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“Have you noticed that all of the headlights up there are coming toward us?”

Warm memories of near-tragic winter event

It’s winter, but you’d never know it by looking out my window right now. I read about winter storms, mountains getting snow, motorists stranded, power outages, and yet all of those reports are from places where winter really means something.

All winter means in Southern California, where I live, is that the days are shorter and the stores are playing Christmas music. The sky is still blue, surfers are still in the water, people are still wearing shorts. They may have added Uggs to their feet, but it’s pretty nice out.

Just the fact that it’s winter, though, takes me back to my days in Minnesota, where I grew up. And when I think of winter in Minnesota, I think of playing hockey. We played mostly on outdoor rinks, so we would put plastic bags over our feet before we put on our skates, and put examination gloves from a doctor’s office on our hands before we put on our hockey gloves. Not until high school did I have the glorious experience of playing in an indoor rink.

One particular post-game night still stands out, and I always think about it when winter arrives.

After a hard-fought game (is there any other kind?) at the Metropolitan Ice Arena outside of Minneapolis, I climbed into my dad’s station wagon, exhausted but exuberant. The high school team I played on had just beaten a cross-town rival. I was giving our goaltender a ride home, and for the first several minutes in the car all we could talk about was the game.

It was a January night in Minnesota, which meant that it was very dark and very cold. I eased the car onto the freeway, and we continued our recap of the game’s highlights.

Suddenly the goaltender said, “Have you noticed that all of the headlights up there are coming toward us?”

I quickly focused on the road, and realized I had pulled the car onto the highway going the wrong way. I yanked on the steering wheel and swerved into the median separating eastbound traffic from westbound.

The car then sank in the deep snow.

My teammate and I crawled out and headed for an exit so we could call for help—this was before cellphones. The car was hopelessly stuck.

The highway patrol officer who came to the site berated me for my carelessness, and continued to marvel in a not-very-convincing tone that we had not been drinking. The tow-truck operator did not hide his irritation at having to crawl into the snow under the car to attach the towing cable to the frame.

But these comments from authority figures did not concern me nearly as much as what I anticipated my dad would say. He was at a dinner party, and I needed to call him from the highway patrolman’s car. My dad arrived just as the car was being pulled out of the snow and pointed in the right direction.

“Are you OK?”

“Yes.”

“The car looks OK.”

“Yes.”

We stood, silent, in the middle of the cold highway. The goaltender, wisely, stood a ways off, shivering.

“How am I going to get home?” I asked my dad as I handed him the keys.



“You’re driving. You got on the wrong side of the highway. It’s not very clearly marked. I’m surprised more people haven’t done it.”

We stood for a while longer.

“See you at the house. I’m glad you’re both OK.”

I didn’t care about the hockey victory anymore. This was a new level of exuberance. In spite of the ditched car, my dad saw something. The value of another chance? A grace moment from his own past? All I could feel was acceptance, love and gratitude.

This is how God sees his creation. He likes what he sees. He sees himself in it. And the delight that God takes in his creation draws us back to him.

It’s winter on the calendar. But it’s warm where I am right now.



Dean Nelson directs the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego. His book about seeing God in everyday life is “God Hides in Plain Sight: How to See the Sacred in a Chaotic World.”



Christmas through the fog

A holiday short story

by MARY KAY MOODY



Mother was still as we drove the meandering roadway quickly becoming snow-covered. She faced the side window, watching the swirling snow, and mumbling sharp words I couldn't make out. I mumbled too, aggravated that a jack-knifed semi blocked the expressway and we had to battle back roads in a snow storm. I had to get us home before she breached her fragile containment and had a meltdown.

Had I known two weeks ago how bad the weather would be this Christmas Eve, I'd have given up my attempt at a traditional family Christmas. Though Mom's mind was elsewhere, lost as if it had flitted into the snowy forest, at least she would join Sandy and me and the kids. We hoped for one last holiday before the teens drifted away into college, jobs, and marriages that threatened to fling them from coast to coast, and before Mom's mind wandered into some dark wormhole permanently.

Rounding a curve, we hit a patch of ice and slid sideways. Mom, hands still resting in her lap, hollered "Whe-e-e." I breathed a

prayer as I eased off the gas and steered out of the skid.

The sky lightened. The snow-covered woods glistened in the weak afternoon sunlight like a Currier and Ives Christmas card sprinkled with glitter. Progress was agonizingly slow, but perhaps the storm would end and we'd just have an uneventful drive and a picture-perfect holiday. Suddenly we were free-wheeling ... right towards a massive oak.

I gripped the wheel. God, please, help...

"James, these horses are a bit frisky," Mom said. "Can't you rein them in?"

I grunted. What does one say when one's mother thinks she talking with one's father? When she doesn't know what age she is or that a car is about to ram a tree?

Sliding into the snow along the road's edge, we gained traction and I righted the car, pointing us toward home again.

"James," she said, looking square at me. "How soon do we arrive? We've been a very long time, and I'm cold in this sleigh."

"It's me, Mom. Travis." I glanced over to see how she'd take my intrusion into her fantasy world.

She glared at me. "What have you done with my husband?" Her words reverberated through the car, and held a shade of panic laced in the bluster.

"Nothing, Mom. He'll be back soon."

"I should hope so. I don't take rides with strange men." She scooted closer to the door.

Well, at least she didn't appear too terrified of this strange man at the moment. I wondered how long before I morphed into Dad again, and if her imaginings brought her comfort. She remained quiet as we crawled along the winding road. Finally we pulled into the driveway. The front door flew open.

Sandy scurried out along with TJ, our eldest son. "Merry Christmas, Mom," Sandy said. "Let me help you."

As usual, Mom looked bewildered, but allowed Sandy and TJ to grasp an elbow and walked her toward the house. Karl stood sentry, holding the door open for her as if she were a queen.



I gave him a thumb's up. Of all the kids, at three years old he should have been most confused by his grandmother's unpredictability. Yet he seemed unfazed by her non-sequiturs and how she drifted away mid-sentence.

I put the car in the garage and tramped inside. Sandy had Mom seated at the dining room table with Karl as he prepared snacks. Sandy and I went into the kitchen where the smell of garlic and roasting beef mingled with coffee. I poured myself a cup and she returned to tending casseroles and pans of whatever. "I heard about the accident. We've been on pins and needles waiting for you. I'm so glad you weren't caught in all that."

"Avoided it, but the back roads were no breeze. I'm not certain we can get mom back tonight."

She put a pan on the stove. "But, Trav—"

"I know." I shrugged. "She hates unfamiliar territory. But the road was risky enough in daylight. I'm not taking chances after dark."

"Maybe a salt truck will come by."

I looked askance. "Christmas Eve? This far out?"

She smiled and jiggled her curly head. "If not, we'll just have to take turns sitting up with her."

"You're a brick." I kissed her cheek. "Anything you want me to do?"

She poured steaming cocoa into a mug depicting a woodland trail and a sleigh. Was she a mind reader? "Would you take this in to her? She might be chilled."

"Sure."

"Go sit and enjoy her while ..."

Her smile faded. "Yeah." I went down the hall and stopped at the dining table. Karl had a silver platter arranged with crackers and cheese. Now his face scrunched as he tried piling chunky peanut butter in—not all over—celery stalks. He already had a half dozen lined up, but practice didn't seem to make the task easier.

I placed Mom's cocoa in front of her, then ruffled Karl's mop of brown hair. "Want some help? I could put the cranberries on top for you."

"Daddy," he said, pulling a pout.

"That's the fun part."

I chuckled. "Okay. I'll sit with Grandma. We'll be your cheerleaders."

He just nodded, his tongue busily working, as if helping guide his knife.

I patted Mom's hand. It felt chilly. "Mom, you warm enough?"

She glanced at me vacantly, then went back to observing Karl's every move.

"This will warm you up," I said, moving the cocoa right beside her hand. I sat across the table, hoping to see any expressions of recognition or joy fly across her face. Working a holiday around her needs, with a rowdy quintet of kids, was a challenge at best. I'd hoped seeing family at home might ... No sense wishing. Clearly she still floated in an Alzheimer's haze. But maybe we'd still have a joyful holiday—if nothing sent her mind and emotions hurtling down some path of terror and shrieking.

A blob of peanut butter fell off Karl's knife, thankfully landing on the cracker plate. He swiped it up with a finger and dropped it into his mouth, then tried again. Half the



gooey stuff stayed in the celery, the other sliding over the edge. Quick as a wink he licked the overflow off and held the stalk up for inspection.

“Travis James!” Mother said.

Karl and I both startled and turned to her.

She wagged a finger at my son.

“Don’t you dare put that on the serving tray, young man. I’ve told you if you lick off the excess, put the celery on a separate plate. Even family might not appreciate second-hand turtles-on-a-log.”

Karl gaped at her a moment before peeking at me. I wondered if he heard anything beyond her calling him by my name. Then he beamed at her. “Yes, ma’am.”

With a smile she passed him a saucer, leaving a solo china cup on the table.

“That’s a good boy.” She turned to me. “James, our boy is polite and a quick learner. He will go far in this world.”

I nodded as a smile warred with piercing sadness. Though she couldn’t say it to my face, she was proud of me. That was an unexpected Christmas present, and I’d hang

on to the memory a long while.

She nodded as if providing the exclamation point to her announcement. Then rose and reached toward me. “Shall we go to the parlor and listen to some music?”

I glanced at Karl who gave me a smile and returned to his task. I took her arm, hoping I was “playing along” correctly.

We walked into the family room. I guided her to the piano. She stopped, and her hand drifted to the gleaming walnut top. “Why, James, when did we get a new piano? Where is our ...” She began scanning the room.

I tensed, ready to run for Sandy who always managed to soothe mother whenever something rose up and knocked her out of awareness and into who-knew-what territory. “Um ... Merry Christmas, Katherine.”

She glanced at me, a question in her watery eyes, then she stroked the shiny surface. “Well, don’t you beat all? It’s lovely.”

Dodged a bullet. I relaxed, enjoying the serene smile on her face.

She glanced at me. “James, you

always have the best surprises.”

Her world was jumbled, yes. But it hadn’t completely evaporated. Dad had given her a piano. A birthday gift, but hey, the memory was still in there somewhere. “Try it out.” I urged her toward the bench.

She stepped over and regally sat, lifting her thin arms and holding her gnarled hands above the keys. Staring off into space, she began to play. Slowly, stiffly. The melody came in fits and starts. But as her hands loosened, the tune flowed. And her face took on a luminescence I hadn’t seen in years. Decades more like.

Karl appeared at the doorway behind her and watched, nodding to the beat. Slowly the others joined him as Mom continued playing carols. The room seemed like old—happy—Christmases, and I stood there enjoying it. This might be the closest we’d come to the Christmas of my hopes.

Mom finished and sat straighter as the echo of the piano faded. She smiled broadly at me. “Merry Christmas, Travis.”

“Merry Christmas, Mom.” ■



PHOTO BY RHONDA MORGAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Olivia's hope

Parents reflect on loss of young daughter to brain cancer

by LORI ARNOLD

Rachel Hudson was trying hard to concentrate on her breathing and ever-increasing contractions as she and her husband André were about to welcome their third daughter, Avery. But there were persistent distractions that often kept her mind away from the birthing center at Grossmont Hospital. Their oldest, Amaya, then 5, was about to start school for the first time, while her little sister, Olivia, was undergoing brain cancer treatment at Rady Children's Hospital.

"Olivia was always a very funky, very independent little lady who always knew what she wanted. She was very independent from a very young age. She had her own ideas about how things should go. She was a little feisty. She was a lot of fun."

As baby Avery arrived, the Hudsons were jolted into a new reality, as their

newborn developed serious breathing issues, including pneumonia. Papa André said they had only seconds with Avery before she was rushed to the neonatal intensive-care unit.

"It was a little crazy because the circumstances around Avery being born," Rachel said. "She had her own things going on. They wanted to transfer her to Mary Birch but we told them we already have a child at Children's Hospital. I can't imagine going back and forth between two different places."

Over the next 10 days the Hudsons and their immediate family rotated parental duties between the two youngest children—hospitalized on different floors at Rady's—and Amaya, who was spending most of her time at the Ronald McDonald House located adjacent to the hospital.

"It wasn't funny but it was laughable,



PHOTOS BY RHONDA MORGAN PHOTOGRAPHY

The many faces of Olivia Hudson

Rachel Hudson said her daughter, Olivia, was a 'very funky, very independent little lady who always knew what she wanted. She was a little feisty. She was a lot of fun.' Rachel and her husband, André, lost Olivia to brain cancer before she turned four.

the amount of trials happening at the same time," André said.

Unlike her older sister, Avery recovered quickly and the most immediate focus returned to Olivia, the young fighter.

"Avery was just with us the whole time," Rachel said. "She was pretty quiet and just hung out. It was kind of perfect. She was such an easy baby. She kind of came into her own a little bit later and got a little bit more feisty. It was like she said 'OK, now it's my turn.' When the focus needed to be on Olivia, she was just so easy."

The logistics, Rachel said, helped to provide a much-needed routine for the couple as they tried to live for the moment.

"When you are in a crisis situation you just handle it," the mom said. "What other choice do you really have? You have to get through it somehow. I think all the things we normally worry about you just stop worrying about and you just focus on what's immediately in front of you and handle what's most important and most critical and then you move to the next. At that point there's no place for any of that other stuff. There just isn't. You have to focus on what's most important and get through that immediate thing. It makes you have tunnel vision. It's almost like you are looking at your feet and what's your next step? And that's it."

André, a worship leader at Rock Church East County, admitted he was torn by the needs of his two sick daughters.

"As a father, you have this natural inclination to protect and keep them away from harm," he said. "I just wasn't able to do that. I was having to make decisions where both options or multiple options were all not good ones. So just trying to navigate around that was definitely really tough.

"I came to a point where I had to make a decision about which child I was going to be with. I had to choose Olivia because she's the one I had a relationship with and it was kind of like this other person came in who was also in trouble. You have to determine who you are going to invest your emotions in. I found myself not emotionally investing in the newborn because I just couldn't take so much tragedy at once."

Something's wrong

By the time Avery made her 2011 debut, 2-year-old Olivia had already been hospitalized for a month after being diagnosed with pineoblastoma, a form of pediatric brain cancer. Within days of her diagnosis, surgeons removed a large mass from the center of her brain. Because of the location of the tumor, Olivia was without symptoms for months, giving the tumor free reign before her par-

ents noticed something was wrong.

"It was a perfect storm that was brewing," Rachel said. "So, until it was actually touching a portion of her brain that cause symptoms, we had no idea what was going on."

At first they thought Olivia had the flu, but when her left eye began crossing inward they scheduled an appointment with a specialist, but the soonest she could be seen was several months out.

As they readied for a family barbecue on the Fourth of July weekend, Olivia's symptoms worsened.

"She wasn't really feeling good," Rachel said. "She was really shaky. She didn't want to eat anything. She didn't want to drink anything. We gave her a bath to see if that made her feel better. She just went and laid on the floor. We knew something was just really off."

They took her to Children's Hospital, where Rachel tried to convince the admitting staff that it was more than just the flu.

"I'm not a new mom," she told the triage nurse. "I just don't bring my kids in for a scratch. I'm telling you there is something wrong."

A CAT scan was ordered.

"The nurse comes back after they get the results and she brings somebody with her. She's crying at this point so I knew something was wrong," Rachel said, her own voice trembling at the



The Hudson family, André and Rachel, with their daughters Olivia, left, Avery, center, and Amaya, enjoy one of their last outings with Olivia.

memory. “That’s where her journey with cancer started.”

The first of two surgeries was scheduled within days, giving her parents little time to process Olivia’s diagnosis.

“We didn’t know if she would make it out (of the surgery),” her father said.

André stayed with Olivia while the nurses prepped her for surgery.

“She looked at me and said, ‘Daddy, God is great?’” André said. “She posed it as a question. I said, ‘Yes, sweetheart, God is great.’ It was so random and so profound. She was kind of like, ‘Don’t worry about it, God’s got this.’ From that point forward she was never physically the same. That was the last time we saw her not damaged.”

After that surgery, Olivia lost the ability to speak or swallow, and much of her motor skills, especially on her left side.

Doctors kept the toddler in ICU for a month and then moved her to a regular room for two more months while she was treated with chemotherapy and radiation. Three months after she was admitted, doctors sent Olivia home to continue her recovery.

“She was regaining function and regaining speech and all those things,” her momma said. “She was really recovering quite well. She was relearning how to walk and all these different things.”

A year into her ordeal Olivia was in remission.

“When kids are young and they have

cancer, it’s very aggressive,” Rachel said. “It’s very different from adults, especially with the type of cancer she had. It was very likely it was going to come back.”

Olivia was cancer free for just a matter of weeks before returning. By then her treatment options were slim.

“That was the point where we were like ‘Oh, we’re not coming back from this. We did what we could, but there was a point when we needed to stop treatment because it wasn’t working,” Rachel said, drawing a deep breath. “We lost our little girl just shy of her 4th birthday.”

Clutching faith

While Rachel and André leaned on each other during Olivia’s cancer treatment, both said their faith helped each of them to process their anger and grief.

“I actually felt my faith was really, really strong when Olivia was sick,” she said. “We just really pressed into God. I felt incredibly close to God at that time. When I questioned Him was when she passed.

“As a Christian it’s really easy to say we know that all things work for the good for those who love God. It will work out for the good. But when we can’t see the good in a situation, it’s really hard for that to really resonate with you.”

The real struggle, she said, came after Olivia’s death.

“I think that was the point where it was really like, ‘OK, do I believe what I say I believe or am I just going through the motions?’ That’s really where I had to evaluate everything that I thought I believed,” Rachel said. “There was a time after she passed that I really had to decide which way I was going to go.”

André said his relationship with Jesus

helped him to navigate dark waters.

“I had some spiritual grounding and I had some understanding of God’s character before I went into this,” the full-time worship leader said. “I think that was vital, just knowing God’s character, knowing that He always provides and seeing his hand through all of it.

“My main prayer wasn’t necessarily getting answered but I knew that God was still with us, giving us peace and comfort.”

While André said he is grateful for his relationship with Jesus, he said relationship is not enough.

“It’s actually deeper than that,” he said. “You have a relationship with your barista at Starbucks, but you are not intimate with the barista at Starbucks. God seeks intimacy. It’s through intimacy with God where all your peace and comfort come.

“I learned that the human body and the human emotions are both strong and weak at the same time. I feel like God took me probably three weeks to a month past the point that I thought I could take. When I felt I couldn’t take it anymore, God took me a month past that point. With God’s power we are capable of doing a whole lot more than we think we are.”

Passing it on

Determined to turn their grief into a lasting legacy, the Hudsons and their family formed the Olivia Hudson Foundation, which funds research for pediatric cancer. It also provides support for families facing the same journey.

“So many people watched Olivia during her fight with cancer,” Rachel said. “She was so strong. She never complained. She was such a sweet little girl. People saw her fight with such strength and grace and she was able to appreciate simple, simple things.

“So many people were touched by

The Hudsons reflect on their fond memories of Olivia.

that. She had teachers at her preschool that came to know the Lord because of that. A lot of people's faith was strengthened by her fight."

At the core that faith, her parents said, was relentless hope.

"The big thing with fighting cancer is that you have to have hope," Rachel said. "You can't lose your hope in that situation. I think we always knew from the time she was diagnosed that there was a possibility that she



might not make it, but you don't ever allow yourself to go there because you really can't. You have to guard your heart.

You have to guard your mind like none other. You can't go there, you can't lose hope, because you need to fight." ■

Building a foundation for others

Trading the comfort of their Santee home for the sterile environment of Rady Children's Hospital, André and Rachel Hudson were overwhelmed by the learning curve associated with pineoblastoma, the pediatric brain cancer that was attacking their toddler, Olivia. Besides learning a whole new vocabulary (pineal gland, cerebrospinal fluid, hydrocephalus, radiation, chemotherapy, melatonin ...), the Hudsons were juggling the needs of their then-5-year-old Amaya and newborn daughter Avery, who arrived just a month after Olivia's diagnosis.

In between treatments, the Hudsons considered how they might be able to parlay their raw familiarity with pediatric brain cancer into a support network for others once Olivia was healed.

"It's a whole community of families who are fighting cancer," Rachel said. "Some make it and some don't. There is so much you learn going through it. You know about childhood cancer, but most the time it doesn't really reach

your circle.

"It's one of those things where you think this will never happen to me or anyone I know when the reality is it's really common. It's not given as much attention as it needs. It's not given as much funding as it needs. It's a crazy community that you don't ever want to be a part of."

Except for a weeks-long remission about a year into her treatment, Olivia never healed this side of heaven. After her March 19, 2013 passing Rachel and her father-in-law launched the Olivia Hudson Foundation as a perpetual tribute.

"We had this incredible group of people who just came alongside us and offered their services," she said.

The foundation's mission is to raise funding for pediatric brain cancer research, support families in financial need, and increase awareness of brain cancer in children. One of its programs, Olivia's Kids Against Cancer, specializes in offering educational programs

with an eye toward assisting siblings who may get overlooked while the parents focus on an ill child.

While the main focus is on the logistics of pediatric cancer, Rachel said it's also an avenue to live out their faith.

"I believe a lot of people came to faith through her," Rachel said. "I believe that many more will through just seeing the love of other people through the foundation."

Olivia's dad sees the foundation more as a practical tribute to his late daughter.

"When I see the outcome of salvations and feelings from her testimony and story I can see the greater value," André said. "I feel like it honors her but I don't know if brings me any peace. My peace is only from God. I love the fact that she's being honored and I love that it gives us an opportunity to share her story and I love that it helps out other kids and their families."

Learn more at www.oliviahudsonfoundation.org.

Refugee highway

Christians minister to thousands traversing Europe

by CHARLES BRADDIX | BP NEWS

While the European Union grapples with the complexities of handling hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants streaming across its borders, Christians throughout the region see this as an unprecedented opportunity for outreach and ministry among those fleeing war, persecution and economic hard times.

“This ever-expanding crisis might just be the opportunity of our generation for Gospel advance among some of the least reached peoples on the planet,” said James Keath,* senior International Mission Board strategy leader for Northern Africa and the Middle East. “I believe God is working through the events of our day to move these least reached peoples into arm’s reach of the church so that they can encounter Christ.”

Mark Edworthy, Keath’s counterpart for Europe, noted, “The continent of Eu-

rope is radically changing, and we have an unprecedented open door to impact the newest arrivals with the Gospel,” he said.

The path across Europe varies, but the starting and ending points seem to be the same. Most refugees, asylum seekers and migrants make their way to Greece and ultimately end up in Germany. They come from the Middle East, Northern Africa, Central Asia and even as far away as East Asia.

According to the U.N. refugee agency, Greece has received more than half a million “sea arrivals” so far this year, while the total number of refugees arriving in Europe by way of the Mediterranean now approaches 650,000. German vice chancellor Sigmar Gabriel has said his country could be hosting up to one million refugees by the end of the year.

From Greece, the “refugee highway”

formerly traversed countries of eastern and central Europe. Now, because of a spate of border closures, the highway crosses through the Balkan states, including Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia. Refugees then make their way into Germany.

Nearly 250,000 refugees passed through the Balkans since mid-September, according to the EU, with many fleeing conflict in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

“The Lord has abruptly brought tens of thousands of refugees through ministry points in Greece, Hungary, Germany and many other countries,” Edworthy said. “Our workers have partnered in the immediate response work in Greece, as well as the follow-up and settlement work in Germany. As refugees distance themselves from the strictures of an anti-Christian culture and see Christian love tangibly shown, they naturally ask about motivation and ultimately about hope,” he said.

Thousands of Bibles have been distributed to those spreading across the European continent, Edworthy said. “We have seen countless of these transients find hope,” he said.

Housing tops the EU’s concerns for refugees, said Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the EU’s special commission on the refugee crisis. “It cannot be that in the Europe of 2015 people are left to fend for themselves, sleeping in the fields,” he said. The proper registration of transient peoples is also of major importance to the EU.

Abraham Shepherd, who works in the region, said, “Beyond the numbers, beyond the registered, beyond the journey that these people suffer and endure, these numbers represent people.”

He noted, “I remember standing at



Each day thousands of refugees and migrants, who arrive on the Greek island of Lesbos after fleeing war and persecution in their home countries, line up to take one of several daily ferries to Athens.

IMB PHOTO BY JEDEDIAH SMITH



Many refugees and migrants pass through Izmir, Turkey, on their way to Europe, where they hope to find peace and asylum after fleeing war and persecution. For most, the only place to rest is along the city streets as they wait to move on.

IMB PHOTO BY JEDEDIAH SMITH

Volunteers and officials are on hand to assist refugees and migrants as they arrive on the Greek island of Lesbos.

that border with Macedonia with my wife, and we noticed hundreds of people lining up for some little food and some clothing in a very harsh environment — flimsy tents — plastic with plastic tarp on the floor. We noticed a well-dressed woman with her daughter, and they were in tears, just broken to pieces. They were scared.”

Shepherd said sometimes all it takes



IMB PHOTO BY JEDEDIAH SMITH

is a smile from a friendly face or a few words of encouragement to make the journey a little more bearable for a refugee. If just that is done when minister-

ing to refugees, it would be a big help, he said. He encourages Christians in both Europe and North America to send teams to Europe’s refugee highway, to have a

10 facts about refugee realities

by ANDERSON ROSSON | BP NEWS

Millions of people across Central Asia have crossed borders to escape war, persecution and violence. While Christians continue to respond, many refugees cling to a hope that wanes with each passing day.

The following includes a list of 10 realities about refugees that many may not yet realize.

1. Children are suffering. Half of Syrian refugees are under the age of 18. Three out of four children have lost a loved one because of the war and desperately need crisis counselors. Volunteers who can organize education, English, art or sports camps play a vital role in ministering to children, many of whom are not enrolled in any structured school program.
2. Shelter is insufficient. Refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon are at capacity. Thousands of refugees are left to sleep on the streets.
3. Winter is approaching. Most refugees flee with only the clothes on their back and a cell phone. Many are unprepared for approaching winter weather.
4. Food is scarce. Refugees who travel across borders often subsist on one meal a day. Provision of food is a critical aspect of refugee relief.
5. Refugees are at risk for exploitation. Crowded housing conditions, which include people living in abandoned buildings, place many at risk of abuse. Pray for God to protect refugees, especially children, from those who prey on the vulnerable and oppressed.
6. Many refugees are educated. A journalist said he fled his country because he was persecuted for expressing his views on the Internet. Refugees may have been engineers, medical professionals, accountants, educators or artists in their home countries. There is a wide diversity of professions represented on the refugee highway.
7. Refugees are diverse. Refugees may speak Arabic, Persian, Kurmanji, Sorani or Urdu. They represent many different people groups — Assyrian, Syrian, Kurdish, Yazidi, Afghani, Persian or Pakistani. Meeting the needs of so many peoples can be a challenge for relief workers, but it presents an incredible opportunity for sharing the Gospel.
8. The road to freedom is dangerous. Refugees risk their lives when they flee their countries. According to government reports, 30 people drowned near the Greek island of Lesbos in a period of four months, yet local workers estimate the actual number to be more than 250. In total, close to 3,000 people have died crossing the Mediterranean Sea to arrive in Europe.
9. Orphans are at risk. The most vulnerable refugees are unaccompanied minors, many of whom have been out of school for a year or more. Volunteer teams could provide critical support through English, art, science or sports camps for refugee children.
10. Refugees laugh, love and hurt. Refugees are men, women and children just like any other man, woman or child in the world. Anyone could become a refugee given the right political circumstances.



IMB PHOTO

Many refugees have insufficient shelter. Refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon are at capacity. Thousands of refugees are left to sleep on the streets.

few things as powerful as their faith in helping them cope with fear, loss, separation and destitution.

“Faith is also central to hope and resilience,” he said. “In most

circumstances local religious communities are the first which our people of concern turn to for protection, assistance and counseling. Faith-based organizations often enjoy higher levels of trust from the community, better access and broader local knowledge, all of which are important assets in program design and delivery, including in complex and insecure environments.”

Don Alan,* a Christian worker in the Middle East serving among Syrian refugees, said, “Let’s be honest. Whether we talk about a thousand or ten thousand or a hundred thousand, the problem is much bigger than any one of us. It calls for the body of Christ to step into the gap, extend a cup of water, a home, a job and the hope that resides in us, the saving power of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

He said there is a call for unity among the body of Christ to respond with His voice, His love and His actions, doing so as the author of Hebrews said: “We are not of those who shrink back ... but of those who have faith,” (Hebrews 10:39, NASB).

“I pray that we would not shrink back from the opportunity to be salt and light, to be the hands of Jesus to the marginalized and forgotten,” Alan said. “I am so thankful for those stepping up and coming alongside of us at this critical juncture in the lives of many of these refugees.”

Keath said, “Recognizing this as a historic opportunity is one thing. Stewarding that opportunity is another thing. How will we as the church respond?” ■

Christian presence there and bring hope to those making the traumatic journey.

Every refugee has a story, Keath said.

“In the reports I get from teams working among refugees, I repeatedly hear the same two things,” he said. “First, every refugee has a story of despair from the unspeakable horrors they have experienced. This just breaks your heart. And if it weren’t coupled with a story of hope it would probably break your spirit.”

Keath said that hope is the story. “Everywhere we encounter refugees we are seeing not just incredible opportunity for a clear, bold expression of the Gospel; we are also seeing hearts that are wide open and searching for that hope in Christ,” he said.

Shepherd noted, “Sometimes God allows persecution — He knocks things out

of control. Maybe those are the things that make people soften their heart and their spirit and their being toward a mighty God who created them. When we’re busy, when we’re strong, when we have it all, thinking we’re in control, we don’t have that need to question or search what is the meaning of life.”

Now is the time to reach the hearts and minds of the refugees streaming across Europe, Shepherd said. “In the urgency of the situation we should engage them as they are seeking, engage them as they have crisis of identity, engage them as they are bewildered about their beliefs and what kind of belief they should be embracing,” he said.

António Guterres, U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, said, “For the vast majority of uprooted people, there are



IMB PHOTO

Amid the refugee crisis, children must endure suffering and extreme uncertainty. Half of Syrian refugees are under the age of 18.

SILENT NIGHTS

400 years.

That's how long God was silent between the Old and New Testaments.

The last thing anyone heard from God was through the prophet Malachi.

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Our country isn't even 400 years.

400 years ago was 1615.

I can't imagine God being silent for that long.

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An angel appearing to a young girl.

An angel appearing to a confused, and hurting young man.

Angels appearing to forgotten shepherds in a field.

A baby's cry in a feeding trough.

Not exactly the ways one would expect to hear from God after 400 years.

Despite all the angelic hosts and declarations, the reality is that when God spoke after 400 years, he basically whispered.

Sure, it may have been bold or dramatic at times, but it was really only a handful of people who actually heard the declarations.

Many were still waiting to hear.

Waiting for words of hope.

Deliverance.

Yet they didn't hear. Not for another 30 years.

In fact, if anything, the world seemed worse.

They were living under Roman rule.

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Struggling to survive.

And even if they heard murmurs that the Messiah had come in the first few years of Jesus' life, an angry king quickly squelched that hope when he ordered the death of all children under the age of 2.

To them, the heavens were still painfully silent.

There was no hope for the future.

But just because they didn't hear it, doesn't mean the

silence was still dominant.

In fact, the silence had been broken.

And the silence wasn't the only thing that was broken. Because in the life of Jesus, the stronghold of sin would be broken.

The barrier between us and God would be broken.

Hopelessness would be broken.

The mystery of God would be revealed in the life and words of Jesus.

And while all of this sounds like a great story, we still need God to break through the nothing, don't we?

We still need God to speak to our silence.

We still need a Savior.

Because there are times when God is silent now in my life and yours.

Not for 400 years. But for 400 seconds. 400 minutes.

400 days. 400 months.

When we wonder about the "next" in our lives.

When we anxiously pray for someone we love.

When we're battling a disease, or watching someone we care about wither away from one.

When we wonder how the bills will get paid, if we'll get the job, what life holds after graduation.

Silence.

And then he whispers, Emmanuel. "God is with you."

You are not alone.

You never were.

And the realization that the silence is part of your story, just as much as the declarations.

And that the silence doesn't mean God has forgotten about you, it means He is quietly there beside you.

God is with us. ■



Tim Walker is a husband/father/writer who is navigating faith, marriage, parenthood and mid-life. Follow his blog at www.tfmswords.com.

MercyMe Christmas

Contemporary Christian stalwarts, MercyMe, winners of eight Dove Awards, have released its second holiday album with



MercyMe It's Christmas! The album, released in October, debuted at No. 1 on Billboard's Holiday Albums Chart.

The band, which formed in 1994, is no stranger to strong album sales, having sold more than 8 million units. The band's debut project *Almost There*, went double-platinum. Four others have been certified gold.

The newest offering features several Christmas classics, plus the original numbers "Our Lullaby," "Christmastime Again" and "Hold On Christmas." The album's track list also includes two compilation songs that include original lyrics. "Joy," mixes "O Come Let Us Adore Him" and "Joy To The World," while "The Newborn Has Come," pairs "Away in a Manger" and "Hark the Herald Angels Sing."

Seasonal favorites include "Sleigh Ride," "I'll be Home for Christmas," "Go Tell it on the Mountain," "Do You Hear What I Hear?" and "O Come, O Come."

A gospel Christmas

Gospel fans are in for a treat with Rendezvous Music's *Christmas Goes Gospel: Volume 2*, a powerhouse collection featuring Whitney Houston with the Georgia Mass Choir, Fred Hammond, Yolanda Adams, CeCe Winans, Andraé Crouch, Marvin Sapp, Bishop Paul S. Morton Sr., Israel Houghton, Jonathan Butler, Marvin Winans, John Stoddart and the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir.



Described as festive and spiritual, the

album features 12 holiday favorites, including "Little Drummer Boy," "The First Noel," "O Come All Ye Faithful," "Emmanuel," "Joy to the World," "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" and "Silent Night."

The compilation released on Nov. 6.

Christmas campfire

Northern Irish worship band Rend Collective gets into the Christmas Spirit with *Campfire Christmas: Volume 1*.



Tapping into their Irish root, the band adds a folksy spin on such classics as "O Holy Night (O Night Divine)"

and "We Wish You A Merry Christmas." Other tracks include "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," "O Come All Ye Faithful (Let Us Adore Him)" and "Merry Christmas Everyone."

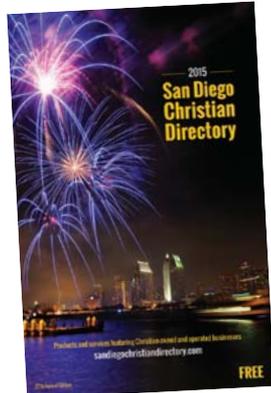
The Christmas album comes just a couple of months after the release of its fifth studio album, *As Family We Go*. That project resulted in the highest debut for a Christian album in the United Kingdom in almost 20 years and the highest-ever Christian album debut in the U.K. The album also hit the No. 1 spot on the iTunes Christian albums chart in the U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and was in the top 10 albums overall in seven countries including the United States.

In advance of the Christmas release, Rend Collective joined Chris Tomlin for the second leg of his "Love Ran Red Tour."



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A thoroughly Cameron Christmas

Kirk Cameron and his sister Candace Cameron Bure, both stars of popular '80s sitcoms, are pulling out their Christmas attire for separate holiday films.

Cameron, a teen heartthrob for his seven-year role as Mike Seaver on "Growing Pains," stars in "Saving Christmas." Released in theaters last year, the movie is now available on DVD and digital download.

The movie explores the biblical origins of family Christmas traditions, including the Christmas tree, St. Nicholas, and the Nativity. Using humor, the movie follows Cameron as he works to de-Scrooge his brother-in-law whose bah-humbug spirit threatens to derail their Christmas joy.

Also starring in the film is another Cameron sister, Bridgette Cameron, who (fittingly) plays his sister. Bridgette's credits include "The Krew," "Home Improvement" and "Full House."

The DVD is available at Christian retailers, Amazon and Walmart.

While her brother uses film to "dive headfirst into all of the joy, celebration, feasting, imagination, and traditions that glorify Jesus as the true 'reason for the season,'" Bure explores the holidays in rural Alaska in the Hallmark Channel's "Christmas Under Wraps." Bure stars as Dr. Lauren Brunell, who finds herself in Garland, Alaska, after failing to secure



Kirk Cameron stars in "Saving Christmas," which is now available on DVD.



Candace Cameron Bure and David O'Donnell star in the Hallmark Channel's "Christmas Under Wraps."

a prestigious fellowship. While sitting on the wait list for the fellowship, she accepts the only position she can find: Garland's town doctor.

It isn't long before she is charmed by Andy (David O'Donnell), a handsome local who soon starts to show her the importance of living in the moment and enjoying her unexpected adventure. As Lauren excels as Garland's doctor, she warms up to the friendly town. But Andy's father, Frank (Brian Doyle-Murray), is hiding something from her in his top-secret shipping warehouse. Just as Lauren decides to get to the bottom of her suspicions, she receives news that will force her to make a life-changing decision, while knowing for certain that for her the Christmas season will never be the same.

The film debuted Nov. 28 as part of the Hallmark Channel's annual Countdown to Christmas. Additional showings for "Christmas Under Wraps" are set for Nov. 29, Dec. 7, 8, 20, 21, 31 and Jan. 1.

'Caged No More' exposes human trafficking

The vile truth about human trafficking will be exposed in all of its disgusting ramifications with the Jan. 15 release of "Caged No More." The film, by the creators of "God's Not Dead," is being released in conjunction with Human Trafficking Awareness Month.

Based on Molly Venzke's novel by the same title, "Caged No More" was adapted for screen by co-producer Lisa Arnold and Venzke, and stars Emmy award-winner Loretta Devine ("Grey's Anatomy"), Kevin Sorbo ("God's Not Dead," "Hercules: The Legendary Journeys"), Alan Powell ("The Song"), Christian singer-songwriter Anthony Evans, and Cassidy Gifford ("God's

Not Dead"), with appearances by Gov. Bobby Jindal, pastor Chad Veach, Grammy award-nominated Christian recording artist Natalie Grant, Fox News anchor Gretchen Carlson, and Kathie Lee Gifford, host of NBC's "Today."

Inspired by real events, "Caged No More" is the story of Aggie Prejean (Devine), a grandmother on a desperate search to find her two granddaughters, Skye (Gifford) and Elle, who have been kidnapped by their sinister father (Sorbo). As the details behind the girls' disappearance begin to unravel, it's discovered that they have been taken overseas to be sold into the sex trade. Aggie enlists the help of the girls' uncle, well-respected local philanthropist Richard DuLonde (also played by Sorbo), and his son, Wil (Powell), who is former Special Forces. A global hunt ensues, and the team will stop at nothing to see the girls safely returned home.



The topic of human trafficking is explored in the upcoming film, "Caged No More," which releases Jan. 15.

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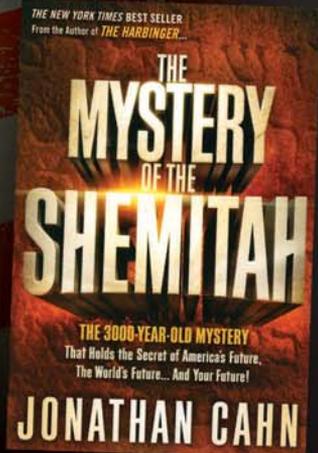
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Saturday, January 2

3 p.m. - Opening Service
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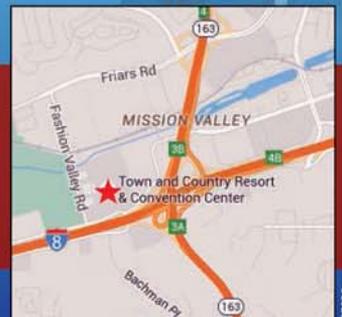
9 a.m. - Morning Service
2 p.m. - Afternoon Service
7 p.m. - Evening Service

Wednesday, January 6

9 a.m. - Closing Anointing Service

General Sessions:

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Christmas program in Mission Valley

ALLIED GARDENS — Mission Valley Christian Fellowship will present its “Hope Has Come” Christmas program at 6:30 and 8:30 p.m. Dec. 18.

The free program also includes dessert.

The church is located at 6536 Estrella Ave.

Learn more at www.mvcf.com or call (619) 683-7729.

Yuletide concert series

SAN DIEGO — The Music Ministry of Hope United Methodist Church will present “Carols from the Heart,” its Yuletide Concert at 7:30 p.m. Dec. 11, 5 p.m. Dec. 12, and 3 p.m. Dec. 13.

Admission is free. A free-will offering will be taken.

The church is located at 16550 Bernardo Heights Parkway.

Learn more at www.hopeumc.com.

Toy drive and ice show

SAN DIEGO — The Jingle Bell Kroc Toy Drive and Ice Show will be held at 6 p.m. Dec. 10 at The Salvation Army Kroc Center.

Admission is free with the donation of a new, unwrapped toy worth \$5 or more. All toys will go to the center’s Toy N Joy Workshop, which provides joy to children in need.

The ice show will feature as many as 140 figure skaters ranging in age from 3 to 71. The evening concludes with free public skating.

The center is located at 6845 University Ave.

Learn more at www.sd.kroccenter.org or call (619) 269-1498.

Appreciation luncheon for pastors

LA JOLLA — The La Jolla Gateway Team of Thrivent Financial will present its annual Pastors Appreciation Luncheon from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Dec. 10 at the San Diego Marriott La Jolla.



Bobbye Brooks, left, and Tonilee Adamson, co-founders of Daily Disciples Ministries Inc., will present their 11th annual women’s conference, “The Power of Hope,” on Jan. 30.

Admission is free, but reservations are required.

The event is designed to bring the clergy and community together for a time of fellowship, while also showing appreciation for local pastors

The hotel is located at 4240 La Jolla Village Drive.

For more information or to RSVP, send an email to ruth.puentes@thrivent.com or call (858) 455-5227.

Daily Disciples women’s conference

POINT LOMA — Daily Disciples Ministries Inc. will host its 11th annual women’s conference, “The Power of Hope,” from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Jan. 30 in Brown Chapel at Point Loma Nazarene University.

The Bible study ministry was co-founded by Tonilee Adamson and Bobbye Brooks as a way to develop solid tools to help women learn how to apply the Word of God to their daily lives. The friends also host a weekday radio program at 10 a.m. on KPRZ 1210 AM.

Special speakers and music will be featured.

Advance tickets are \$25 and include lunch and parking.

Learn more at www.dailydisciples.org or call 1-800-992-0369.

‘Christmas for Kids’

SAN DIEGO — Reformation Lutheran Church will host “Christmas for Kids,” a morning of fun activities focused on the true blessings of Christmas, from 9 a.m. to noon Dec. 12. The program is open to children ages 3 to 12.

The free event will include the telling of the Christmas story, crafts, music, games and activities. The children will sing one of the songs they learn at a closing program, set for 11:45 a.m.

Although the event is free, parents are encouraged to register their children in advance to ensure admittance.

The church is located at 4670 Mount Abernathy Ave.

Learn more or pre-register at www.reformationsandiego.org or call (858) 279-3311.

Celebrating the manger

CARLSBAD — Carlsbad Community Church will present “Beyond the Manger,” a free Christmas concert, at 6 p.m. Dec. 13.

The annual concert features the Celebration Choir, Orchestra, and Children’s Choir.

The church will also host a Christmas Eve service at 5 p.m. Dec. 24.

The church is located at 3175 Harding St.

Learn more at www.3c.org or call (760) 729-2331.

The musical world of Christmas

OCEANSIDE — Lighthouse Christian Church will present “The World of Christmas,” a concert by the San Luis Rey Chorale and Orchestra, from 7 to 8:30 p.m. Dec. 13 and 14.

The concert is free.

The church is located at 4700 Mesa Drive.

Learn more at www.lightcc.org.

'Windows into Christmas'

ESCONDIDO — Emmanuel Faith Community Church is presenting two musical events in celebration of Christmas.

The first, "Jesus Paid it Forward," a musical featuring the children's choirs, will be held at 6 p.m. Dec. 6 in the worship center.

The EFCC Music and Worship Arts Ministry will present "Windows into Christmas" at 7:30 p.m. Dec. 11 and at 3 and 5:30 p.m. Dec. 12 and 13. The late concert on Dec. 13 will be interpreted for the hearing impaired.

Childcare is only available for the Saturday and Sunday concerts.

Admission is free, but advance tickets should be secured.

The church is located at 639 E. 17th Ave.

Learn more at www.efcc.org or call (760) 745-2541.



New Life Presbyterian Church will present "Listen to Love," an Advent concert featuring pianist George Miladin, from 2 to 3:30 p.m. Dec. 5.

The church is located at 5333 Lake Murray Blvd.

Learn more at www.newlifelamesa.org.

'Gloria' takes the stage

LA JOLLA — La Jolla Presbyterian Church will present the "Gloria!" Christmas Concert at 4 and 7 p.m. Dec. 13.

The concert features the congregation's Chancel Choir, which will be ac-

companied by a professional orchestra. In addition to the music, the concert will include readings, carols and anthems old and new. Congregational singing will also be part of the event.

The 4 p.m. concert will highlight the church's three youth choirs.

A reception follows the 7 p.m. concert.

Learn more at www.ljpresmusic.com or call (858) 729-5531.

A Lakeside melody

LAKESIDE — Lakeside Community Presbyterian Church will host a Christmas concert at 7 p.m. Dec. 11.

The congregation, noted for its pipe organ, hosts concerts year round.

The church is located at 9908 Channel Road.

Learn more at www.lakesidepc.org or call (619) 443-1021.

Seminar on Christian Basics

LA MESA — Lake Murray Church will present its 10-week Christian Basics Seminar beginning Jan. 8. Sessions will run weekly at 10 a.m. and 7 p.m. Content for the seminar is the same in both the morning and evening sessions.

The series runs weekly through March 11.

Topics to be covered include Truth, The Bible, Jesus, Salvation, The Church, The Trinity, Discipleship, Prayer, and Worship.

The course is based on the book "Christian Basics," written by James Reed, the congregation's senior pastor.

The church is located 5480 Lake Murray Blvd.

Learn more at www.lakemurray-church or call (619) 697-7770.

Advent piano concert

LA MESA — New Life Presbyterian Church will present "Listen to Love," an Advent concert, from 2 to 3:30 p.m. Dec. 5.

The concert will feature the piano artistry of George Miladin, who will present a collection of best-known classical gems plus gorgeously arranged ballads, sacred songs and Christmas favorites.

"CRITIC'S CHOICE"
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I'm glad that before my dark days began, I had a friendship with God.

Coping with loneliness at Christmas

'Tis the season to be ... gloomy?

Feeling low this Christmas season?

You're not alone. Amid cheery songs, festive parties, gifts and good wishes, many lonely people are crying or dying on the inside. Maybe you're one of them. I was.

During a horrible year, my wife of 20 years divorced me, my employer of 25 years fired me, and I had a cancer scare. As I drove home one night, lovely Christmas music came on the radio. Melancholy aching evidenced the deep pain of abandonment and loss that I was still processing.

No fun.

Romantic estrangement, family strife, and bereavement can make your holidays dismal. One of Elvis Presley's most popular songs was "Blue Christmas." A lonely crooner mourns heartbreaking lost love. Performers from The Beach Boys to Celine Dion, Loretta Lynn, and Jon Bon Jovi have recorded it.

Does even thinking about that song make you depressed? The spoofed "Porky Pig" version could get you laughing. Google will take you there. But please ... wait until finishing this short article to search, OK?!

Several factors can produce Christmas blues. Hectic activity can bring physical and emotional stress. Overspending can produce financial pressure. Year-end reflection and focus on loss can magnify sorrow.

McGill University psychologist Dr. Michael Spevack notes, "Overeating and over drinking combined with a decreased amount of sleep is also a formula for extreme emotional swings." Depression can lead to thoughts of suicide, especially among the socially isolated, he says.

The 'empty chair'

Is your family apart this season by necessity or choice? Maybe an "empty chair" reminds you of your pain. Does Christmas "Ho, Ho, Ho" contrast with your deep anguish?

One widow recalled how she felt during the Christmas after her husband's death: "Little mattered to me. I didn't want to hear carols. I didn't want to be cheered up. I didn't want to look at perky Christmas cards. I wanted the same thing I'd wanted every day for eight months: the strength to force myself out of bed in the morning, to brush my teeth and to eat."

One possible influence, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), is a form of depression the medical community doesn't completely understand. The Mayo Clinic says genetics, age and body chemistry could be the culprits. Mayo recommends seeing your doctor if you feel down for days and have motivation problems. Symptoms can include changing sleep patterns and appetite, feeling hopeless, contemplating suicide, or seeking comfort in alcohol.

Learning to cope

How can you cope with Christmas loneliness? Some suggestions:

Spend time with people, especially positive ones who lift your spirits. Perhaps you'll be grateful for their cheer.

Exercise regularly. Blood pumping can help clear your mind.

Eat right. Chocaholics beware. Overindulgence can mean temporary highs followed by disappointing flab.

Lights on! Enjoy sunlight, outdoors if possible. Brighten up your home and workplace. Light therapy sometimes helps SAD.

Budget your gift spending and stick with your budget. Prevent January bill shock.

Talk about your feelings. Keeping them bottled up can mean anxiety, ulcers, sour disposition, and/or explosion. Need a trusted, listening friend? Try a local church.

Give to others. Volunteer. Medical professor Stephen Post, PhD, is convinced that giving is essential for optimum physical and mental health in our fragmented

society. He says some California physicians give volunteerism "prescriptions" to their Medicare patients.

Seek counsel. I used to be embarrassed to obtain professional counsel. Now I recommend it. We all can use good advice navigating life's storms.

Develop spiritual roots. I'm glad that before my dark days began, I had a friendship with God.

Tired of friends who betray, manipulate, disrespect, or desert you? God won't. He cares for you, values you, will listen to you and comfort you. You can trust Him. He always wants your best.

One early believer put it this way: "Since God did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't God, who gave us Christ, also give us everything else?" His point: God loved us enough to send Jesus, his only Son, to die on the cross to pay the penalty for our wrong, our sins. What a demonstration of love! I can trust a God like that. Then Jesus rose from the dead so He could live inside us and become our friend.

Your choice

Would you like to meet Jesus, the best friend you could ever have? Wouldn't Christmas season be a great time to place your faith in Him? You can tell Him something like this:

Jesus, I need you. Thanks for dying and rising again for me. Please forgive me, enter my life, and give me eternal life. Help me to become good friends with you and learn to follow your lead.



Rusty Wright is an award-winning author, lecturer and syndicated columnist. His audiences have included academic, business and government leaders and university students. Learn more at www.rustywright.com.

3 life-changing things you should tell your kids every day

My 7-year-old son is like a lot of boys his age—energetic, jovial and somewhat loud.

He also has this peculiarity that is prominent among his peers: He pretends he doesn't like to be praised.

"Great job, son!" I'll tell him—to which he responds with a shrug of embarrassment or a stare of indifference.

But I know my words impact him—*greatly*.

One time he and I were having a candid father-son talk when I—unwisely—told him that the Bible says I should love his mom more than I love him. Oh, sure, it was a super-dumb thing to say, even though it had a biblical basis (Ephesians 5) and was factually true. But his 7-year-old heart wasn't ready to process that, and he went to his room and sobbed. I nearly cried, too.

Sociologists have conducted dozens of studies demonstrating the power of words, but Scripture—more than 2,000

years ago—beat social science to the punch.

"Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body," Proverbs 16:24 tells us.

If we were to analyze the thousands of words we say each day to our children, would they be mostly negative ("I can't believe you did that!") or positive ("Let's clean that up together")? Our words, both good and bad, shape our children in the same manner the talented potter molds the unformed clay.

My wife and I have become intentional in recent months about using more positive words around our children, and we've seen our home become an even happier one. The results, though, aren't always seen overnight. Just as honeycomb and other healthy foods don't lead to instant good health, sometimes our words have to be sprinkled on our children each day and every week, until months later we see fruit—whether that is obeying better, treating their siblings and friends better, or even making better grades.

Any list of "things to tell your kids every day" could be lengthy, but for me, three of them rise to the top. All total, it's 10 words:

1 "I love you."

Carey Casey of the National Center for Fathering says when he gives lectures to dads, only 3 percent to 4 percent will raise their hands saying their father said "I love you" on a consistent basis. How tragic! Children need to hear "I love you" because they need to know they're wanted, they're supported, they're treasured. They need to know they're loved ... unconditionally. A few months back I started writing small "I love you" notes for my children in the morning if they were asleep when I

left. Know what? Those notes were a big hit—so much so that the kids now complain when I forget.

2 "I'm proud of you."

There's actually a debate among so-called parenting experts as to whether these four words should ever be said to children, and the argument boils down to this: We shouldn't praise our children. *Hogwash*. In an age of hyperbullying and teasing, kids need affirmation. Adults enjoy hearing "good job" when they do something worthy of notice. So why wouldn't our children? The Bible even affirms it (Matthew 25:21). I don't believe in praising my kids for, say, *eating pie*, but an "I'm proud of you" is certainly warranted each day, even for something as simple as building a nice-looking Lego set.

3 "God loves you."

Without God's love there would be, well, *no love*. Think about it: God ... created ... love. Yes, we must tell our kids that *we* love them, but that's not enough. That's because we won't always be there for them—not each moment of every day and certainly not for their lifetime—and because, well, we are incapable of loving as God loves. If you're stumped how this one fits into a daily conversation, simply sneak it there at bedtime: Mommy loves you, Daddy loves you, God loves you. And if your kid asks if Daddy loves Mommy more than all of the children, well, just change the subject.



Michael Foust is the father of four small children and blogs about parenting at michaelfoust.com.



JANICE THOMPSON

...a world of needy people would be blessed beyond measure by your generosity this holiday season.

Practically speaking... Gift-giving that changes lives

Thirty-five years ago I experienced one of the most profound Christmas memories of my life. My husband and I encountered a bewildered young mother consoling her three small children after discovering her husband had just abandoned them. Apparently caring more about “stuff” than his family, he stripped their home of everything that wasn’t nailed down. We realized that replacing some basic needs—with a few treats to delight the children—would go a long way toward making this family feel like someone cared. The blessing we received while shopping for each special item started our family on a Christmas tradition that continues to bring us more joy than any gift we could buy each other.

If you feel like the commercialization of Christmas is out of control and out of step with the Holy One we are honoring, you’re not alone. Maybe the following alternatives will resonate with you this year. What if you slimmed down your gift giving and focused on a needy family or deserving ministry instead? If you have children or grandchildren, consider making this a family project that could create a teachable moment, a living illustration of Christ Himself. Your young ones are far more likely to remember this than any of the many perishable gifts they receive. Here are some ideas for those little “sponges” in your life:

- Gather some of their gently used toys and donate to a place of your choice (may take a little friendly persuasion at first).
- Bake Christmas cookies together and distribute to your neighbors or perhaps a home for the (housebound) elderly. For young children, the simple act of creating and giving away is a lesson in unselfishness.
- Have them earn and save coins to take to the bell ringers for The Salvation

Army. Let them know how these humble buckets provide so much for the homeless and those in need.

And for you, here is a place to start with some deserving ministries to consider if you don’t already have a favorite of your own:

- Compassion International. Have a heart for needy children? You can make a one-time tax-deductible donation for critical needs or you may even choose to make a monthly commitment to sponsor a child through their international child sponsorship ministry. Through them, you can release a child from poverty in Jesus’ name. www.compassion.com/sponsor_a_child/
- Feeding America San Diego. Have a heart for the hungry in our community? A distribution partner with the San Diego Rescue Mission, this organization feeds more than 60,000 children, families and seniors every week. Every dollar donated turns into four meals for an individual in need. In addition, 95 percent of donations directly fund hunger-relief programs. www.feedingamericasd.org
- San Diego Rescue Mission. Have a heart for San Diego? With this great local option, your gently used or surplus clothing and household goods can save lives. They either go directly to needy people or are sold at one of four thrift stores to raise money for critical programs that provide food and emergency shelter for men, women and children. You may also simply donate money on its website. www.sdrescue.org
- World Help. Have a heart for the world? The ministry’s programs—child sponsorships, humanitarian aid, educational assistance, clean water projects, Bible distribution and church plants in unreached communities—meet both physical and spiritual needs around the world. World Help also offers a Christmas catalog for more creative giving



ideas. www.worldhelp.net/gifts

- Wounded Warriors. Have a heart for our veterans? This organization serves our valiant men and women who preserve our freedom with such courage and humility. Donations to this organization help wounded military personnel to transition back into life at home, some of them with deep wounds both inside and out. www.woundedwarriorproject.org

The truth is I don’t know what became of that little family we were privileged to provide for so many years ago. I do, however, vividly remember the joy it brought to our Christmas that year.

If you are longing to restore the joy of Christmas and this idea touches your heart, purpose to give a gift that will keep on giving. After all, there’s a Savior to be honored and a world of needy people who would be blessed beyond measure by your generosity this holiday season.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!



Janice Thompson is a certified financial planner and co-founder/CEO of One Degree Advisors, Inc. A frequent speaker on financial topics and mentor for financial

professionals, she also serves on the board of directors for Kingdom Advisors. Learn more at www.onedegreeadvisors.com.

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What to do with that crazy family member

Let me be Paul Revere for a moment. *“Christmas is coming! Christmas is coming!”* Crazy Uncle Remus and Aunt Annabelle are going to be showing up at your doorstep for Christmas. What is a “normal” family to do?

Craziness manifests in many different ways but, in short, we can break craziness down into three categories: Psychotic, Neurotic and Character.

Psychotic craziness

My wife, Beth, and I were in Grand Junction, Colorado, last month because Beth’s brother was experiencing delusions of persecution. Although he had done nothing wrong he firmly believed that he was going to be taken to prison where he would spend the rest of his life.

My brother-in-law’s reality was very different from everyone around him. He was displaying what we call “psychotic” symptoms. A person is psychotic when they experience hallucinations (sensory experiences that really don’t exist) or delusions (a belief system that is patently untrue and often absurd).

Neurotic craziness

I know a man who clearly illustrates a different kind of crazy. Instead of facing problems and dealing with them, he tends to avoid them by moving away and cutting off all contact. He changes jobs frequently, cannot hold long-term relationships, and will cut off all contact with family just to avoid the dreaded possibility of conflict.

So this is what we call “neurotic” avoidance. Usually neurotic people struggle with insecurity and anxiety. They often feel overly responsible for the feelings of others.

Psychotic and neurotic people need our help. They are victims of disorganized and irrational thinking. We reach

out to these family members when they struggle.

There’s a third kind of crazy that you should know about—it’s the “Personality Disorders.”

Character craziness

Research shows that 10 percent of the population can be diagnosed with one of the personality disorders. There are many ways that personality can be flawed and so there are many types of personality/character disorders. They stem from early childhood emotional and relational wounds.

People with personality disorders don’t change much over the years and their insight is very low. They make everyone around them feel crazy. They have a way of not taking responsibility for their actions—they see their own problems as being caused by everyone else.

A family member with a personality disorder can make life difficult for everyone during the holidays. Here are some helpful suggestions to help you survive.

Don’t get sucked in. They will bait you with provocative comments. They will bring up politics and religion. They will make negative comments about your children or your home. Expect that this will happen and be prepared to let it pass by. You aren’t going to teach them a lesson by telling them that what they did was wrong. It will only escalate the anger and conflict.

Set up some emotional boundaries. People with personality disorders quickly move from a simple difference in opinion to an assault on you as a person. It is helpful to remember who owns the problem. The person with the disorder owns the problem, even though they

are trying to get you to own it.

Exercise patience. If they are here for the holidays, do your best to put up with it until they are gone. Be gracious and tell yourself that their behavior is not OK, but it is time-limited. Of course, if they become physically abusive it then becomes a legal matter, regardless of how long you have to put up with it.

Ongoing forgiveness. You may come to really feel hatred for this other person, but that only puts you into another form of bondage. Remember, forgiveness is a 7 times 70 process (Matthew 18:22). It doesn’t mean that you need to make yourself emotionally vulnerable again.

Let Go(d). Sometimes, the boundaries need to be very thick. For your own sanity you may need to let go of the relationship. After years of trying, you may actually need to say, “This isn’t working, and I need to protect myself.” Ending the relationship is a last resort, but if it is necessary, then letting them go may be the only answer.

Remember, we have been forgiven a great debt, and the best way to show our appreciation to God is to forgive the offenses of those who have hurt us. If we can see that crazy family member through God’s eyes, with mercy and compassion, then we will love as He has loved us.



Daniel Jenkins, Ph.D. is a licensed clinical psychologist at Lighthouse Psychological Services in Mission Valley. He is also a professor of psychology at Point

Loma Nazarene University. Learn more at www.lighthousepsy.com.



Celebrating Christ-centered holidays

Have you ever felt like “the holidays” have become a blur? With the unofficial start of the season now showing up just before Halloween, it often seems way too early to see Christmas decorations. In reality, though, Halloween is just nine or ten weeks prior to Christmas, which is not so early given the amount of things we plan to do. On any other month we might also find it a struggle to juggle our calendars, but layer on the holidays and the additional duties add up quickly, particularly for women who absorb many of the holiday-related roles: Santa, chef, baker, decorator, worker, shopper, gift wrapper ...

We juggle a lot this time of year and—no matter the amount of planning—it can often become the “Holidaze,” as a good friend likes to call it. How can we make our days more holy and remember the reason for the season in the midst of all that we choose to do in this timeframe? Can we find a way to celebrate Christ-centered holidays?

I recently tackled this very subject while encouraging a group of women to transform the “holi-” into “holy” and the “daze” into “days.”

Holy Days.

First, how can we slow down and consider this journey a marathon rather than a sprint? A marathon has its benefits (I know I know, it sounds like a long way), but consider the fact that you have time to look around and enjoy what you see. The length of a marathon allows us time to be sure we are on track with our plan. It also provides time for assessing, helping us to make adjustments by speeding up or slowing down as needed. There is definitely much to do, but we don’t want to lose the meaning along the way.

If, however, we approach the season as if we are on a sprint, then our blinders will keep our sights straight ahead as we gallop full speed, probably plowing past someone who is important to us.

Second, consider some of the tasks that need to be completed. Sit down and make a list. At the top, most likely, will be family traditions. Other things to consider are who will get gifts and what those gifts will be. Consider which events are non-negotiable by examining your calendar and determining when to fit them in. Decide what to say “no” to this year, particularly if it doesn’t fit with creating more Christ-centered holiday plans.

Then, start with the vision, create an overview of plans, and finally, develop detailed action items. The vision begins with picturing the end first (thank you Stephen Covey) and perhaps even picturing specific events and how you would like them to roll.

For example, if you could experience your ideal holiday season, what would that look like? What would each event look like and how would you look in the process? Would you be rushing by people or letting others in line ahead of you or stopping to help or chat with a complete stranger in need or just be there where you are at the moment?

Also consider how to keep Christ as the center of all the activities of the holiday season. What can you do as a reminder to walk through each day with the purpose of God’s love flowing out of you, rather than the rush of wind as you run by someone? Have you ever collapsed into a chair at an event because you are so grateful to sit a while? Some days we can “take up space” rather than add to it, right?

If we plan in advance, we might be more apt to be in the moment than ever before. This reminds me of watching some of my kids’ events and noticing that many of the parents around me are watching their phones instead. They are “there” in person, but they are not “there” present with the event. We are all busy, but there are definitely times when we need to put the phone away to give our full attention

to the task at hand—if for nothing else than to set that example for our children who are watching us. My older kids still say “Hey, mom, look at me” when they do something. That desire to please someone or show someone what we’ve done (social media photos?) seems to be high on most people’s list far past childhood.

Learn how to align your “to do” lists with God’s callings and purpose for you as you create the plans. Look at your list of to do’s and be open to a change in the day. By asking a few simple questions we can either eliminate events or say yes to them. Will this honor Christ or serve someone else? Do I want to do this or do I just feel obligated? What does the Holy Spirit show me about this? Does this fit with my natural or spiritual gifts, purpose, priorities or personality? When you stop to really think about some of the tasks, it becomes easier to say yes or no (even to yourself!). If it’s causing stress and strife it probably isn’t in line with where God would have you since our main mission is to love one another. Let’s face it, we just aren’t that loving when we are stressed.

So to create more joy in the season, simplify your life or add more, depending on your stage of life. Focus on the reason for the season by starting your day off in the Word, prioritizing your day and plans, and then leave room for God’s will and adjust where needed. Sometimes when we surrender, we see it all works out anyway, just in a different order than what we planned!

Enjoy some Holy Days.



Jennifer Sedlock is an inspirational speaker, author and corporate trainer. She leads educational seminars on leadership, communication and teamwork. Learn more

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JOANNE BROKAW

Seeing Christmas

A funny thing happened on the way to this humor column: My eyeglasses broke.

I'd been planning another inane piece for this month, a Christmas column written by my dog Bandit. But when my glasses broke I changed plans.

Broken glasses held together with duct tape are the stuff nerd jokes are made of. But if your eyesight is as bad as mine, broken glasses aren't a joke. It's actually a bit of a crisis.

My eyesight is so bad that, without glasses, the world looks like an impressionistic painting when you're standing just inches from the canvas. Lots of pretty colors all swirled together, but with nothing really discernible. I could be looking at a Cezanne in the main gallery at the museum or a tray of Christmas cookies in a bakery on Main Street.

Unfortunately, I don't have a backup pair of glasses. The irony is that, back in June, I had been at a writers' conference and my roommate lost her glasses. She got by in those few days with us leading her around campus, but she wasn't sure how she was going to drive home when the conference was over.

Fortunately, she found a local eye doctor who gave her a pair of disposable contacts. She made it home safely.

Unfortunately, I can't wear soft contacts, so it was a good reminder to me that if I had been in her shoes, I'd have been up the creek without a paddle. Or a boat.

When I got home, I made the appointment I'd been putting off to have my eyes examined so I could get a new prescription for glasses. All I needed to do was order them.

That was in July.

I've often thought over the last few months that "I really should order those glasses." It's just so time consuming to hunt for frames that look good, hide my

incredibly thick lenses, and fit our budget. I told myself there was no rush.

Then there I was, standing in my living room, holding the pieces of plastic that used to be my second set of eyes.

I used to wear gas permeable contacts. They gave me great vision but after three decades my aging eyeballs needed a break, so a couple of years ago I stopped wearing them. But I hung on to them; in fact, in July the eye doctor checked them during my exam and said if I ever wanted to wear them again for very short periods of time, I could.

So I could only wear the contacts for about an hour, but they got me to the eye doctor's office. The optometrist was able to put my eyeglass lenses into frames of similar shape and size while I waited for my replacement frames to come in. And while the temporary frames weren't a perfect fit, at least I could see. And then I ordered new glasses, so I'd have two pair. You know, in case one pair breaks.

And just like that, the problem was solved. It cost several (several!) hundred dollars by the time it was all said and done, but I could see.

This whole experience got me thinking. What if I lived in a developing country without access to eye doctors



and eye-wear? I would have had to live my entire life without being able to see beyond the end of my eyelashes. I couldn't read or work or even navigate around the house without assistance, even though my vision could be corrected with a simple pair of glasses.

All of which leads me to this month's column. I wish I had something funny to say about the whole experience. I mean, the tortoise shell and baby pink temporary frames were pretty amusing. But the truth is that I forget about the simple gifts God has bestowed upon us, and the blessings we have living in an industrialized country. Technology, education, political freedom, fresh water, safe food and yes, eyeglasses.

This year, I don't need any gifts for Christmas. I'm just grateful I can see my way to the cookie trays.



Award-winning freelance writer Joanne Brokaw spends her days dreaming of things she'd like to do but probably never will—like swimming with dolphins, cleaning

the attic and someday overcoming the trauma of elementary school picture day. She lives with two dogs, a cat, six chickens and one very patient husband. Learn more at www.joannebrokaw.com.

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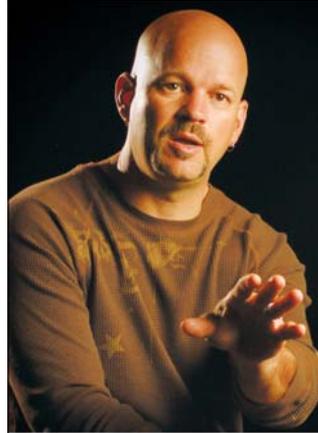
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- Voted Top Dentist by his peers (San Diego Magazine)
- On staff at Scripps Memorial Hospital, La Jolla
- Graduate USC School of Dentistry
- Graduated Omicron Kappa Upsilon (Highest Dental Honor)
- Former Faculty Member USC School of Dentistry
- Published Medical Researcher
- Member ADA, CDA, SDCDS, AGD
- Member American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry
- Member American Society of Dental Aesthetics
- Fellow International Academy for Dental-Facial Esthetics
- Fellow Academy of Dentistry International

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