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HAPPY BIRTHDAY, JESUS!

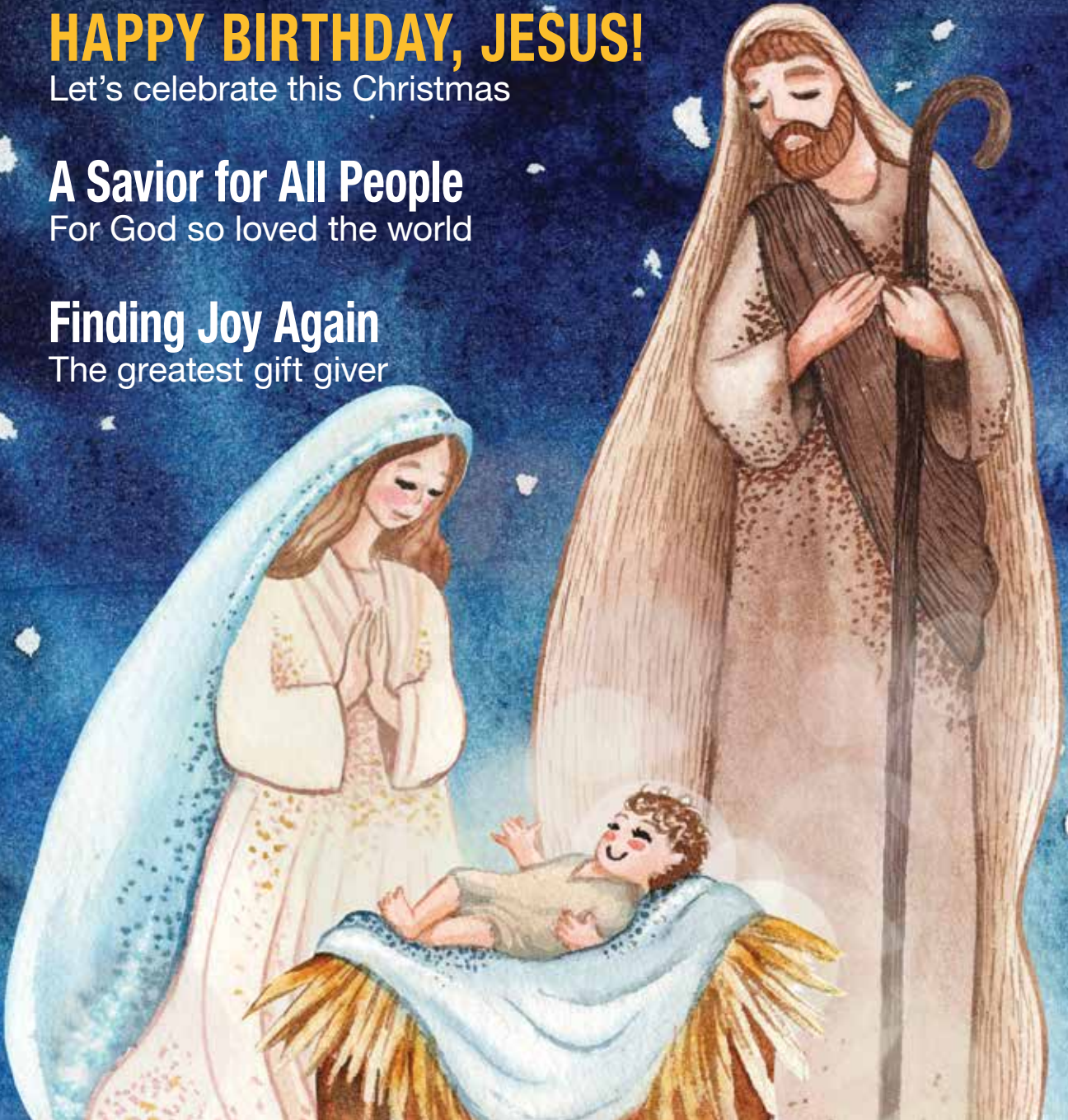
Let's celebrate this Christmas

A Savior for All People

For God so loved the world

Finding Joy Again

The greatest gift giver





PERSONALLY SPEAKING THE ESSENCE OF CHRISTMAS

The beauty of Christmas seems to have been lost in many parts of the world. Longtime traditions have been dropped to give way to flashy trends. Bright trinkets, ornaments and baubles have paradoxically darkened the true light of the holiday. Many cultures that once embraced Christmas traditions have now

toned down the festivities, which has resulted in little rejoicing. Manger scenes have been replaced by gaudy figures, and well-loved carols by silly songs that are fun to sing but leave us feeling empty.

Let's explore how to bring back the true meaning of Christmas as we celebrate the good news that "God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

We can help bring the light of Jesus into the Christmas holidays as we consider the needs of others, give generously, and share special moments together. Our actions don't have to be costly or extravagant. We can call a friend who is lonely, offer to help someone who is burdened, send an old-fashioned Christmas card, prepare a gift basket for a family in need, or visit an elderly person and take time to listen patiently. One small act of kindness is more valuable than a bucketload of good intentions.

Let's do all we can to bring Christmas joy and peace to the weary. If we want to have a positive impact on the world, we can start within our own home and family, our neighborhood, our workplace, and our surroundings. As we celebrate the true meaning of Christmas, we can reflect Jesus' love on our faces and in our attitudes, actions, and words.

As we enter into the Christmas season, we can be part of spreading joy to others. Give with an open heart and you won't be disappointed! It's easy to think that our small individual efforts will do little good, but if we shine the light of God's love and truth, we can brighten our part of the world and make a difference.

As we embrace the true Christmas spirit, we can wholeheartedly celebrate our Savior's birth. May the Christmas cheer you spread this season return to you and bless you many times over.

Gabriel and Sally García
Activated Editorial Team



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HAPPY BIRTHDAY, JESUS!

BY HÉLÈNE MINEO



BECAUSE I GREW UP IN THE SOVIET UNION, I didn't celebrate my first Christmas until 1991 when I was 16 years old. Until then, I had never seen a manger scene, never heard a Christmas carol, and never been told the story of Jesus' birth.

When I finally experienced the truth and joy of Christmas, it thrilled my heart and mind and left me feeling tipsy with happiness from December 25th (Christmas in the West) to January 7th (Christmas according to the Julian calendar and the Russian Orthodox Church). I spent those two weeks with missionaries who had recently introduced me to Christ. We wished a happy Christmas to everyone we met and passed out colorful posters with the Christmas story to thousands of people, many of whom, like me just a short while before, were hearing this message for the first time.

I turned 16 shortly before I found Jesus, and to celebrate my birthday my family and friends organized the biggest party I had ever had. Today I hardly remember the party or the presents, but I can still describe every detail of how I met Jesus. He filled my empty life with His love and happiness, and that was by far the best present I have ever received. It was beyond my wildest dreams!

I remember standing outside with some friends at midnight on the Orthodox Christmas Eve, our faces turned up toward the clear, starry sky, as we shouted, "Happy birthday, Jesus!" at the top of our lungs. I still get goose bumps remembering how happy I was at that moment. To this day, every time Christmas comes around, you will find me singing "Happy Birthday, Jesus" on Christmas Day.

That first Christmas after I came to know Jesus, I wanted to give Him a present that I was sure He would be pleased with—other people being introduced to Him, so He could fill their hearts with as much joy as He had given me. That desire in my heart hasn't diminished over the years. And this Christmas I will share Jesus with as many people as I can.

God's infinite, all-encompassing love—the heart and soul of Christmas—never ceases to transform those it touches. Let's each do our part to give Jesus a very happy birthday this year by sharing His love and truth with others.

HÉLÈNE MINEO IS A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN FRANCE. ■



A SAVIOR FOR

BY PETER AMSTERDAM



ON THE NIGHT OF JESUS' BIRTH, in the hills near Bethlehem, shepherds were watching over their flocks. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord, His light and brightness, shone around them. The angel told them not to fear, that he had good news for them. He then revealed that a Savior, Christ the Lord, had been born in the city of David that night. As a sign of this proclamation, the angel told them that they would find the child lying in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothes (Luke 2:8–12).

Right after this astonishing announcement, a multitude of the host of heaven appeared, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace,

goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:13–14 NKJV). When the light of God’s glory and the angel and the host departed, the shepherds decided to go to Bethlehem right away to see what God had told them about.

There is evidence within Jewish writings that shepherds and herders were considered to have a very low social status within first-century Israel. This was partly because they were in the fields all the time and were unable to keep up with all the religious laws, and also because they would have the sheep graze on other people’s land without permission. Given that context, the fact that this announcement was made to shepherds—seen to be outcasts to some extent—is all the more remarkable.

In Bethlehem the shepherds found Mary, Joseph, and the baby, just as the angel said they would. Finding Jesus lying in a manger swaddled in cloth within the main room of a peasant house, with animals in the

stable area, would not have been unusual for them, since most likely their children had been swaddled in the same manner according to the customs of peasants. Placing a child in a manger was probably not normally done, but a practical solution in overcrowded accommodations.

What would have been extraordinary for them was that a child whose birth was announced to them by an angel, accompanied by a heavenly host, was found in a village home that was just like theirs! The shepherds—who were people of low status, the poor and humble—discovered that night that the Messiah, the Savior of the world, was born a humble peasant just as they were.

ALL PEOPLE

The Gospel of Luke tells us that the shepherds left “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen,” and telling others “all that had been told them concerning the child” (Luke 2:17–20). Jesus had come for the poor and needy, the lowly, the downtrodden, and not just for those of status and good reputation. The message was that everyone is welcome, God’s gift of salvation is for all.

Matthew’s Gospel tells of the visit of the Magi, who came from the East after they saw a special star, which they understood to be an omen that a king of the Jews would be born. They traveled to Jerusalem in search of the king, and upon their arrival began inquiring where

was this child who was destined to be king, so that they could pay homage to him (Matthew 2:1–2).

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, as the birth of a new king could mean a challenge to his throne. He gathered the chief priests and scribes to find out where such a child was supposed to be born, and they told him that according to Scripture the birth would be in Bethlehem. Though the religious rulers knew that Scripture stated where the Messiah would be born, they had no idea that He had already been born. While Bethlehem is only about five miles from Jerusalem, there is no record of any of the religious leadership going to seek out the child.

Herod secretly met with the Magi to ascertain when they had seen the star, which was apparently two years earlier. After getting this information, he sent them off to Bethlehem with instructions for them to report the child’s whereabouts so he too could pay Him homage (Matthew 2:3–8). The Magi left Jerusalem, found Jesus and His family, bowed down before Him and paid Him homage, and gave gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:9–11).

After finding the newborn King, the Magi were instructed through a dream to not return to see Herod, and they obeyed those instructions. When Herod found out that they had left the country without telling him where to find the child, he was furious. He ordered his soldiers to kill all the male children who were two years old and younger in Bethlehem and the surrounding area, in hopes of eliminating any challenges to his throne.





Besides relaying these events, what did this part of Matthew's narrative seek to convey? Herod and the religious leaders in Jerusalem were unaware that the promised King was born, showing that God had not given the religious or the political leadership a sign. On the other hand, the gentile Magi had seen a sign in nature, in the star. They responded by seeking for the newborn king and eventually saw the Savior and worshiped Him. Matthew was making the point that the salvation God had promised wasn't reserved for Israel only, but for the gentiles as well, meaning it was for everyone.

Luke tells us that after Jesus' birth, His parents took Him to the temple in Jerusalem to be presented to the Lord. While they were there, an elderly devout Jew named Simeon saw them. God had told Simeon that he wouldn't die before he saw the Christ, the Messiah. Upon seeing Jesus he took Him in his arms and prayed: "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:29–32).

Simeon's prayer speaks of salvation for all people—both Jews and gentiles. As was the case with the Magi,

the message is of salvation available to *all* through Christ. The Son of God came to earth for *everyone*.

Simeon then blessed them and prophesied, saying to Mary, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed" (Luke 2:34–35 NIV). Having proclaimed that salvation would be for both Jews and gentiles, Simeon also prophesied that there would be a rejection of Jesus from within Israel. Some would believe and others wouldn't; there would be division among the people as the thoughts of people's hearts were revealed.

In Luke's Gospel, the shepherds, some of the lowly within Jewish society, witness a supernatural announcement through the angel, and the child is a peasant child—a clear sign that He has come for the common people. There is also a prophecy from a religiously devout Jew within the temple, making the statement that the Messiah is for everyone, though He will be rejected by some. In Matthew's Gospel, the sign of the Savior, seen in nature, is followed by the gentile Magi coming to Him, again signifying that salvation is for all.

The consistent message throughout the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth—in fact, throughout all of the Gospels—is that Jesus has come for all humanity; He died for the salvation of all. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). This is the good news of Christmas. This is the news that the angels proclaimed, the message portrayed by the star leading the Magi, and the message of God's love that we carry in our hearts and are called to share with others.

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



MEANINGFUL MEMORIES

BY VICTORIA OLIVETTA



I LOVE THE CHRISTMAS SEASON! I often look for new ways to serve the Lord and others during this time.

Two Christmases ago, I had an idea for an activity. I spent a fair bit of time going to different stores looking for colorful envelopes and paper. I finally found what I wanted and chose the favorite color of each person who would be at our Christmas party. When it was time to share gifts, I gave an envelope and a piece of paper to each person. I suggested that on one side of the paper we could write a list of the things that fill our hearts with gratitude, and on the other side we could write our goals and dreams for the coming year. It was a rewarding experience! We each saved our envelope.

The following Christmas I celebrated with these dear friends again, who have been by my side for many years and through many challenging circumstances. We planned the menu, shared the expenses, and had a marvelous time. During our time together, we pulled out the envelopes we'd saved, and shared what we had written the year before—what we were thankful for and our dreams and goals for the new year—and how many of them had become reality.

A few months later a friend and I were having a meal together, and with a glow in her eyes she recounted how faithful the Lord is. It had been a year of many changes for her, including loved ones moving away and a grandchild being born. She said she felt so grateful for the little colored envelope she had kept, because she had never before prepared a written record of God's blessings. It helped her see how much she had enjoyed God's love, protection, and provision, as well as good health, good communication with her son who lives overseas, and much more.

I was grateful to see that this simple idea had an impact. How lovely are gifts from the heart! Those little envelopes held treasures because they enabled us to remember the Lord's abundant blessings.

This Christmas season I am praying for the Lord to give me another idea. It may require a little time, imagination, and love, but it will be worth it!

VICTORIA OLIVETTA IS A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN ARGENTINA. ■




MY CHRISTMAS IN JULY

BY KATRIN PRENTICE

IN MY EARLY TWENTIES I EMBARKED ON A LIFE-CHANGING JOURNEY AS PART OF A CHRISTIAN SINGING GROUP. The vision was to bring God's love and joy to children living in orphanages who longed for a glimmer of light in their lives. Christmas was a particularly magical time, and one day I found myself leading a spirited Christmas entertainment show for a group of children who were all about five years old. Little did I know this would mark the beginning of a heartwarming story that would come full circle fifteen years later.

That day, with the air filled with anticipation and excitement, we sang songs that echoed through the hallways of the orphanage, capturing the children's attention, and stirring their hearts. We taught them carols that shared the timeless story of Jesus' birth and the message of love and hope. As we wrapped up the show, we gave each child a simple Christmas present, which included a colorful poster to remind them that Jesus loves them. This was something they could hold on to long after the holiday season.



Fast-forward fifteen years to a hot summer day in July 2005. It was a few days before I was going to get married to the love of my life, Brian. We were staying with his best man's family, surrounded by wedding preparations and the excitement of a new chapter in our lives.

Unrelated to the wedding buzz, the house where we were staying needed some repairs, and our friends had hired some handymen to help with the job. When the workers arrived, our friends were not home, so my husband and I acted as the hosts. I prepared coffee and biscuits for them while they worked on fixing the wall and tiles. What happened next was nothing short of extraordinary.

While passing out the cups and the treats, my gaze met the curious eyes of the young apprentice. A sense of wonder swept over him, freezing him momentarily in time. I felt both uncomfortable and intrigued, and I asked him what was on his mind. What he shared left me utterly amazed.

"Nothing is wrong, Ma'am," he began. "To the contrary, I am both overjoyed and taken aback by the sight of you. I remember you. I can hardly believe it!" My discomfort deepened as I struggled to recognize a face that I was sure I had never encountered before.

"Allow me to backtrack," he proposed, with a smile on his lips. "May I ask if your name is Katrin?" With a nod, I acknowledged his inquiry. His eyes sparkled as he continued, "You play the guitar, don't you? And you sing, quite beautifully, I must say?" I smiled as I blushed in confirmation. I couldn't help but wonder how he could know such details about me.

"I knew it!" he exclaimed. "See, you probably don't remember me, because it was a long time ago, I was about five, and there were so many of us..."

He told me that he was one of the orphans I had performed for during that memorable Christmas show. With vivid clarity, he recounted how I had held his little hands, looked into his eyes, and assured him

of Jesus' love. "I still keep that poster you gave me," he added tearfully. "And I never forgot meeting you."

The poster I had given him had become more than a token of seasonal goodwill. It had planted a seed of faith in his heart that grew through the years.

There were probably over 50 little children dancing around us during that unforgettable Christmas show. What are the chances I would meet one of them fifteen years later, on the eve of my wedding?! But here we were. Two lives, connected by an act of kindness and a seed of faith planted long ago, were crossing paths once more.

My Christmas in July, as I would come to call it, held profound significance for me. It whispered to me of the potentially far-reaching impact of the words we speak and the acts of kindness we bestow.

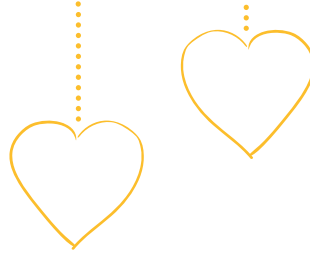
This unexpected encounter also underlined the importance of planting seeds of faith, even when we can't predict the outcome. I wonder how different his life might have been if I had missed the opportunity to tell him of Jesus' love for him. Thankfully that was not the case. And here he was; the little orphan boy had grown into a remarkable young man.

In the tapestry of life, every encounter, no matter how small, can add a unique thread that weaves a beautiful story. That chance encounter in July wasn't a coincidence. It was a purposeful reminder of the impact of God's love and grace!—The best wedding present ever!

As we said our wedding vows, my husband and I also vowed to carry forward the lesson learned—to cherish every moment, to never underestimate the power of a kind word, and to always be faithful to share the message of Jesus with everyone we meet.



KATRIN PRENTICE IS AN ACCREDITED LIFE AND EXECUTIVE MASTER COACH (IAPC&M) BASED IN BULGARIA. SHE HAS TRAINED HUNDREDS OF COACHES ACROSS EUROPE AND PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN DEVELOPING THE COACHING INDUSTRY IN THE BALKANS REGION. ■



CELEBRATE THE POSITIVE

BY AMY JOY MIZRANY

WHEN IT NEARS THE END OF THE YEAR, most of my focus goes towards Christmas. It's an exciting and larger-than-life kind of event. But there's also the aspect of December being the last month of the usually very tiring year.

At this time, I think about the closing year, how things went and what I'm hoping will be different next year.

Sometimes on particularly busy and stressful days, I think about how nice it would be if all the busyness of Christmas was caused by a desire to honor Jesus and not the frantic "keeping up with the Joneses" struggle.

I occasionally want to yell in frustration when I remember the resolutions that I committed to and never got around to, the habits I thought I could break at the beginning of the year but held on to for another year.

Those were some of the thoughts running through my mind as Christmas neared. But then things changed!

I was walking down a road with a friend, and I happened to glance down at the pavement.

"Hey," I said. "Look at that."

My friend replied, "Oh man, the municipality really does not care. That crack should have been filled ages ago.

Good luck trying to get anyone to fix that pothole. I'm sure the cyclists have not enjoyed this."

I started laughing. "No. Look. It's a heart!"

"Oh!"

We both laughed over how the same thing could be seen in two vastly different ways.

My friend was right. It was a crack in the road. They should have fixed the hole. It would probably trip someone up. It probably already had.

But I was right, too. It was a heart.

I took that incident as a formula for reflecting on this year. And it goes like this:

People were unkind.

I failed.

Winter was cold.

I got sad.

Friends and family passed away or left.

That's the *pothole*.

God was faithful.

I was loved.

I succeeded.

Summer was warm.

Jesus stayed with me.

I got to touch people's lives.

That's the *heart*.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that this Christmas I'm looking at the heart, not the pothole. With eleven months of the year behind me, this December I'm going to celebrate the positive, the progress, the joy.

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. ■

Christmas Peace

BY MARIE ALVERO

I'VE BEEN BLESSED WITH NEARLY 50

CHRISTMASES. It's fun to reminisce over my Christmases, celebrated in different houses, in a variety of countries, with different people, a hodgepodge of traditions, and almost always on a shoestring budget.

Thinking back, they all had two things in common: we were celebrating Jesus' birth and we were spending time together. When I plan my own celebrations now, these are the two things that I try to keep at the center. I've learned that there are many ways to help this time of year be simple and inexpensive, but still sweet, fun, and meaningful. Here are a few ideas to consider:

- Honestly assess your budget, both for money and time, so you know what you have to work with.
- Based on your resources of time and money, choose the number of activities and events you can participate in.
- Communicate with your friends and family about what you are able to do so that everyone is on the same page.
- Many of the things that make this season special cost very little, such as playing Christmas music, reading well-loved Christmas stories, watching Christmas movies, volunteering, etc.
- The Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell the story of Jesus' birth, but all of the Gospels tell of Jesus' life. Christmas is a perfect time for reading these stories in the Gospels.
- Give to others. Generosity is one of the resounding themes of Christmas. God gave His Son to the world, an incredible gift! Being generous with our time and resources helps us reflect that loving gift.
- Slow down and savor simple things. Carols and candlelight, a Christmas movie and popcorn, a drive to see the Christmas lights, a dinner with friends and



family. Make the season less of a production and more about slowing down. This takes practice, but it's so worth living in and enjoying the moment.

- Widen your circle of friends. If you know of someone who is alone or in need of cheer, reach out.

Here are my goals for this Christmas season, in this order: 1) Celebrate Jesus and get to know Him a little better, 2) love on my people and share simple joys, 3) slow down and enjoy what is, and 4) stay in budget.

Your goals can be different from mine, but I have learned that approaching the Christmas season with some intentionality helps me and my family get the most out of the holiday.

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. ■

Finding Joy Again

BY ROSANE CORDOBA



THE YEAR WAS 1992. Everything was going great; our youngest daughter arrived in February and we moved to a better house. My husband's small silkscreen business was going well, and the kids were happy and healthy. We had some spare time on the weekends to do volunteer work, singing in children's homes, a facility for elderly people, and a home for orphan teens. We also collected donations at the market to share with poor families.

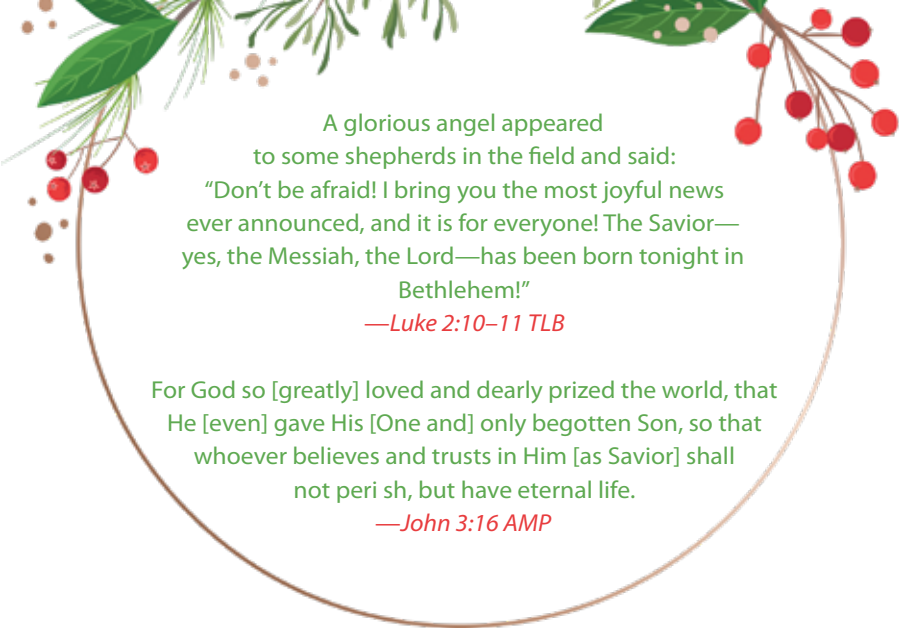
Then, the unexpected happened. My husband had a sudden stroke! This came as a big shock to us all. He was in the ICU for three weeks, while I juggled between managing everything at home, trying to keep the business going, and visiting him every afternoon. Contrary to all our expectations, the Lord took him home to heaven.

We moved through our grief slowly. My faith in the goodness of God kept me going. Also, my life became extra busy, and this helped somewhat to take my mind off of my sadness. I knew our children were being brave and

suffering in silence, and it made my heart sink every time I looked into their sad eyes. My eldest daughter's birthday in September passed without a celebration. Not counting the baby, my children were ages 3 to 13. I could see them maturing beyond their age because of their loss, but I couldn't do much about it.

As Christmas approached, our feeling of emptiness grew, and I prayed and asked the Lord for a miracle of joy for that season. At the beginning of December, some Christian relatives of my brother-in-law who owned a small clothing factory in a city close by came our way for the holidays and stopped by. They brought new clothes for all the kids and sat on the veranda with us for a few hours. They were like angels of mercy, talking to my children and cheering them up.

We lived on the border of Brazil and Paraguay. A week before Christmas, my sister Mabel sent some money for me to go to Ciudad del Este, where toys were cheaper, so



A glorious angel appeared
to some shepherds in the field and said:
“Don’t be afraid! I bring you the most joyful news
ever announced, and it is for everyone! The Savior—
yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in
Bethlehem!”

—Luke 2:10–11 TLB

For God so [greatly] loved and dearly prized the world, that
He [even] gave His [One and] only begotten Son, so that
whoever believes and trusts in Him [as Savior] shall
not peris h, but have eternal life.

—John 3:16 AMP

I could buy a gift for each child. The amount of money was just enough to buy a special toy for each one. I remember getting my middle daughter, who loves to sing, a small portable music box with a microphone to amplify her voice, and for my adventurous seven-year-old I picked out a set of walkie-talkies.

On Christmas Day, they opened the toy packages, laughed, and played. We ate a special meal, we sang together, and we thanked Jesus for coming to our sorrow-filled world to bring us joy. Somehow, He was doing it all *again* for us that Christmas!

As the months passed, we eventually were back to our happy selves. Though we had little money, God always supplied our needs. We found time and inspiration to go back to doing our volunteer work singing and bringing cheer in institutions. We understood better what it was like to be an orphan or a lonely widow in a nursing home.

All my kids are now adults, with children of their own. Every Christmas we get together, we eat and celebrate. We play and we sing together. We have a family tradition where after each present is taken from under the Christmas tree, we mimic the person that the gift is for, and the others guess who it is. We always have some big laughs. Two of my sisters, including Mabel and her grandson, come to our celebrations.

Sometimes, a gift can make the day (or the year!) of a person in need of some cheer, as Mabel’s gift did for me and my family that year. As we approach Christmas, I am reminded that our heavenly Father is by far the greatest gift giver of all time. He loved us so much that He gave His own Son to redeem us.

ROSANE CORDOBA LIVES IN BRAZIL. SHE IS A FREE-LANCE WRITER, TRANSLATOR, AND PRODUCER OF FAITH-BASED AND CHARACTER-BUILDING CHILDREN’S MATERIAL. ■



If you have not yet received the gift of eternal life through receiving Jesus as your Savior, you can do so now by praying this simple prayer:

Dear Jesus, thank You for coming to earth and dying for me and for all humankind. Thank You for making a way for me to have a personal relationship with You and the Father. Please forgive me for the wrong things I’ve done. I ask You to come into my heart. Fill me with Your Holy Spirit and help me to live a life that pleases You. Amen.

OUR HUMBLE SAVIOR

LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT HOW JESUS' CHARACTER WAS MANIFESTED THROUGH SOME OF THE KEY EVENTS IN HIS LIFE. The King of kings chose the path of humility and submission. Jesus both preached and lived humility.

BORN IN A BARN

[Mary] wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.—*Luke 2:7*

HIS MINISTRY

Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.—*Matthew 9:35*

THE FOOT WASHING

[Jesus] poured water into a basin. Then he began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he had around him. After washing their feet, he put on his robe again and sat down and asked, "Do you understand what I was doing? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you are right, because that's what I am. And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you."—*John 13:5,12-15 NLT*

HIS TRIUMPHANT ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM

Behold, your King is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey.—*Matthew 21:5*

SILENT IN THE FACE OF HIS ACCUSERS

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.—*Isaiah 53:7*

REJECTED BY MANY

He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him.—*John 1:10-11 NLT*

CRUCIFIED WITH COMMON CRIMINALS

Two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left.—*Matthew 27:38*

STOOPED TO OUR LEVEL

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant.—*Philippians 2:5-7 NIV* ■



Welcome Back

BY CHRIS MIZRANY

WHENEVER I RETURN HOME FROM A WORK OR MISSION TRIP, my family makes little “Welcome Back” signs, which are hung on the gates, doors, walls, and pretty much all over the house. It’s always a great feeling and it’s amazing how quickly the exhaustion of the trip fades away and my heart is drawn into the cozy glow of home. *Yes, I’m home again.*

I wonder how Jesus felt, heading out the door of heaven to a tough and trouble-filled world, not to return for many years. On the night the angels sang, Jesus’ journey was just beginning. Much, much more living lay ahead—joys and tears, friends and traitors. He was a traveler far from His heavenly home, a stranger in the world. I believe He felt weary at times, just like I do. I imagine facing rejection when He spoke the truth was as painful for Him as it is for anyone else. And I know that He longed for His home and Father. But He kept on.

Now we know how the Christmas story progressed over those long years—the wonder, growth, learning, ministry, choices, destiny, miracles, suffering, death. We see its influence over millennia and feel the undying love that inscribed Jesus’ life on untold hearts. But the story unfolded for Jesus one day at a time, one obedience at a time, one more day away from home, until that incredible

morning when He rose in glory, death’s pang fading in the glow of eternal salvation won for all who would receive Him ([John 1:12](#)).

Today, you and I are passing through this world that appears to be less welcoming of our faith with each day that passes. None of us see the end of our story or know our full impact yet. There are bound to be days when we feel like quitting, days of near unbearable longing for a place away from it all, a place where we *belong*. In those times, let’s recognize the honor it is to walk in the tradition of so many believers through the ages. (See [Hebrews 11](#) and [12:1–3](#).) We aren’t travelling accidentally or aimlessly—we’ve been chosen and sent. So, let’s make the most of our time here!

We can celebrate Jesus, the One who makes our Christmas season festive! We can spread kindness and cheer as sparkling lights in a dim world. How wonderful it will be when we weary travelers are at last home and we see our Lord. In that moment, surrounded by “well done” and “welcome back,” we’ll know it was worth it all.

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FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

MY PRESENCE WITH YOU

As the Christmas season approaches, whether your life seems to be going uphill or downhill, I am with you. Whether you're looking for better days ahead or things are rolling along smoothly, My promise stands that I am always with you (Matthew 28:20).

I am with you to celebrate the wins and to walk with you in your times of joy. I am also with you in difficult times—when that promised job falls through, a loved one becomes sick, or economic worries threaten. No matter where you are at in your life journey, I am with you and your future is one of hope and glory (Romans 8:18).

You can always count on Me and turn to Me for guidance and solutions in every difficulty or new opportunity that presents itself. You can have perfect peace of mind—no matter what is going on around you—in the knowledge that I will be with you every second of every day of this life, and you will be with Me in heaven for all eternity (Isaiah 26:3).

I am the Prince of Peace. I came so that you could have life in all its fullness and abide in My love and joy—and that your joy may be complete (John 15:9–11 NIV). That is My gift to you—and to everyone who will receive Me.