

Another Christmas song I love imparts a similar sentiment and, when I was young, I used to sing it with a group as a performance. We had a lot of other dance numbers, poems, and plays as part of the show, but we all knew that this song was the one we wanted to get right. My favorite part of it went...

*When holiday lights have all gone dim
Will you still remember Him?
When ornaments are packed away
Will the Christmas spirit with you stay?*



This song, whenever we'd perform it, would bring people to tears within the crowd and we would have many people coming up to us afterwards to say how much the song moved them. The idea of the love that Christmas is supposed to help us dwell on being packed away with all the extra fluff and frills of the season is a powerful one. A lot of people listening to us could resonate with the concept of losing the closeness that they had felt to God once the world would move on to the next thing and the stores would bring in some other money-making event.

More and more, I hear people talking about how they don't enjoy Christmas as much anymore, due to how commercialized it's become. For me, Christmas is not about the decorations, or the dinner, or the gifts. It's about love, about the proof of God's loving nature manifested in the gift of His Son. Everything else is brilliant and moment-making...but extra. None of those things make Christmas. They're not what it's about.

It can be hard to counter the message that it's about the perfect gift, the perfect display, the perfect tree, etc. We all succumb to the pressure now and then, but when you find yourself in this position and you're autopiloting Christmas with meaningless activities and trappings of the season, take a pause. Read the story of Jesus' birth again and meditate on it for a while. *That's* what Christmas is about. And that is worth singing about and celebrating!

Place the real meaning of Christmas at the center of your mind and heart throughout the whole month, so that no matter what the rest of the world is doing, we can give Jesus the birthday celebration He deserves.

AMY JOY MIZRANY WAS BORN AND LIVES IN SOUTH AFRICA, WHERE SHE IS A FULL-TIME MISSIONARY WITH HELPING HAND AND A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL. IN HER SPARE TIME, SHE PLAYS THE VIOLIN. ■



A LITTLE CHILD

Long ago on a bed of hay,
A little newborn baby lay.
He lay quite still and didn't cry,
But looked around with a curious eye.
A little baby sent to earth,
A very special kind of birth.
"But this is just a child we see.
Isn't He as human as you and me?
Yet something's shining in His face,
A sweet and tender look of grace."
What is it in Him we see there?
His mother sits, and though we stare
And try to understand this wondrous child,
She only pats Him with a smile.
She has been told by heaven's own
Of what will happen when He's grown.
How He will teach and help and share
With all who love God and who care
To learn how they can love more, too.
He will have much work to do.
And He will leave her, this she knows,
As to His destined task He goes.
And then one day His life He'll give
So those who trust in Him can live.
She knows all this and sighs within.
But His sacrifice will conquer sin
And pain and death and so much wrong.
This future promise makes her strong.
So she and we look at His face,
Smiling gently in His place,
And contemplate all that will be done
By this little one, God's Child, His Son.

—Chloe West ■

A SIMPLER KIND OF CHRISTMAS

BY JOYCE SUTTIN

I HAVE TAKEN A GOOD HARD LOOK AT MY LIFE THIS YEAR. Seeing all the stuff I had gathered and realizing how happy others could be if I gave it away, I have simplified and decluttered my life. I still have lots of stuff, and I am by no means living a Spartan existence, but I just have a lot less, and I have felt good about it.

Looking at my living room in November, I dreaded the coming holidays. For years I had put up a huge tree, laden with decorations. Then I would spend hours wrapping gifts to put under the tree. I have a large family, and by the time I had done all my shopping and wrapping, my living room was full of stuff, just sitting there until Christmas.

Then I began to think of all the stuff I had received. I might have mentioned that I loved candles, so I would receive two or three candles. Or I might have said I enjoyed essential oils, and I would receive several boxes of oils, many of which were still sitting in my closet. I wondered if members of my family really wanted or needed the gifts I would pick out for them, or if they would take the gifts and the gift receipts and stand in long lines after Christmas to exchange them for something else.

So, as I dragged out my boxes of Christmas ornaments this year, I did what I have been doing with my other excessive belongings. I took a good look at what I really wanted and needed and gave the rest away to someone who was thrilled to have it. Then I decorated my tree and saw that it still looked wonderful.

I started to panic that I hadn't begun to shop for Christmas gifts until the end of November and prayed for a better, simpler way. Then, it came to me. Instead of giving stuff this Christmas, I would give experiences.



In my children's busy lives, they long for those weekends when they can get away for a few days. So I looked for a way I wouldn't just be giving money, but I could help pay for them to have unforgettable experiences.

My Christmas is simpler this year. I have fewer decorations, but I enjoy what I have. My tree still looks great with fewer ornaments in an uncluttered living room. There are a few gifts beneath the tree, and I am excited about my giving as I wait to see the surprise on the faces of my children. As I have embraced a simpler life, an added perk has been that life seems to move a little more slowly, with time to remind myself of what Christmas is really all about and spend time on what is really important.

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/). ■



CHRISTMAS ORANGES

BY CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER

OUR FAMILY HAS A LONGSTANDING CHRISTMAS DAY TRADITION OF SHARING TANGERINES BEFORE OPENING OUR PRESENTS. It's a way to remember our grandparents and great-grandparents who came through many trials and tribulations from Germany to their new home in America.

My grandfather had a grueling job in a Pittsburgh steel mill with very little money to spend on their first Christmas together in their new home in 1927, so the family gave what they could—a special delight from the “tropical land” of Florida. Though they had little, they had each other and a hope that their future would be brighter than their past—and so it was.

It turns out that giving oranges is a popular Christmas tradition around the world. One story tells of the bishop of Myra, St. Nicholas, who heard that a poor man had no dowry for his three daughters' marriages. St. Nick gave each of the three daughters a bag of gold to help them with their new lives. The oranges remind us of the importance of giving and helping those in need.

You can make a meaningful Christmas decoration with an orange called a *Christingle*. You take an orange and slice the bottom to make a base for it to stand on. Cut a hole in the top and put a candle in the orange. You can use some aluminum foil to catch any wax that might drip down when it is lit. Then put a red ribbon around the orange. Top the orange off with four kebab sticks that have dried fruit or other goodies skewered through them. (Of course, you need to keep fire safety in mind when doing projects like this with younger children.)

The orange represents the world, the red ribbon the blood and love of Christ, the four sticks represent the four seasons/the four compass directions, the fruit represents the fruits of the Holy Spirit, and the lit candle represents Jesus, the light of the world.

CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER IS A FREELANCE WRITER AND MIME ARTIST¹ WHO SPENT 47 YEARS DOING MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES IN 10 DIFFERENT COUNTRIES. HE AND HIS WIFE PAULINE CURRENTLY LIVE IN GERMANY. ■

1. <http://elixirmime.com>

How to share Jesus' ♥ love at Christmastime!

Q: I would like to make this coming Christmas more meaningful for me and my family than past Christmases, but I don't know where to start. Any suggestions?

A: There's nothing more inspiring than seeing God's love and miracle-working power firsthand, and what better time to see people's hearts being touched by His love than at Christmas?

Here are some ideas of activities that you can do with your family or friends. Most of these require a little organization or preparation, but they're doable. ♥

* Go Christmas caroling

Even if you don't have the most awesome voice, you'll have fun going door-to-door in your neighborhood singing Christmas carols with others. And you'll probably be pleasantly surprised to see how readily people open their doors and hearts to you as you spread Christmas cheer. It's a great way to make new friends and show old ones that you care. ♥

* Visit institutions

Visit the lonely and bedridden in hospitals, homeless shelters, children's homes, or retirement homes. Bring Christmas gifts if you can—they need not be expensive or elaborate to convey love. A little bit of cheer goes a long way! ♥

* Babysit for busy parents

During the Christmas season, parents often struggle to find time for all that they need to do. Offer free

babysitting to friends at your home or theirs. Include the children in age-appropriate Christmas activities, such as making cards or cookies, or crafting gifts for their parents, relatives, or friends. ♥

* Minister to coworkers and neighbors

Remember those people you see at work every day, but don't exchange more than a casual "good morning" with? Or the people you live next door to but hardly know?

Make an effort this Christmas to get to know them. Perhaps you could invite them to your Christmas dinner, Bible study, or to participate in one of your Christmas activities. You can approach them with a gift of Christmas cookies or a card. Let God use you to bring a coworker or neighbor closer to Him this Christmas.

* Christmas angel

Here's a group project that you can do with your family, workmates, or friends to usher in the meaning and spirit of Christmas.

Put everyone's name in a hat or a bowl and draw names. Then each person becomes a "Christmas angel" by doing secret deeds of kindness for the person whose name they drew. Give some thought to how Jesus feels about that person and see if you can come up with something special to do for him or her. ♥

Giving from the heart can touch the giver as much as the recipient. As you make it a point to give more of yourself this Christmas, you'll discover the wellspring of joy and happiness that is Christmas at its best! ■



THE BEST GIFT

BY KEITH PHILLIPS

CAN YOU IMAGINE BEING GIVEN A CHRISTMAS GIFT AND NOT OPENING IT FOR 20 YEARS? Well, that's exactly what I did. Year after year I unwrapped all of my other gifts and enjoyed them for a few minutes or a few months before I lost interest or outgrew or wore out each one. I don't know why I never got around to opening that one gift. When I was small, my other gifts all looked more fun, I suppose, and as I grew older, I thought I knew what was inside and wasn't interested. Most years I didn't even notice it.

Then one evening I bumped into an old friend on the street, and he handed me, of all things, that Christmas gift I'd ignored all those years. I opened it mostly to please my friend, who was clearly quite excited about it and seemed convinced that it was just what I needed. To my astonishment, he was right! Suddenly the other Christmas gifts of 20 years paled by comparison. This gift was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. It was intangible, yet more real than the ground I was standing on. I can only describe it as love—love in its richest, deepest, truest sense, overwhelming and boundless love, unconditional and unending. And it was mine! Definitely mine! For a moment I felt foolish for having waited so long to open it, but then I realized that no longer mattered. It was mine!

And it gets better. This gift is for everybody. If you haven't unwrapped yours yet, let this be the Christmas you do. It's the one that bears this note: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."¹

May you and yours experience the wonderful reality of a love-filled, Christ-filled Christmas.

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. ■

1. John 3:16



Dear Jesus, through Your birth and life on earth, You opened the door for me to have a personal relationship with You and Your Father, an eternal connection that will endure forever in the world to come. Please come into my heart, forgive me for the wrong things I've done, fill me with Your Spirit, and help me to live a life that pleases You. Amen.



CHRISTMAS PAST AND PRESENT

BY CHRIS MIZRANY

EVERY YEAR, Christmas comes too fast. That's not to say I don't look forward to it, as I surely do, along with all the little joys, decorations, and memories forged over the season. But it always seems to show up before I'm quite ready, then it's gone before I've had time to fully enjoy it. I often find myself sighing with both relief and disappointment when the season winds down and is relegated to one more checked item on my year's list.

Of course, there's so much to love about Christmas, even as the details change with time. When I was a child, my siblings and I would sing carols on Christmas Eve with our parents. Now, I sing those same carols with my own daughters. In those days, Christmas meant late to bed and late to rise. Now it still means late to bed—but up early with the sunny faces of my kids, excited to run to the living room.

But Christmas is so much more than a holiday, a giant decoration-fest, or a reason to enjoy a meal together with friends and loved ones. It marks a point in time when human history began to change. The first Christmas reset

time forever with its unprecedented truth—that God had come to dwell with us in the person of Jesus, whose death on the cross would bring the gift of eternal life to all who believe.

I want to make each Christmas a time when I leave things behind that hold me in the past, as I move forward into the newness of life that Christ brought by His birth. For me, Christmas is the perfect time to reset the clock and start afresh. It's a constant reminder that God saw us as worthy of redemption then, and He still does today, and that we are capable of renewal.

This Christmas may also be the last Christmas for many things in my life. Friends move away, children grow up, circumstances change. So I want to savor the little moments and take note of the big ones. I choose to live with the joy that Christmas affords—and look to the future with hope.

CHRIS MIZRANY IS A MISSIONARY, PHOTOGRAPHER, AND WEB DESIGNER WITH HELPING HAND IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA. ■

WHEN YOU AREN'T READY

BY MARIE ALVERO

EACH YEAR, December 25th comes around whether we're ready or not. We often talk about how there's so much we still need to get done, how we're short on time and money, etc. But what about when you aren't ready for Christmas because you're dealing with a loss, and your heart is simply not ready for celebration?

In 2021, we prepared to celebrate Christmas without Granddad. My best friend's eight kids prepared to celebrate without their mom, and with a newly widowed father still reeling from the loss. Another friend had lost her father just a few weeks prior, and another two friends would celebrate this Christmas as singles, following their divorce. Another friend was struggling with being unemployed, with Christmas adding to the stress of barely being able to make ends meet as it was. And yet, the holidays were closing in at their usual pace, with no relief for the heartbroken.

My heart was so heavy—not just with my own loss, but with my loss in conjunction with the losses all around me. Each death had been sudden and unexpected, and I felt myself waiting for the next loss-related news.

This was the first year I worked through Advent, the four-week period leading up to Christmas that many dedicate to prayer, meditation, and Bible study. It was a struggle just to try to do this well. I didn't observe much, and there certainly weren't any daily gifts or anything. I just had the words: Hope, Preparation, Joy, Love. Each



cast a ray of light into the darkness, shifting my focus to something more meaningful and worthy.

Aside from my loss and brokenness, the fact that Jesus came as the Savior of humanity is a thing to celebrate! Even if I couldn't muster up all the joys and the traditions of the season, I could fix my heart. If I seemed a bit more melancholic than my usual Christmas self, it's because I was chewing on those words—Hope, Preparation, Joy, and Love.

Hope reminded me that my hope is not in the promise of this life being easy, but in Jesus' promise to redeem me.

Although I didn't have the strength for big Christmas preparations, I could **prepare** my heart to accept God's sovereignty.

I have **joy** because Jesus came! And joy increases when it's shared with others.

God showed His **love** by sending Jesus to earth to redeem us.

I sent a huge basket of treats to my best friend's kids and texted and called the friends who had lost someone. And on Christmas Day I was ready to say "Joy to the World."

MARIE ALVERO IS A FORMER MISSIONARY TO AFRICA AND MEXICO. SHE CURRENTLY LIVES A HAPPY, BUSY LIFE WITH HER HUSBAND AND CHILDREN IN CENTRAL TEXAS, USA. ■



FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

GIFT EXCHANGE

The first Christmas was My Father’s gift of love to the world, but it was also His gift to you personally. And it was a “gift that keeps on giving.”

For those who witnessed it firsthand—the star, the choir of angels, the baby in the manger—it was an unexpected and overwhelming spiritual experience. For the blessed few who recognized that baby as their Messiah, it was the fulfillment of a long-anticipated event. For them and the many millions since who have likewise believed, it is the door to eternal life. And it’s the same today. If you celebrate Christmas in spirit and truth, the same wonder, the same promise, and the same unspeakable joy can be yours.

But Christmas is not just a gift from My Father’s heart to yours—it’s a gift exchange. It’s a special time for you to meditate on My love and the wonder of the first Christmas, but it’s also a time to give Me the gift of your thankfulness and praise and to celebrate all that I’ve done for you. So if you’re wondering what gift you can give Me this Christmas, you can give Me the gift of your love and a thankful heart.