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IMAGINE A BETTER CHRISTMAS

Three questions to
show the way

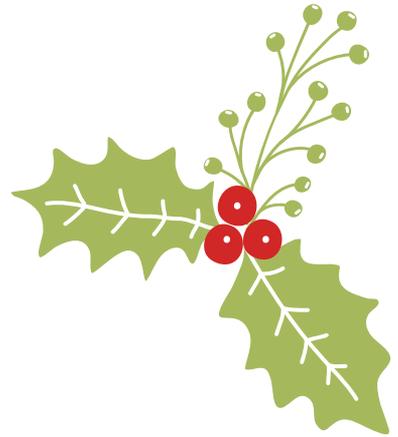
Our Jesus

The universal gift

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How to survive the
holidays





EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

A TIME FOR LOVE

One of the miracles of Christmas is that even in a modern society, where you often find yourself seemingly besieged by rampant materialism, the true meaning of Christmas is never entirely lost. Even nonbelievers are moved by the symbolism of an innocent child who represents humanity's hope and who came to earth to invite each person to reach out to God and to one another. I cannot imagine a more beautiful story.

Christmas has a way of bringing out the best in people. It's a time of year when we look upward in search of peace and hope and outward in search of reconciliation.

You may disagree. Turn on a television or read a newspaper this month, and it will seem the world is just as broken as it was last month. We constantly hear about the pressure of individualism straining the bonds between ourselves. And far too often we choose to react by closing in on ourselves. But Christmas is a unique opportunity given to us all to make things right, with God and with one another.

This season, a father and son who haven't spoken in years will greet each other with a hug. A daughter who has a grudge against her mother will whisper in her ear that she loves her. Siblings who have drifted apart will look at each other and remember the joys of their childhood and shared experiences.

Such exchanges may be awkward and often don't come easily, but part of the magic of Christmas is that for a few weeks, all around the world, in all kinds of cultures, communities, and families, people rediscover what unites them and come together to share a brief but blessed moment of peace and fraternity.

Whether your December is synonymous with snowstorms or trips to the beach, we'd like to take this opportunity to wish you a very happy Christmas, and may God bless you and yours with His perfect peace and love, this season and always.

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BY MARTIN McTEG

OUR JESUS

MY WIFE HAS A FONDNESS FOR MINIATURE NATIVITIES, or manger scenes, as they are sometimes called. Twenty-five years ago she made small nativity figurines as gifts for her family. She sculpted them from clay, painted them at the kitchen table, and then baked them in the oven. Her sister still displays her set every Christmas.

When we lived in foreign countries as Christian volunteers, my wife began collecting small nativities made in those places. She has a Russian nativity and one from Israel, carved from olive tree wood. She has a snow globe nativity that also plays “Away in a Manger,” and some others.

Last year we saw a private collection of about 100 nativities from around the world. Among

them, we saw the Holy Family depicted as African tribespeople, as Orientals, in Indian garb, and as Latin American farmers. We saw a finely detailed nativity once used in a grand cathedral in Europe. We saw a nativity made by Eskimos, in which Mary and Joseph were wearing parkas and snow boots, and one made in a South Pacific island, where the figures were dressed as the island people dress and arranged in a hut made from coconut palm fronds.

The people who made those nativities in so many different countries all had something in common. They portrayed Jesus and those at His birth like themselves, wearing their type of clothes and living as they did, relating to them in their culture and context.

In the early 1800s, before slavery was outlawed in the U.S.A., a skeptic

once asked a slave, “How can you believe in Jesus and pray to the same God that your slave masters pray to?” And the slave wisely answered, “He’s not just their Jesus. He’s my Jesus too!” That slave had found Jesus and learned to draw the strength and comfort that he needed from Him.

This is still true today. Jesus relates to everyone of every race and in every land: rich and poor, rural people and city folk, the highly educated and the illiterate, the strong and the weak. He loves us all, and each of us can claim Him as our own and find in Him forgiveness of sins, salvation, and supply of our deepest needs. He’s my Jesus, and He’s your Jesus too.

MARTIN McTEG IS A FORMER MISSIONARY VOLUNTEER, NOW RETIRED, AND LIVING IN THE USA. ■

MANGER BEGINNINGS

BY MARIA FONTAINE

THERE ARE MANY THINGS WE CAN CELEBRATE AT CHRISTMAS, the most essential being the gift of our relationship with God through His Son, Jesus. To paraphrase a beautiful promise in the book of Daniel, the closer we grow to Him, the more His wisdom will “shine as the brightness of the firmament in us,” and His righteousness through us “as the stars forever and ever.”¹ Remembering to pause and take those moments to acknowledge Him allows His Spirit to flow freely in our lives and replaces the stress and strain that bottles up our joy. All we have to do is let that peace flow in, and He goes to work helping it shine out to others.

Christmas marks the beginning of the most wonderful and important relationship we'll ever have. It's not just knowing about that babe born in a manger. It's about our relationship with a friend who sticks closer than a brother, with the one who has made us part of God's family. It's about the bond we have with our hero who rescued us from death, who bestows on us all that is His. It's about the one who is our mentor, guide, and protector, the one we can always trust and rely on, no matter what!

This relationship changes who you are to the very core. That is what Christmas—all year long—is really about.

To celebrate Jesus this Christmas I'd like to share some reflections on my favorite quotes about Christmas.



CHRISTMAS IS THE SPIRIT OF GIVING WITHOUT A THOUGHT OF GETTING. IT IS HAPPINESS BECAUSE WE SEE

1. Adapted from Daniel 12:3.



JOY IN PEOPLE. IT IS FORGETTING SELF AND FINDING TIME FOR OTHERS. IT IS DISCARDING THE MEANINGLESS AND STRESSING THE TRUE VALUES.—*THOMAS S. MONSON*

Jesus' love was at the center of all that He did for humankind. His was a life of giving. He gave up His life in heaven to come to this world. He gave up the unimaginable riches of His kingdom to live on earth without even a place to call His own. He gave His time, His strength, and His reputation among many of the supposedly righteous to seek out the beggars, the outcasts, the sick and dying who could never offer anything of this world in return for all He offered them. He laid down His own life in order to rescue us from the pitfalls of sin, and He did it purely out of love for us.

Why did He do that? To help us to understand what the essence of God is. He gave us the example of how to develop that nature in us, how by His grace we can become children of the Most High. As we discover the joy of helping to bring His love to others, we grow His kingdom. We experience a touch of God's joy when we emulate His giving without seeking anything in return. We might seem to lose in the moment, but in the end, we gain far more.

HE WHO HAS NOT CHRISTMAS IN HIS HEART WILL NEVER FIND IT UNDER A TREE.—*ROY L. SMITH*

Sometimes we may be tempted to attach too much importance to the traditions of Christmas, like trees and music and celebrations. Even giving gifts and doing good deeds have to have gratitude at their core or they lose their greatest value. Jesus chose to live for our sakes, to pour out His life for our sakes and to overcome death for us. He was the ultimate gift, given by the ultimate gift giver—God. He gave us a living, breathing, tangible example to follow; the most perfect illustration of unconditional, unlimited, all-inviting love.

So let's follow His example.

CHRISTMAS IS THE DAY THAT HOLDS ALL TIME TOGETHER.—*ALEXANDER SMITH*

Have you ever wondered why Jesus came to earth when He did? I wonder if it might have been to illustrate

that He is the center of everything. He brings sense out of all that came before His life on earth, and He brings the promise of all that is ours to claim through Him. He walked with Adam in the garden in the beginning, and He walked with humankind when He became a human in this world. He will come again to unite His children in His eternal kingdom. Christmas is a reminder that He is the focal point of our existence.

THE SON OF GOD BECAME A MAN SO THAT MEN COULD BECOME THE SONS OF GOD.—*C. S. LEWIS*

When people look at the story of a baby in a manger and angels singing and the wise men visiting, I wonder if they truly grasp what this event means for humankind. Jesus, who had everything, gave it all up, and His birth marked the beginning of the transformation from the earthbound, time-constrained, sin-prone existence of this temporary life into the supernatural, eternal, unfathomable wonder and beauty of eternity. An existence immersed in unbounded joy, purpose, and oneness with the King of all! It marks the arrival of the gift of perfect love.

JESUS WAS GOD AND MAN IN ONE PERSON, THAT GOD AND MAN MIGHT BE HAPPY TOGETHER AGAIN.—*GEORGE WHITEFIELD*

Jesus was the personification of God's care for humankind. He was God's merciful offer of rescue to a world drowning in folly. He was a living demonstration of how far God's love is willing to go, even to the point of appearing in a form that we could understand.

I pray that your life will be filled with God's Spirit this Christmas and that His many wonderful blessings will be yours in the coming year.

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

BY DINA ELLENS

A LIFE CHANGED



ONE DAY I NOTICED THAT MY DENTIST FRIEND, Dr. Rina, was looking a bit sad. We often meet for coffee, but today Rina wasn't her usual bubbly self. I asked her what was wrong and she answered:

"Well, Christmas is coming up, and I'm just feeling kind of sad. As you know, both of my children are married and live far away. And I don't have any grandchildren yet."

Thinking back on my own situation, I could easily identify with Rina. My children are also grown up, married, and live overseas. Although I do have grandchildren, they're far away and I don't often have time with them.

"I can relate to that, Rina," I said. "I'm in a similar situation. Can I tell you about what helps me?"

I went on to tell Rina about how I volunteer weekly at a local orphanage, and how spending time with the

orphans not only does them good but also helps me. I always come away feeling happy and inspired that I was able to do some good and help others. I'm actually not really sure who benefits the most—the orphans or me!

Realizing that Rina needed something to get her mind off her own situation, I told her about an upcoming project at the orphanage.

"We want to make Christmas special for the orphans. We need help choosing the right gift for each one. Would you be available?"

Rina's face brightened. "Yes," she replied. "I'd love to do that."

Over the next few weeks, armed with a shopping list detailing each of the orphans' wishes, along with size and color, Rina was busy shopping for the orphans. She was so preoccupied with bargain hunting and

making the budgeted funds stretch that she hardly had time to think of herself.

The day of the orphans' Christmas celebration, Rina was at my door, bright-faced and eager to get started on wrapping the gifts.

Throughout the day, I noticed how Rina had undergone a total transformation. She was the one handing out the gifts to the orphans, and every time I looked at her, she was bubbling over with happiness and ready laughter.

Rina found the secret to true happiness: Give yourself away by helping others, and happiness will find you!

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. ■



By VICTORIA OLIVETTA



ONCE UPON A CHRISTMAS



CHRISTMAS WAS GOD'S BIG SPLASH, the greatest miracle ever—His love in the form of His only Son, Jesus, sent down to earth to lead us back to Him. And Christmas is still a time for miracles. Like ripples traveling out from that splash, little Christmas miracles remind us of God's unfailing love.

One Christmas my husband, Daniel, and I planned to take presents to some of the poorest families in Goiânia, Brazil, where we were living at the time. The previous year, a friend who owns a toy shop had given us hundreds of toys to distribute, but this year he was only able to contribute five large plastic trucks.

What good could five toy trucks accomplish? We mulled this over for days, until one night the answer came to Daniel in a dream. "I know what we can do with those trucks," he told me the next morning. "Pedro

recently had heart surgery." (Pedro was a vendor at the central market, who donated fruits and vegetables to our volunteer work whenever he could.) "He and his wife, Maria, used their entire savings to pay his hospital bills, so they probably weren't able to buy Christmas presents for their children this year. They have five boys."

The trucks were so big that they filled a large plastic sack. Daniel slung it over his shoulder and set out for the bus stop to go to the other side of the city, where Pedro and his family lived.

Pedro and Maria's children were playing in the street as Daniel, who was graying and happened to have a beard, approached, the bag still over his shoulder. One of the boys saw him coming and ran inside yelling, "Mommy! Daddy! Santa is here!"

So Santa spent the afternoon with Pedro and Maria and their

boys. When he got home that night, Daniel's face shone with joy as he described the children's happiness. "Pedro and Maria felt sad that they didn't have money for presents for their children, but God took care of that! Five boys, five colorful trucks!"

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

Christmas is love in action. Every time we love, every time we give, it's Christmas.

—Dale Evans (1912–2001)

••★☆☆••

I truly believe that if we keep telling the Christmas story, singing the Christmas songs, and living the Christmas spirit, we can bring joy and happiness and peace to this world.

—Norman Vincent Peale (1898–1993)

BY AALIYAH WILLIAMS



EBENEZER SCROOGE AND THE GRINCH—have you ever sympathized with them as the Christmas season approaches? Or perhaps not to that extreme, but maybe you’ve never felt the warm fuzzies that everyone else has? And would you like to figure out how to have a better Christmas this year?

A few years ago, I was working on a Christmas article for a children’s website, and I came across this startling piece of information: “By the early part of the nineteenth century, Christmas [in North America] had almost died out. *The Times* newspaper, for example, did not once mention Christmas between 1790 and 1835.”¹

Curious, I asked Google why Christmas celebrations nearly disappeared during that period in American history. It turns out

that many American settlers of the 1600s were Puritans—a group of very strict Protestants who believed that Christmas was a Catholic holiday and therefore not to be celebrated.² And for the next 200 years, until the start of the 20th century, Christmas wasn’t celebrated by most people in America, and was celebrated quietly by those who did.

Nor was it celebrated in Oliver Cromwell’s England. Though in 1660, two years after Cromwell’s death, the ban was lifted, and Christmas was again instituted as a holiday.³ That said, from the mid-1600s to the end of the 18th century—almost 150 years—Christmas celebrations weren’t much like we celebrate today. It was during the Victorian era that so many of the holiday traditions that we currently celebrate were embraced. What

changed? A lot had to do with one man writing a story about Christmas.

In 1843, British novelist Charles Dickens (1812–1870) wrote *A Christmas Carol*. Besides the story of the first Christmas, it’s probably one of the most popular Christmas stories of all time. In his novella, Charles Dickens idealized a certain kind of Christmas that we now base a lot of our Christmas perceptions on. You might think that with him writing such a wonderful description of Christmas as celebrated by Tiny Tim’s family, that this was how most of England celebrated Christmas—the tree, the Christmas carols, the dinner, the family togetherness, the gift giving. But not really. At least, not at the time.

“When we read or hear *A Christmas Carol*,” says Bruce Forbes⁴ in an interview with a



regional radio program, “we are not seeing a reflection of what Christmas was like in his day; we’re seeing what Dickens would *like* Christmas to be.”⁵

At the start of the 19th century, “There was a lot of unemployment,” Dickens scholar John Jordan says. “There was misery, and [Dickens] saw Christmas as something that tended to function as sort of a counterforce to the negative effects of the industrial revolution.”⁶ So, many thanks go to Charles Dickens for somehow looking beyond how Christmas was celebrated at that time and creating a vision of something better.

I’ve been circling; what I’d like to say is that there’s nothing stopping you from creating your own Christmas traditions that have special meaning to you.

When I was growing up, I had Scrooge-like feelings when it came

to the Christmas holidays. In the past few years, though, I’ve come to enjoy Christmas, and I think it has to do with creating new Christmas traditions for myself, or reminding myself of the meaning of the old traditions. I’ve come to understand that traditions are at their best when they are done to commemorate something that shouldn’t be forgotten—and which absolutely needs to be celebrated.

Here are three questions that might help you to find and create Christmas traditions that you’ll love. The traditions might even be things that you’ve done in the past, but which you may need a change of perspective on, or a renewed passion for why you’re doing them.

You don’t need to feel tied in to how others have celebrated it in the past, because, at least for

me, Christmas traditions should be about celebrating love. In my opinion, that’s really the only test your new Christmas traditions need to pass.

1. See <https://countryandvictoriantimes.com/2010/12/09/charles-dickens-saved-christmas/>
2. See <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1544080/posts>.
3. See <http://www.olivercromwell.org/faqs4.htm>.
4. Bruce Forbes is the chair of the religious studies department at Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa.
5. See http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/2005/12/24_gilbertc_historyxmas/.
6. See http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/2005/12/24_gilbertc_historyxmas/.



WHO DO I LOVE?

Write a list of those who mean a lot to you. Celebrate your love by doing something with them or for them—something that will mean a lot to them. You could decide on reading through a book together during the Christmas season as a means of celebrating togetherness. Or decide on a list of things to be done together on each day leading up to Christmas. Or present a loved one with quotes, songs, or tiny cute or nonsensical gifts that celebrate who they are.

No rules; just make your loved ones feel loved. And that will mean something different for each person. So get out a notepad and start scribbling.

WHO DOES JESUS WANT ME TO LOVE?

We know Jesus loves everyone, and it's easy to focus on the people very, very far away that Jesus loves, because if they're 5,000 miles away, they're a little too far for you to personally reach out to. So I won't talk about those people *super* far away, but what about the people nearby—in your office, school, or neighborhood?

Are opportunities to show love to others being lined up for you this year? Consider saying yes. And not just in your mind, that part that rationally understands that Jesus loves others. But also in your heart, that place where you know doing so will require that you step outside of your comfort zone.

HOW CAN I CELEBRATE LOVE?

I recently bought a book on crafting children's toys, and there's a section on Christmassy stuff to make—wooden chests, painted toy soldiers, angel wings, etc. The one I'm going to try my hand at is the decorated paper bags that serve as an alternative for Christmas stockings. Throughout the season, I'll write letters and rummage around for little gifts for my nephews and put them in their bags marked with their names.

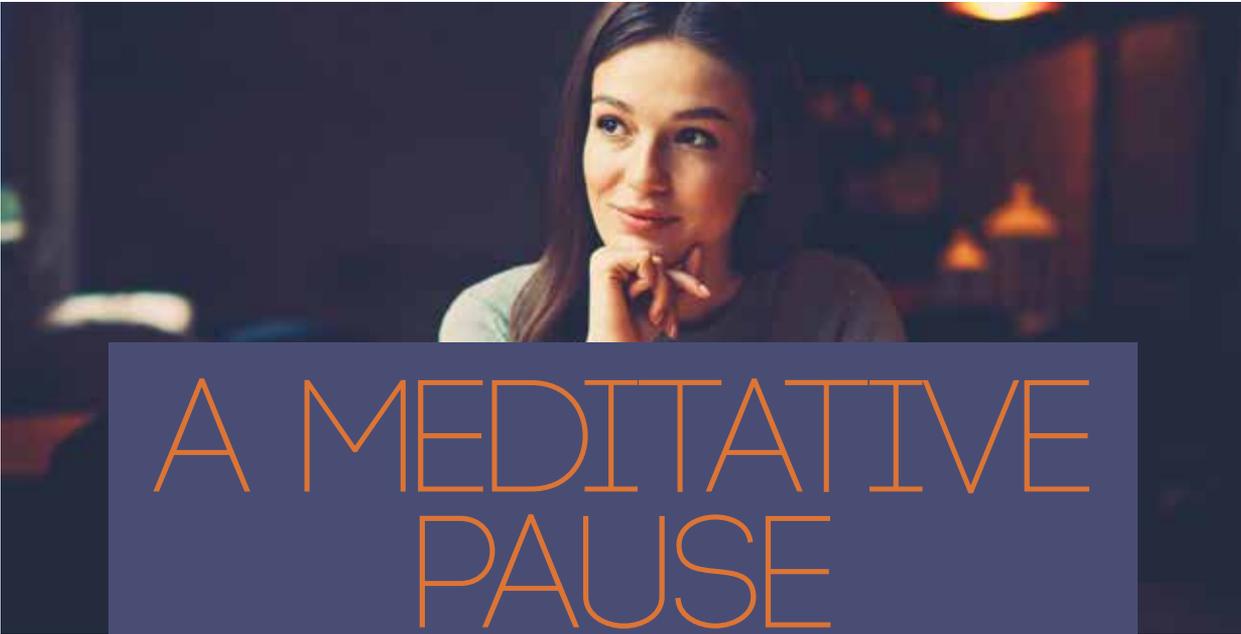
These ideas might sound corny, but things have started to feel holy during Christmas. I think it's because with every activity I take on, every batch of cookies I bake, every evening I commit to spending with loved ones, I know that I do it (or try to do it) because of this divine thing called love.

Decide on wonderful things to do for those you love; bathe your actions in love—and you'll have one of the best Christmas traditions ever.

I'm loving the idea that for a long, long time, so many people around the world have gathered and done something in a particular way to celebrate a certain event or idea. That's when traditions are at their best—when they're done to commemorate something that shouldn't be forgotten—but *how* it's done could be different from anything that's been done until now. So let's get creative!

If the idea of Christmas feels rather dry and worn, I hope you'll think of the guy who imagined a better Christmas, and how you can go about creating a better one for yourself too.

AALIYAH WILLIAMS IS AN EDITOR AND CONTENT DEVELOPER. ■



A MEDITATIVE PAUSE

By SALLY GARCÍA

DECEMBER IS BY FAR MY BUSIEST MONTH OF THE YEAR. The days are filled with organizing events, recycling toys to give to needy kids, buying gifts, decorating the house, and planning Christmas get-togethers and Christmas Eve dinner. Then there's New Year's celebration to ring out the old and ring in the new.

But there are a few special days, like an island of refuge floating quietly in this sea of perpetual movement—the days *between* Christmas in the Gregorian calendar and New Year's—December 26th through 30th. These days are my personal time of reflection. Not that I have five days of retreat, because there's still a lot to do to finish the year! But during these days is when I take stock of the year that is ending and contemplate the new one before me.

First, I pull out my agenda to go over the most significant events of the year. I thank God for the obvious blessings, as well as the “blessings in disguise” that came in the form of difficulties and lessons learned the hard way! I'm always amazed at how much can happen in 12 months, and how long ago some of the events seem!

If I didn't take time to look back in reflection, some important threads of the tapestry of my life would be lost in forgetfulness, and I might miss the bigger picture of

how events are unfolding. Over the years I've made a collection of year-end reviews.

Then I look forward to the year ahead. Some years seem to be already pretty much planned out, others are more nebulous, but in any case, I know there will always be surprises. I dedicate the year to God and write a prayer as I feel led. I also try to find an appropriate Bible verse that will go along with the prayer.

This year, my verse is Matthew 6:33 from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”¹ I hope to review it often and to study what it means to “seek God's kingdom first” in my actions. I'd also like to contemplate what “righteousness” means to Him, which I suspect is more about love, faith, and grace than my puny efforts toward perfection. And lastly, to have faith for “all these things” that my heavenly Father promises to provide.

Every year I look forward to these days between Christmas and the New Year, when I can lay aside time to step back from December's activities, take stock of the past year, count my many blessings, and commit the coming year to His precious care.

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

1. NIV



BY ELSA SICHROVSKY

MY SOPHOMORE CHRISTMAS

ON THE CHRISTMAS EVE OF MY SOPHOMORE YEAR IN COLLEGE, I was trying, and failing miserably, to feel “Christmas fuzzies.” Part of it was that the excitement of my freshman year was gone, and I was battling a bout of end-of-semester fatigue, coupled with frustration over an assignment that I’d been struggling with. I sat waiting outside my professor’s office to discuss the aforementioned problematic paper, while reminiscing wistfully on the carefree good cheer of childhood Christmas festivities.

He called me in, and I tried to wipe off my gloomy frown. Before we started, he opened his desk drawer and pulled out a bag of Dum Dums. “Would you like some candy? You can pick one,” he offered with a smile. I was caught off guard, and laughed nervously. Since when did professors give candy to students?

“Happy Christmas!” he said, and then began sharing his thoughts about how I could revise my paper. It turned out it wouldn’t be as complicated as I’d thought, and I left the meeting feeling much better.

Although my professor hadn’t known about my loneliness and sophomore blues, his spontaneous and kind gesture gave me just that little bit of emotional uplift I needed to face the rest of my Christmas challenges, such as my upcoming final exams. In that little green

lemon-flavored lollipop was encapsulated the magic of Christmas—cheerful, spontaneous giving, as well as the enjoyment of candy.

After finishing my lollipop, I went to another class, where I happened to see one of my friends poring over a weighty civil engineering tome. Her eyes were tired, and the corners of her mouth were drooping in a painfully familiar fashion. When I opened my schoolbag to take out my textbook, I saw that I had two chocolate-chip cookies in one of the pockets, which I’d packed for an afternoon treat. I pulled them out and asked my friend, “Hey, would you like a cookie?”

Seeing her eyes brighten up made me smile too, and I realized that even though I wasn’t going to be enjoying the same Christmas festivities and parties of my younger years, I could still spread some Christmas cheer to those around me. A smile and a sweet treat is such a small thing, yet at a time like Christmas when emotional nostalgia and glowing expectations clash all the more painfully with life’s stark reality, a simple act of generosity can do wonders to bring Christmas joy to a dreary day.

ELSA SICHROVSKY IS A FREELANCE WRITER. SHE LIVES WITH HER FAMILY IN TAIWAN. ■

ADAPTED FROM D.J. ADAMS

CHRISTMAS STRESS BUSTERS



CHRISTMAS IS A GREAT TIME FOR GIVING, getting together with old friends and new, and rediscovering the importance of family and of spirituality. But Christmas can also be hectic and even frustrating if we don't manage our time and our moods correctly. I know. I run a book and game store that gets tremendously busy during November and December, and yet I also have shopping to do, parties to go to, a family that wants me to spend extra time with them, and so on. Since I talk to a lot of frantic people every year around this time, I have some words of advice that hopefully can help you get the best out of this wonderful season, without it getting the best of you.

KEEP YOUR PERSPECTIVE.

Remember what Christmas is about: a time to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. The concepts of “peace on earth” and “goodwill toward men” (and women) are universal and worth sharing. It's sometimes difficult to remember this when you're battling for a parking space in an overcrowded mall parking lot, but it's worth the effort.

PLAN AHEAD.

Why are so many of us shocked each year that it's suddenly almost Christmas and we haven't done a thing to prepare? How much better and easier to pick up gifts early, wrap them, and put them in a closet? You can even start Christmas craft projects in July! By the time December rolls around, you won't have much to do

except enjoy yourself—and you'll be the envy of those of us who wish we'd been as organized!

KEEP IT SIMPLE.

Simplicity is a virtue. Holiday celebrations don't have to be complex. Gift-giving should be about showing you care, not about making an impression. Don't let yourself get snowed under by volunteering to bake a huge pile of cookies for the school Christmas party. Give of yourself, by all means, but don't offer to give something you don't have. Your family, friends, coworkers, community, and others all have claims on your time, so budget accordingly.

BE CHARITABLE.

Charity begins at home, but it's not meant to end there. Are there families in your area whose children aren't getting much this holiday? Why not buy an extra toy, game, puzzle, or whatnot whenever you go Christmas shopping, and give the extras to those in need? Volunteer to help with your school's or workplace's gift drive. It's very fulfilling, and helping others is one of the best ways to defeat stress in your own life.

PLAN SOME QUIET TIME.

For some, this might mean attending early-morning Christmas services with other believers. For others, it might mean setting time aside each day for private reflection. But one way or another, plan to stop, pray, be thankful, and fill up your heart with God's good things. ■



BY CHRIS MIZRANY

PRESENTING JESUS

FOR ME, one of the most exciting parts of Christmas is the presents. I know, Christmas is about so much more than gifts—yet the simple act of opening my presents and finding out what’s in them always brings me a lot of excitement. I catch sight of a gift, beautifully wrapped, with my name on it, and it thrills me! Even if I have an idea what it might be, it’s so much fun to open the package and see the gift for the first time!

When Jesus came on that first Christmas, everyone was waiting. The Israelites of His time were anticipating a Messiah, someone who would liberate them from the oppression they were suffering. Jesus arrived, packaged in the form of a little baby, and ultimately showed Himself to be the Greatest Gift in every way.

However, not everybody was prepared to understand who He was or to see His value. Some scoffed at His place of birth; others, at His

earthly father’s profession; and others still, at His parentage. For some, He wasn’t the type of Messiah they’d been expecting, and they wished they could return and exchange Him.

Nevertheless, those who received Jesus with open arms recognized how much more wonderful their lives would be now that they had the gift of eternal salvation and the unconditional love of God that He offered. They in turn shared Christ with others, who kept on sharing the good news, and here we are today.

In a world beset by false personas, materialistic thinking, and misleading advertising, His gift of love is just as real and just as needed as ever. Let’s bring Him into the lives of others, both at Christmas and always.

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

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)*



If you’d like to receive Jesus’ gift of love and everlasting life, all you have to do is ask. “Here I am!” He says. “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in.”¹

Dear Jesus, thank You for coming to earth to save me. I accept this amazing gift and invite You into my heart and life. Please help me learn to love You and others. Amen.

1. Revelation 3:20 NIV

BY MARIE ALVERO

BROKEN DECEMBERS



AS THE HALLMARK MOVIE CHANNEL ANNOUNCED 40 NEW CHRISTMAS MOVIES FOR THEIR 2019 SCHEDULE, it occurred to me that few events get the expectation and hype that Christmas does. Christmas has come to represent the culmination of the year in an extended season of beauty, feasting, generosity, friendship, and joy. We plan for traditions to be repeated, bringing all the perfection of Christmases past into today's edition.

But what about the times when the season of merriment is eclipsed by divorce, a scary diagnosis, death, disappointment? When all the traditions feel hollow, and the season serves as a reminder of what a mess your life is, when relationships are severed, bank accounts are dry, and dreams are crushed, what is there to celebrate anyway?

I think we all get a few Christmases like that, a few broken Decembers.

But our personal experience doesn't change the fact that Jesus chose to be made human, as a helpless baby, and enter our world of pain, sickness, sin, and separation from God in order to manifest

God's love for us. He chose to be the sacrifice, the atonement for our sin, so that we can enter into a redeemed relationship with God. His arrival in this world signaled the end of the power of death, fear, and hate. Even though those things are still prevalent in this world, Jesus' birth ensured that they don't get the last word. They don't win!

Even in your broken and disappointed state, Jesus brings a hope that can be celebrated. I hope you get to enjoy the full Christmas experience of family, friends, feasting, gifts, and beautiful decorations. But even if you're alone and aren't doing anything special to commemorate the season, I hope you're able to re-center your hope in Jesus. I pray that a deep awareness of His love for you will be the gift that exceeds all expectations. I hope that all of the trappings and commercializing of Christmas fades into the background as the beauty of the story of our salvation overwhelms

all the brokenness in your life and mine.

I think back to the shepherds watching their sheep on the outskirts of Bethlehem on the night Jesus was born. They were probably cold, hungry, and uncomfortable. They probably didn't feel like they had much going for them, professionally and otherwise. But as the angel appeared to them heralding the good news of Jesus' birth, followed by the sky filling with choirs of angels, I bet they felt love, hope, joy, and excitement that transformed the drudgery of their lives.

Take hold of that same good news. Let's celebrate the hope of Jesus this Christmas!

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FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

THE ESSENCE OF CHRISTMAS

Christmas is best enjoyed when it isn't centered on decorations, presents, or festivities, but on My gift of love to the world. Love is the essence of Christmas. Christmas is best celebrated by taking quality time with your family and friends, and cherishing and celebrating the love you share. Sadly, love can get lost amid the Christmas hustle and bustle. Sometimes it's covered up by the decorations and gifts, the endless shopping, and the Christmas dinner and parties.

Christmas is My birthday, the day when I entered into human history with the greatest gift ever. Can you spare some time for Me on My birthday? Can you take a

minute to give your heart to Me and let Me tell you how much I love you? It was love for you that brought Me to your world, to live and die for you. Love was, and still is, the core of My nature. My death on the cross was for the salvation of every person who has ever lived or ever will, but I would have done it for you alone. You mean that much to Me!

On My birthday I would like you to take time for love. Enjoy the festive decorations, the scrumptious food, and the gift-giving, but don't let those overshadow or distract you from the best and most important thing, the only thing that will last for eternity, the essence of Christmas—eternal love.