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Vol 18 • Issue 12

CHRISTMAS IS FOR KIDS

Led by a child

Silent Nights

Tips to recharge the
batteries

Christmas Candy

Make sweet
memories





EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION THE PRINCE OF PEACE

Sometimes it feels like the world is getting darker and colder all the time. When the sun sets, we look for some ray of hope.

That hope is here.

Two thousand years ago, over the town of Bethlehem, a new star shone and an angel proclaimed to a group of shepherds, "Behold, 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 On that special night, God gave us the greatest gift anyone could give—His Son, Jesus.

Though Jesus came into the world as a tiny baby, He brought with Him all of God's wonderful gifts. As He grew older, He unwrapped these gifts for us one by one, as He taught us how to love God and one another. Then when He died for us, He gave us the greatest gift of all—the promise of eternal life with Him in heaven.

Jesus wants to live in the hearts of all people everywhere. He sees the misery, grief, and pain of the heavy-hearted. He sees the weak, the sick, and the weary. He sees those who struggle with regret over the past and fear of the future. He sees the persecuted and war-torn, those who have been robbed of hope and a fair chance at life. He hears all our cries and reaches out to us in love. "Don't let your hearts be troubled," He tells us. "Trust in God, and trust also in me."² "Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."³

May you and yours have a wonderful Christmas filled with God's care and love.

Samuel Keating
Executive Editor

1. Luke 2:10-11
2. John 14:1 NLT
3. John 16:33 NLT



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BY DINA ELLENS

THE LIGHT OF CHRISTMAS

I WAS GATHERED with friends in a living room full of Christmas decorations. There were refreshments on the coffee table, and we were singing Christmas carols together. What could be more typical?

But I live in Southeast Asia, and I was surrounded by local friends and was attempting to sing “O Holy Night” in a foreign (to me) language. As my eyes traveled around the circle, I briefly thought of each one that was there.

Susy converted from Buddhism. This caused an uproar in her traditional family; but over the years, she has patiently won each of them to Christ as well.

Nining and her husband were self-proclaimed agnostics when they got married. But Jesus started working on Nining’s heart and she now attends church every Sunday—but

she sits alone, as none of her family are Christians. Nining’s prayer is that someday her husband and sons will be there too, seated by her side.

Hanna’s parents were atheists when they lived in Communist China, but they came to know Jesus after emigrating. After 30 years of marriage, they recently decided to renew their marriage vows in church in the presence of all their children. It was a joyous celebration of faith for the whole family.

As I looked around the circle, I thought of the long journey each of my friends had taken to arrive at this point, where we were sitting together singing Christmas carols. However, there was still more to this simple Christmas celebration that I didn’t know about. After we finished singing “O Holy Night,” one of my friends confided:

“Bomb threats have been made on all the Christian churches in the city. We’re so glad that we could gather here tonight.”

I looked at my friends and marveled at their love and steadfast devotion, despite all odds. I sometimes wonder what the future holds for Christians who are unable to live their faith freely. But tonight my fears were dispelled, as this thought came to me: *As long as the Christmas star shines bright in our hearts and we who love Jesus gather to celebrate His birth, the light of Christmas will shine brightly and light the way for His return.*

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

Christmas Rush or Christmas Reason?

BY VIRGINIA BRANDT BERG, ADAPTED



A FEW CHRISTMASES AGO, as I was standing in the doorway of a department store, enjoying a lovely Nativity scene in a store window, a mother and her little girl came hurrying by. Catching a glimpse of the beautiful scene, the child grabbed her mother's hand and exclaimed, "Mama! Mama! Please let me stop for a minute and look at Jesus!" But her mother replied wearily that they weren't even half through with their shopping list and didn't have time to stop. Then she walked on, dragging her disappointed daughter behind her.

The child's words rang in my heart for a long time after that. "Please let me stop for a minute and look at Jesus." I thought of all the minutes speeding by me that busy Christmas in the mad rush of life that is accelerated at the height of the shopping season. How many minutes had I spent shopping and buying presents and preparing decorations and food in the great wind-up to Christmas, and how many had I spent with the One whose birth and life is the true meaning of this festive season?

Jesus is always so very close to us. He is "at my right hand" and "closer

1. Psalm 16:8; Proverbs 18:24
2. Matthew 11:28 NIV
3. See John 10:10
4. Romans 5:1 NLT

than a brother.”¹ He is within speaking distance. His birth is the essence of Christmas. His gifts to all—peace, love, and joy of heart—are the essential magic of Christmas. With arms outstretched He holds out these gifts to us and says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”² But these we will never receive if we forge on, endlessly shopping, to-do lists in hand, too busy to stop and even notice He’s right there.

Like the old saying, “Dew never falls on a stormy night.” We rarely experience the sweetness and joy of time spent with Jesus while in an anxious and feverish rush of accomplishment. But the dew of heaven and the blessings of Christmas fall peacefully on our hearts and lives when we stop for a moment to get quiet and remember Him. To go on without Him is to forfeit the only real, lasting joy and perfect love that can be experienced in this life and shared forever.

Why don’t we stop and enjoy—really enjoy—what Christmas means? Let’s cut down our task lists. Let’s enjoy the beauty. There are so many wonderful things about Christmas and so many beautiful things to see. It would be a shame to miss it all, wrapping this and wrapping that, rushing for this last thing

and that, cooking and preparing so much for a feast, cluttering our Christmas with so many unnecessary things. And if we don’t stop to enjoy anything of life until after Christmas, the fury with which we proceed will send us reeling into the New Year sighing, “I just survived Christmas!”

Jesus came to bless our lives. That is why we have Christmas. He said He came to bring us life, and that we might have it more abundantly.³ And the apostle Paul tells us, “We have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us.”⁴ Peace and life in all their fullness need not elude us. They are ours to enjoy this Christmas if we’ll give Jesus a chance in our lives and a place in our hearts.

May we all take a minute with Jesus. The true presence of Christmas is found with Him. May the celebration of His birth touch our hearts in a new way this year. May we learn more about the gifts He gave so long ago on Christmas. May we be a part of Christmas itself by being more like Him. May we stop and look at Jesus.

VIRGINIA BRANDT BERG (1886–1968) WAS AN AMERICAN EVANGELIST AND AUTHOR. READ MORE ABOUT HER LIFE AND WORK AT [HTTP://VIRGINIABRANDTBERG.ORG](http://virginiabrandtberg.org). ■



When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with the flocks,
then the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal those broken in spirit,
to feed the hungry,
to release the oppressed,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among all peoples,
to make a little music with the heart...

And to radiate the Light of Christ,
every day, in every way, in all that we do and in all that we say.

Then the work of Christmas begins.

—Howard Thurman (1899–1981)

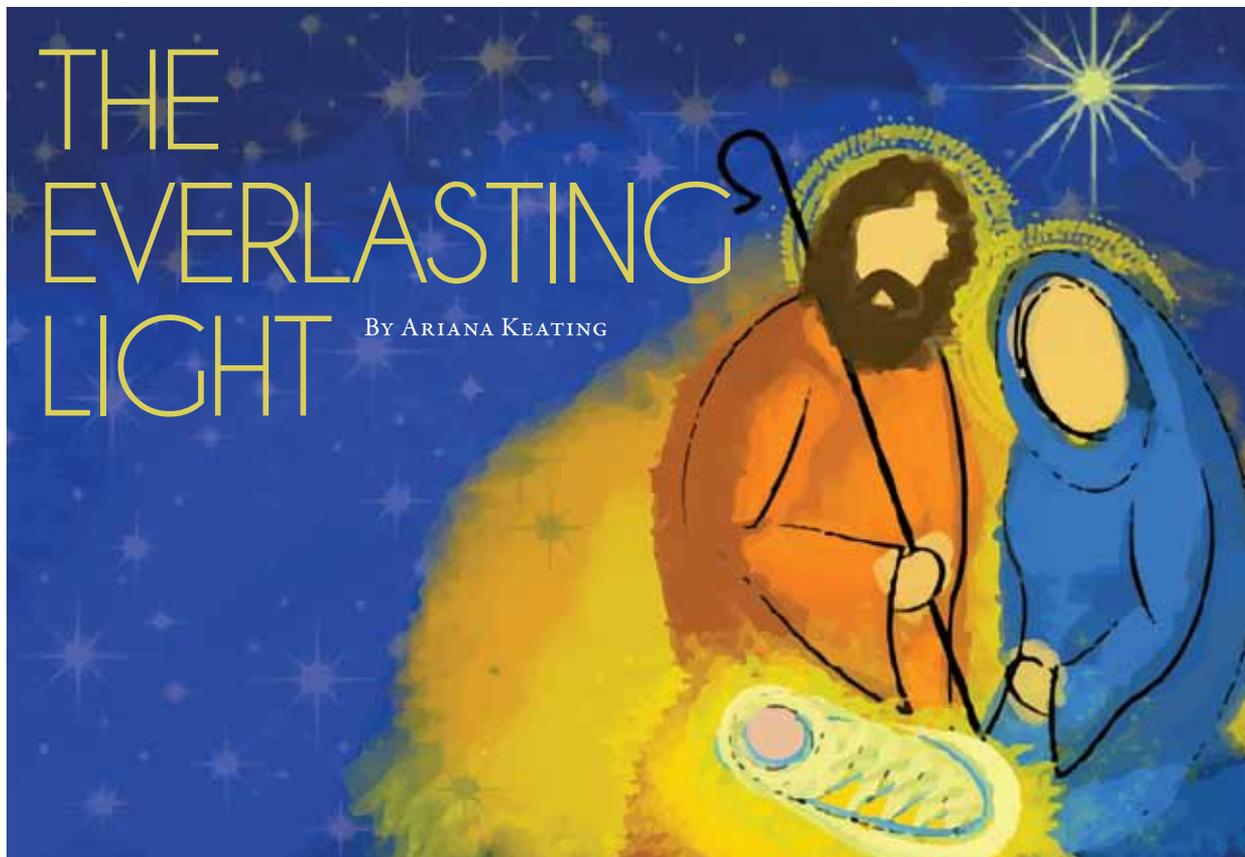


The way to Christmas lies through an ancient gate. ... It is a little gate, child-high, child-wide, and there is a password: “Peace on earth to men of good will.” May you, this Christmas, become as a little child again and enter into His kingdom.

—Angelo Patri (1876–1965)

THE EVERLASTING LIGHT

BY ARIANA KEATING



THE CHRISTMAS WHEN I WAS SIX YEARS OLD, I learned a poem titled “Where Jesus Was Born.” The poem tells the story of three boys who went to see Jesus. One was blind, another was deaf, and the third was lame. Despite their infirmities, they helped one another make their way to the manger where Jesus was born. Then God gave them a special Christmas present—He healed them.

I imagined the little boys were around my own age, and I was so happy that they were healed on that special night. Now, I can’t help but think of all the other people whose lives have been changed because of Jesus’ birth.

There was the man walking to Bethlehem, leading a donkey that carried his expectant wife. Nine months earlier, his life had taken a sudden change—for the worse, it seemed—yet there had been a glimmer of hope: he’d been promised in a dream that all would be right. He held on to that promise; he hoped and prayed and patiently waited. That first Christmas night, all his fears were washed away. As the tiny Babe lay in the manger, peace flooded Joseph’s worried soul.

On the hills outside Bethlehem, a lowly shepherd watched sheep all night. Life was hard. He had taxes to pay and a family to feed. His country was occupied by a foreign power, and he longed for the day when he would be free. As he sat under the starlit sky, he prayed for a solution to his problems. That night his prayers were answered, and as he watched the Babe sleeping in the manger, he knew that God was going to work everything out in the end. Light came into his life.

A learned man had long searched the night skies for a sign in his quest for truth and meaning. Despite all his knowledge and wealth, he longed for something more. The answer came with a wondrous new star that heralded his Savior’s birth and led him to the young child.

Today, there are still many who are searching for truth and peace. For each one, the answer is the same as it was for those others that night in Bethlehem. The same love that touched their hearts two thousand years ago can touch the hearts of those who are searching today.

ARIANA KEATING IS A TEACHER IN THAILAND. ■

CHRISTMAS PREQUEL

BY PETER AMSTERDAM, ADAPTED

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN doesn't tell the story of Jesus' birth, but it tells us the prequel—the story that precedes what we are told in the birth narratives. This Gospel takes us back to the beginning, before our world existed, and tells us something about our Savior that was true well in advance of His earthly birth in Bethlehem two millennia ago. Understanding this part of the story is what brings clarity to who Jesus was, why He came, and what He accomplished.

The story begins like this: “In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him.”¹

This Gospel begins by telling us that before anything was created, *the Word* existed, was *with* God, and *was* God. John looks back beyond the beginning of the creation of the universe, before time existed, and tells us that the Word was preexistent. The opening line of this Gospel repeats the first words of the Bible in Genesis: “In the beginning...”² This expresses that the Word existed before creation and is eternal, that there was never a time when the Word was not. The Word was not part of what was created, meaning that the Word is greater than all things that were created.

1. John 1:1–3 NLT
2. Genesis 1:1

We're told that “the Word was with God,” and then it's repeated a second time, “He existed in the beginning with God.” The emphasis here is that the Word exists in intimate relationship with God. That oneness is expressed in the phrase “and the Word was God.” Everything that can be said about God can also be said about the Word.

This is what we celebrate at Christmas—that the Word, who existed with God before creation, who lived in face-to-face fellowship with His Father, who participated in the creation of all things, who is self-existent, and who is God the Son, was born as a human being and lived among humanity.

All that Jesus did during His time on earth—the words He spoke, the parables He told, His interaction with people, His confrontations with the religious leaders of the day, the miracles He performed—all of it revealed His Father's love, care, and concern for humanity. It is through the Incarnate Word, Jesus, that we gain a deeper understanding of God, as well as of His desire to reconcile humanity to Himself. At Christmas, we celebrate that God entered our world for the purpose of making it possible for us to live with Him eternally.

The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us! What a wonderful thing to celebrate.

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

BY NYX MARTINEZ

A Real Tree



WE CHILDREN HAD ALWAYS WANTED A REAL CHRISTMAS TREE—a tall, lavishly decorated one, like other families had. It would have “singing” lights, silver tinsel, and glass ornaments dressing its snow-topped branches. And of course, the space beneath it would be overflowing with presents.

But as another December came, our living room remained bare. New Christmas decorations were too pricey for a large missionary family like ours, so Mom pulled out the storage boxes and made the old decorations look as good as new. Then she went to work on handcrafted “stockings” made from shiny red paper and trimmed with cotton balls. My little sisters helped cut and paste. There were 12 stockings—one for each of us kids—and Mom strung them

up on the staircase banister. My two brothers revived the old colored lights and strung them on the veranda.

For a Nativity scene, we molded little clay figurines, then baked and painted them. Someone gave us a set of three cherubs that were the perfect match until we kids—all determined to keep rearranging the figurines until we found the perfect look—knocked over one of the cherubs and he lost his head.

Then one evening, Dad came home and announced that he had bought a Christmas tree. Curious and excited, we all gathered in the living room to inspect the tree. Our own Christmas tree!

“Isn’t it incredible?” Dad was always so enthusiastic.

In fact, it was a papier-mâché model of an evergreen, about a foot tall.

“That’s our tree?!”

Cue sour expressions on twelve faces.

“It’s so skinny!”

“It’s kinda strange.”

“Dad, that’s not a real tree.”

“Of course it’s a real tree, honey. Isn’t it great?”

Dad hoped his enthusiasm would catch on. “And look, I bought a matching reindeer to go with it!” With some fanfare he produced the reindeer—also made from recycled newspaper.

That was just like my father! Even though he didn’t have much to spend on extras, he always tried to help those who had even less by purchasing some of their wares. As a chaplain in the national correctional system in the Philippines, he had collected many such handcrafted items. The

LOVE CAME DOWN AT CHRISTMAS

Excerpted from Queen Elizabeth II's 2016 Royal Christmas Message

At Christmas, our attention is drawn to the birth of a baby some two thousand years ago. It was the humblest of beginnings, and His parents, Joseph and Mary, did not think they were important.

Jesus Christ lived obscurely for most of His life, and never traveled far. He was maligned and rejected by many, though He had done no wrong. And yet, billions of people now follow His teaching and find in Him the guiding light for their lives. I am one of them, because Christ's example helps me see the value of doing small things with great love.

The message of Christmas reminds us that inspiration is a gift to be given as well as received, and that love begins small but always grows. ■

previous year, there had been an intricately carved battleship sitting serenely on our library shelf until my brothers went to war with it. The year before, our house had been filled with glass bottles containing miniature scenes—homes on stilts, tiny matchstick people, palm trees by the beach.

My brothers would collect newspapers and old magazines for the inmates, and my sisters and I would help sell their handmade Christmas cards. The profits went back to their families.

And now this—our “real” Christmas tree.

“I suppose we could fix it up,” one of my sisters suggested. So we set it up on the phone table, which almost seemed too large for it. Mom cut ornaments from

cardboard—stars, bells, and candy canes. Glitter glue gave the tree a touch of sparkle. I remembered a pair of plastic doves covered in white mesh that I'd found in a wholesale store. They went up as well. We strung colorful miniature lights, which flickered prettily over Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus, and the two and two-thirds cherubs.

Christmas came all at once to our merry little home, and I'll never forget it. That year in particular was a struggle for our family, but it was also one of the most memorable.

We never got our store-bought Christmas tree. Instead we got one that truly represented our family's love. Our home was never outfitted with fancy décor, but it was filled with the laughter of happy children

and the melodies of meaningful Christmas carols. Santa never fit in with our family, but you can bet we caught Mommy kissing Daddy somewhere near that tree. And as for Christmas presents, our parents gave us gifts that no amount of money could ever buy.

We spent many happy moments together as a family. Our parents taught us that Christmas was for giving of our hearts to others, and that the same selfless love should color our lives, not only at Christmas, but all year round—just like a real evergreen.

BORN IN MANILA IN 1981, NIKKI “NYX” MARTINEZ IS A MULTIMEDIA ARTIST AND WRITER. FOLLOW HER WORK AND JOURNEYS ON WWW.NYXMARTINEZ.COM. ■

CHRISTMAS IS FOR KIDS

BY GABRIEL GARCÍA V.



AT THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS is the Child of Bethlehem, who was born into this often cold, hostile world to warm us with His heavenly Father's love. It was a child who began the first Christmas celebration, and it is children who keep it alive in their own special ways.

Adults know this. Christmas brings out our childish innocence, we become tender, and our hearts beat with excitement as when we were kids—with the carols, the lights, the gifts, the symbolism and festive

1. Little Drummer Boy: Lyrics: Katherine K. Davis, Music: Traditional Czech carol
2. Jesus Come into my Heart: Music and lyrics: Cathy Gehr, Michael Gilligan
3. Away in a Manger: Music: James R. Murray, William J. Kirkpatrick, Lyrics: Unknown

gestures. We associate Christmas with children, and each year we like to remember their simple joy.

One December evening in the midst of the Christmas rush, my wife and I were returning home after a long, tiring day. I felt disgruntled, not just by the jostling bus ride, but by nostalgia for warmer Christmases, less commercial, more musical.

I was musing on these and other thoughts when a family with small children got on the bus. The kids were spunky, a good thing on a dull night, but the best was about to begin. Suddenly I heard a *pa rum pum pum pum!* At first I thought it was just the natural sequence of my inner thoughts, but no—it was the children who had just gotten on the bus. A live presentation of the “Little Drummer Boy!” With no prompting from their parents, the two were singing with full force:

*Come, they told me
Pa rum, pum, pum, pum
A newborn King to see
Pa rum, pum, pum, pum*

*Our finest gifts we bring
Pa rum, pum, pum, pum
To lay before the King
Pa rum, pum, pum, pum
Rum, pum, pum, pum
Rum, pum, pum, pum.¹*

A few days later, we were in a coastal town we visit each year to bring good cheer, toys, and the message of Christ at Christmas. After an intense day of activity, we were at the home of a dear friend who always receives us enthusiastically with open arms and tea on the table. On this night, though, the tiredness of the day was evident all around. We had used up all our physical resources, and our hosts were also tired from a long workday. How were we going to spread Christmas cheer among these weary hearts? Someone began strumming a carol on the guitar, and



we sang along. We were beginning to wake up a bit, but still not enough to get into full swing.

Who brought us out of our slump? A little child. We had explained to Franco—a four-year-old resident of the house—that the best of Christmas was not the *open present*, but the *open heart*. So when we began to sing the song, “Jesus Come into My Heart,” Franco’s voice rang clearly over all the rest. He enunciated each word purposely as he sang, fully concentrated on the meaning of this powerful message:

*Jesus come into my heart,
Fill me with Your love and light.
Children everywhere pray this little
prayer,
Ask Jesus in tonight.²*

Suddenly, all of us were fully awake to witness a true Christmas miracle—Christ born in the heart of a believing child.

The final episode occurred on the last day of our visit when around twenty children were gathered for games and prizes. After they had raced rowdily and happily up and down the lane in competitions and relays, it was time to tell the story of the first Christmas—but would they settle down? To our surprise, they sat on the ground in a semicircle in front of us, taking the song sheets in their now-sweaty hands, and with concentration and reverential solemnity, they searched for the right carols and began to sing along. Their parents and all of us were in awe at this simple childlike display of worship. For a moment, it was as if we had a miraculous glimpse into the stable on the first Christmas night:

*Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus lay down His
sweet head.
The stars in the bright sky looked
down where He lay,
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the
hay.*

*Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask You
to stay
Close by me forever, and love me,
I pray.
Bless all the dear children in Your
tender care,
And fit us for heaven to live with
You there.³*

Christ manifests His presence in each child who celebrates His birth. May He also touch your life and home this Christmas.

GABRIEL GARCÍA V. IS THE EDITOR OF THE SPANISH EDITION OF ACTIVATED AND A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN CHILE. ■



CHRISTMAS CANDY

BY CONNIE CALLENDER LINDSAY

CHRISTMAS IS APPROACHING, and I've been thinking about colorful lights, Christmas trees, presents, Christmas carols, church bells, and most importantly, the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. And for some reason, I've also been thinking about the colorful hard ribbon candy, chocolate drops, candy canes, chocolate-covered cherries, and little square hard-candy treats of my childhood Christmases.

I won't be enjoying any of those this year. My entire stomach was removed last year, due to disease, and that has ruled out sweet treats for me forever. I'm not discouraged, though, because I've found something even sweeter. I savor my friends and family. I'm thankful for my renewed health and for being able to travel without fear of needing an emergency transfusion or having my oxygen supply

suddenly cut off. Each day I taste the goodness of God as I experience His mercies, miracles, and blessings. Those things satisfy my sweet tooth now. I don't miss candy at all.

Replacements for my usual Christmas treats this year also include petting a dog; the sweetness of my granddaughter's face as she looks into mine; holding my husband's hand and hearing him say he's so glad he married me; my daughter saying she appreciates me; friendly neighbors; good doctor visits and good test results; the beauty of the sapphire winter night sky; and the innocence of the graceful deer, wild turkeys, and other wildlife that flourish here.

I used to love my Christmas fudge! But instead of acquiring the "Christmas spread" that comes with abundant eating, this year I'll spread Christmas cheer. When I think about my renewed energy and treasures that were overshadowed for years by bad

health, I know God is giving me new chances in life. I won't let those gifts go to waste. I'll use that energy to pass out some "Christmas candy" of my own.

We all want good things in our lives. And we have them. We just need to look around and appreciate them. Indulge yourself this Christmas! Love life and the loving God who created it. "Taste and see that the Lord is good!"¹ It won't make you fat or rot your teeth. It'll do your heart more good than bypass surgery, and it'll take years off your face. It won't raise your blood sugar levels, but will raise the hope in your soul.

Better yet, be a *candy maker*—an instigator of little deeds of thoughtfulness and kindness, the things that sweet memories are made of. Let "good will toward men" sweeten your Christmas season. Savor it and share it. ■

1. Psalm 34:8



THE STAR SINGERS

BY ANNA PERLINI

WHEN MY CHILDREN WERE YOUNG, we read about an old tradition that existed in various parts of Europe since the Middle Ages. Groups of children and young people would go house to house singing Christmas carols and sometimes collecting donations for charitable purposes.

So we started doing it too. In the beginning, it took a lot of courage to ring the doorbells, and we got used to gruff “Who are you?” questions over the intercom. Our answer was an enthusiastic “We are the Star Singers, here to sing for you and wish you a merry Christmas!” Almost always, doors would open and people would gather to listen, clap, and exchange greetings. Many remembered the old tradition and thanked us for bringing the spirit of Christmas to their homes. We got

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

to meet and spend time with lonely people, the elderly, and the ill.

A couple of times, we got stuck in the elevators of apartment buildings and just kept on singing till somebody found a way to get us out. Once, we witnessed how two neighbors who hadn’t been on speaking terms for years forgave each other and wished each other a merry Christmas!

As the years went by, other children and young people would join in, and even some of my grandchildren. No one was a musical professional. The only requirement was to be full of Christmas joy.

One Christmas Eve, some of our guitar strings broke, and things weren’t going so smoothly. But that was the time when one of the most touching encounters happened. We met a man with a leg in a cast, who hadn’t been able to do his usual Christmas Eve party because of his condition and was very sad. We ended up singing for him

a cappella, and he showed us pictures of his loved ones who lived far away. When we left, he told us it was the best Christmas Eve he’d had in a long time.

ANNA PERLINI IS A COFOUNDER OF PER UN MONDO MIGLIORE,¹ A HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATION ACTIVE IN THE BALKANS SINCE 1995. ■

THE GREATEST GIFT

If you haven’t yet received God’s gift from His heart to yours—Jesus—you can do so now by praying the following prayer:

Thank You, Jesus, for coming to earth so that I could know my heavenly Father’s love. Thank You for dying for me so I can be reconciled with Him and have eternal life in heaven. I receive You, Jesus, as my Savior now. Please help me to get to know and love You in a deep and personal way. Amen.

BY MARIE ALVERO

SILENT NIGHTS

WEARY. That used to be my word for December. Yes, I know it doesn't convey the true wonder of the season. But the days are hard and long, and by this time of year, I have 300-plus behind me. I just wish the year wouldn't race past me and leave me feeling totally spent—and still coming up short.

Each year starts with an opportunity and a promise. I always start with great goals: I'm going to lose 15 pounds, we'll save X amount of money, we'll carve out more family time outdoors, I'll earn that promotion, etc. But as the momentum of the year builds, I feel like I'm running a three-legged race blindfolded. Stress. Life. Work. Family. It's a lot.

Then December rolls around and I drag my weary behind into the kitchen to bake and cook all the goodies that taste like Christmas. I take my skinny wallet to the store to buy Christmas. We put up decorations to the point that it looks like our house was in the path of a Christmas cloudburst. My family signs up for community outreach and volunteering to try to give Christmas. We watch Christmas movies and listen to Christmas music so that we can feel Christmas.

Then why do I still feel like I've missed Christmas?

Two Christmases ago, I heard this chorus on my car's radio, and the tears flowed:

*I need a silent night, a holy night
To hear an angel voice through the chaos and the noise*

*I need a midnight clear, a little peace right here
To end this crazy day with a silent night.¹*

That elusive silent night was exactly what my soul was craving. What I learned in that moment of teary contemplation is that I can't do Christmas from empty. I can't take a tired and depleted soul and expect it to pour out abundantly. I can't expect the "season's magic" to be enough to fuel me.

Now I plan those "silent nights" into the year. I'm learning to recognize when I'm depleted and weary, and the things I need to feel recharged. Thankfully, they're pretty simple things:

- 1) **Quiet time.** Time spent reading God's Word, praying, worshipping in song.
- 2) **Enough rest.** I cannot be perpetually tired.
- 3) **Basic fitness and care for my body.** Health permits function.
- 4) **Human connection.** I need to feel connected to my husband and children. I also need regular meaningful connection with people beyond my family.
- 5) **Some kind of "you are here" map in my head.** I can't feel totally lost.

Taking stock of these things on a regular basis helps me to not show up for Christmas spiritually and emotionally bankrupt. Actually, it helps me all through the year.

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, U.S.A. ■

1. Amy Grant, *The Christmas Collection*, 2008

THE ULTIMATE PROOF

BY CHRIS MIZRANY

HOW QUICKLY CHRISTMAS HAS COME AGAIN! The days, weeks, and months fly by, and I end up being both surprised and resigned to reaching another Christmas season. Not that I dislike Christmas! I love the beautiful familiar carols, the vibrant cheeriness, and the ability to wish both friends and strangers well with impartiality.

And yet, it is that very familiar feeling that can steal my joy if I'm not careful. I end up taking last year's plans, making a few adjustments, and pasting them into this season's calendar. *If I just make sure to do such-and-such, remember so-and-so, and organize XYZ, things should flow along fine.*

But wait. When did "fine" become my objective? Is "getting through"

the season a worthy goal? Do I find myself bracing for the long hours, jam-packed days, and obligatory "cheer," instead of embracing an overwhelming sense of joyous love? I'm ashamed to say I do. So, this year, I want to rethink Christmas.

What was the first Christmas? If I had to sum it up in one word, I think I'd choose "proof." Why?

The birth of Jesus Christ into this mortal world was absolute proof that we are loved. It was proof that God's promises can always be trusted, and that His ability to shape history is unparalleled. Through His Son, in a baby's helpless form on that first Christmas, God proved that He is solid, dependable, and eternally caring. He also proved that He is willing to do anything to bring us into His family. Jesus' birth was the first step towards our rebirth, and through it God said, "I value you."

How then should we celebrate this amazing season? With food, songs, games, presents, friends, family, laughter, reminiscence, and attention to detail? Yes, absolutely, for "every good and perfect gift is from above."¹

But even more, let's let ourselves bask in the feeling of Christmas as if it were our very first. Let's follow that star of light in our hearts, not to an earthly stable, but to the One who is with us everywhere. Let's kneel before our wonderful Savior, bringing what He desires most—our time, honor, attention, and love.

Let's make Him proud by celebrating not just His birth in the present, but our lives with Him forever. That's more than fine. That's fabulous.

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1. James 1:17

FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

WHY I CAME TO EARTH

When I came down on Christmas Day, it wasn't to attend a party or pick up gifts from friends. It wasn't part of a school field trip, or to get a good deal at a stable. What could I have possibly wanted, already having the world at My fingertips? Well, what I wanted was *you*—and coming down to earth was the only way for Me to have you. It wasn't easy, but knowing that it was for you made it worth it all.

I love seeing you live, observing you learn, and even watching you make mistakes. I love experiencing your thrills with you, being there for you when you're down, and sharing in all your day-to-day activities. I love seeing you enjoy the nature and beauty I have created to make this world a lovely place for you. I love it when I'm in your thoughts.

It makes Me so happy when My birthday rolls around and the world starts remembering Me—and it makes Me even happier when I'm remembered all throughout the year.

