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A Christmas short story

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10 tips from
Carol LeBeau

Gifting outside the box

Ideas for giving to
those most needy

More than window dressing

Faith helps
artist brush
away grief



JANICE THOMPSON
Keep the woe, woe, woe
out of the ho, ho, ho

MARK LARSON
Embracing life's melodies

KIM RUBY
Peace on earth
and at the dinner table

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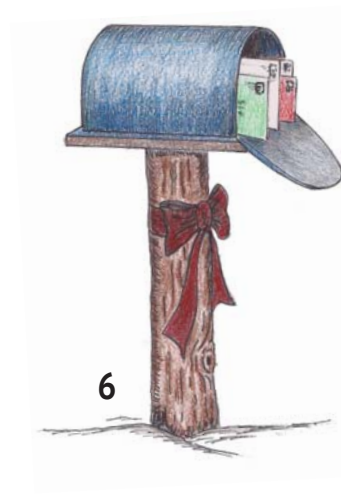


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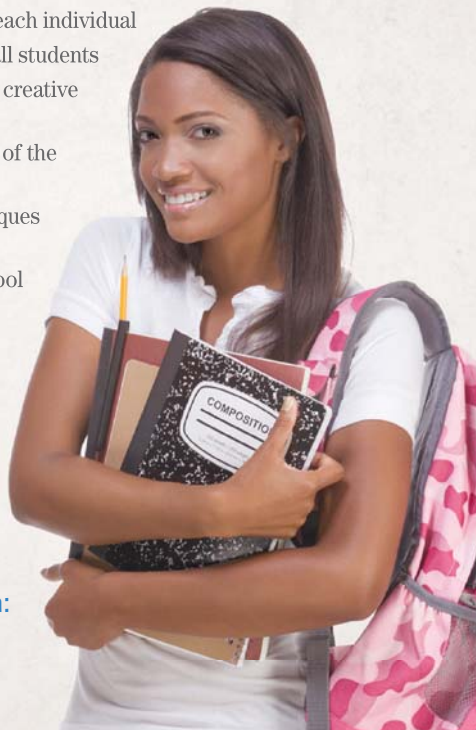
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VOLUME 1 | NUMBER 12

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Refreshed is an independent, faith-based magazine published monthly by Selah Media Group. It is distributed in bulk, free of charge, to hundreds of locations throughout San Diego County.

For a 1-year mail subscription, send \$24.95 to the address below or visit refreshedmag.com.

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Living Bethlehem

My friend Don told me about a time during the Christmas season several years ago when he and his wife loaded their two little girls into their car to drive from their small Ohio town to spend the holiday with his parents in Iowa. It was a freezing day, and after a few hours he pulled the car into a highway rest stop so everyone could stretch their legs.

As Don approached the rest room, he saw a sign taped to the door. It was written in pen, on the back of a remnant of a cardboard box. It said “We’re stranded, and want to get home for Christmas. Could you help us?” The sign described the car these people were in.

“I thought about it for a minute,” Don told me. “It sounded like a scam. But what if it wasn’t? It was so cold that day.”

Don turned around and looked for the car. He saw it immediately. It had seen better days. When he got to the car he noticed that there was a man and a woman in the front seat, and a sleeping baby in the back. The man behind the wheel rolled his window down, and Don handed him a \$10 bill. What the man said shocked my friend.

“Thanks, Don,” the man said.

“Did I know him from somewhere?” Don wondered, shaking his head as he told me about it. “Was he a member of my church? A high school acquaintance? Did he hear my wife call my name from our car? I don’t know.”

He couldn’t explain it. But since it involved a traveling couple with a baby at Christmas time, he said, “It felt as if Bethlehem was breaking through my distractions.”

If we operate from the premise that God is always breaking through, from the invisible to the visible, in every moment, then we discover that our everyday tasks have meaning and connec-

tions beyond the tasks themselves. Our everyday tasks are ways that we can participate with what God is already doing.

One of the ways we do this is by looking at the people around us—the ones we typically ignore—and saying, “I see you. I notice you. You matter.” We are the innkeeper in Bethlehem who makes room.

We really don’t need much in order to do this. Jesus sent his followers out with nothing except some instructions.

As author Barbara Brown Taylor says, God calls us is to be a provider of God’s love, knowing that “there is really only one provider, who sends us out with nothing at all and with everything we need: healing, forgiveness, restoration, resurrection. Those are the only things we really have to share with the world, which is just as well, since they are the only things the world really needs.”

One night, when my kids were little, my wife and I were out to an event with them, and as we were driving home, my kids declared that they were hungry. We were a few miles from our house, and I argued the point that it would make more sense (and be less expensive) to eat something when we got to our own kitchen.

But the three other people in the car pointed out that we were about to pass a fast food drive-thru, and that we should stop there. Overruled, I pulled in. It was about 9 p.m., and as I drove toward the

drive-thru lane, the headlights briefly illuminated a homeless man stretching out a blanket under a tree on the other side of the parking lot. We ordered our food, and I asked for a few extra hamburgers and coffee in a separate bag.

“Suddenly hungry?” my wife said.

“No, I just need to do something.”

I pulled out of the drive-thru lane and back to the parking lot. I brought the bag to the man I had seen under the tree.

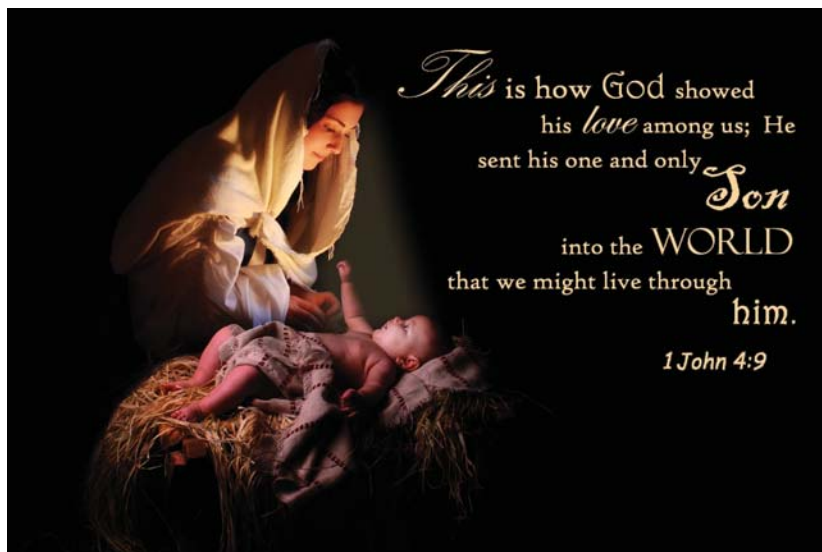
“You looked hungry,” I said.

That night, as I was putting my daughter to bed, I asked her what her favorite part of the day was.

“Watching you give that man some supper,” she said. “Homeless people usually scare me. I never thought they might be hungry.”

It was the best part of my day, too.

Bethlehem is breaking through every moment of every day. Christ continues to arrive in the least likely places. What do you see? Where do you see it? And, more to the point, Who are you seeing?

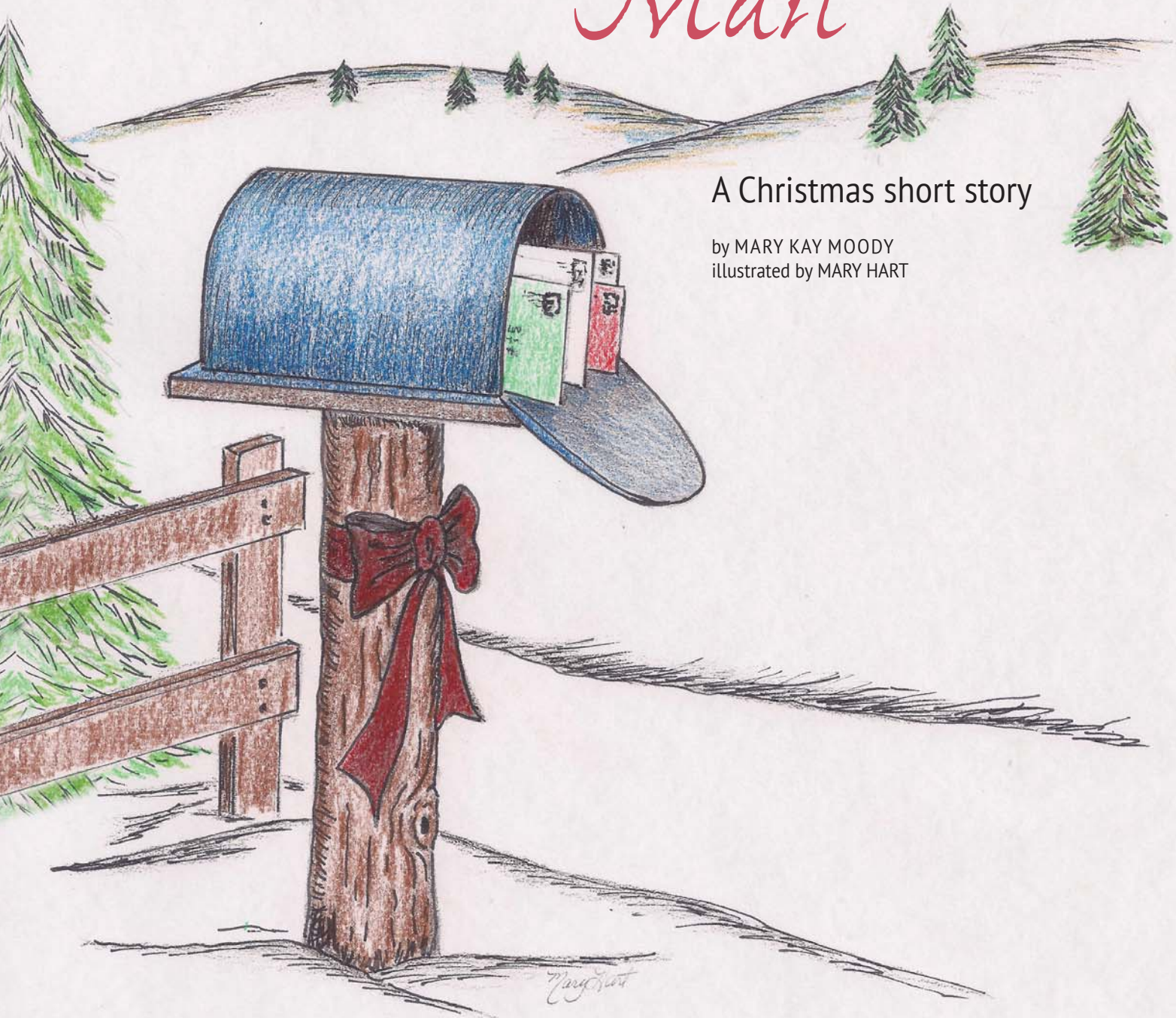


Dean Nelson directs the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego. His book about seeing God in everyday life is “God Hides in Plain Sight: How to See the Sacred in a Chaotic World.”

Morning Mail

A Christmas short story

by MARY KAY MOODY
illustrated by MARY HART





Maggie McKnight clipped seat belts over Jake, 5, and Tyler, 3, then handed them their teachers' Christmas gifts. She swatted snow off the windshield, eager to get going and cross things off her long to-do list. She flung a prayer that their old Chevy would start, turned the ignition, then smiled in the mirror at the two boys who occupied a large portion of her heart.

"Mail's here, Mom," Jake said as they reached the end of the driveway.

The box overflowed and the flap wouldn't close. "I'd better grab it. It'll get soaked." She stuffed two handfuls into her tote bag and drove off.

"Mommy?"

She checked the mirror.

"How many days to Christmas?" Excitement glittered in Ty's brown eyes.

Those eyes, so like his dad's. "Six, honey. Hard to wait?"

"Oh, yeah."

Selma looked out at the snow, a chill settling around her heart as Maggie and the boys drove by. *On their way to school, no doubt.* She waved, but no one looked her way, so this morning she got no return wave. A tear trailed down her wrinkled cheek. Swiping it on the sleeve of her thin chenille bathrobe, she turned to put on tea.

Robot-like, she filled the kettle, turned on the stove, poured juice, and set butter and marmalade on the table. Winter is hardest she thought. *Always is.* Her breath caught in her throat, her hand suspended over the white enamel table. *But this year's the worst.* The kettle's piercing whistle interrupted her thoughts.

She poured water into the teapot and enjoyed the aroma of orange spice. *Two cups in the morning.* Returning the kettle to the stove, her attention snagged on

pictures stuck to the refrigerator. She inhaled a ragged breath, drawing a line along the cheek of the handsome young serviceman in the faded black and white photo.

"Joe, love of my life, do you know how much I miss you? When I shopped last Friday, I remembered our ritual, but I couldn't bring myself to get cocoa without you." Another tear escaped. "Second Christmas without you and this one's even harder. My first alone in 52 years." She rested her fingertip on his lips, then shifted her gaze to a color photo, a young man in a crisp blue uniform. A long sigh quavered. "Joe, do you know young Michael was killed in Afghanistan a few months back?"

Tears streamed. "Losing you was bad, Sweetheart, but we had many years together. Watching our sweet Emily lose her youngest son. Well, it's the hardest thing I ever had to do." She gave another ragged sigh, then straightened her bony frame, tightened the sash on her robe, and ate breakfast, wishing she could spend Christmas with her family—what was left of it.

Maggie dropped the boys at school and drove to the doctor's, sorting mail while she waited. Bills inside her purse, Christmas cards into her satchel, junk mail on the couch to toss in the receptionist's wastebasket.

But that miscellaneous stack tugged at her attention. Solicitations. From the local mission where folks receive food, shelter, job training, and teaching about Jesus. Organizations asking for a monthly commitment to relieve hunger. An agency that rescues children in distant countries from slavery or

prostitution. The thought of children in such straits wrenched her heart.

The nurse called, and Maggie shoved the stack of requests into her bag. *Later.*

After her check-up, Maggie quickly crossed off three to-do items by picking up puppy chew toys, special chocolates for Christmas Eve, and the new fishing rod she wanted for her husband, Keith. Leaving the mall, she spotted the bell ringer with the red bucket. She reached for her usual donation, then paused. *Should she give more?* Unsure, she dropped a ten in the kettle and went to pick up the boys.

After dinner Maggie settled under a velvety throw and emptied her tote. "Keith, what do you think?" She held up the stack of solicitation envelopes.

He peered over the newspaper. "What about them, Hon?"

"Usually we toss them. I tried that earlier and I just couldn't." She thumbed through glossy fliers. "I feel like we should send a contribution. But there are so many needs, I couldn't pick just one."

"Painful, isn't it?"

Closing her eyes, she leaned back. "Especially the children." A tear trickled down her cheek.

"Honey?"

She kept her eyes closed. "Yes?"

"Have you prayed about it?" he whispered.

"No." She winced at the defeat in her voice.

He folded the paper. "Heavenly Father, thank You for the many gifts You graciously provide. Maggie and I want to celebrate Jesus' birthday in a way that will bring glory to You. Thousands are in deep need. Please show us clearly where you want us to help. Thank you. In Jesus' name. Amen."

She opened her eyes as Keith walked over.



"I wonder if you know you're part of God's answer to my prayers."

He wiped her tears and flashed a grin. "We should know soon."

"Thank you. And thanks for not making fun of me."

"Maggie, your sensitive spirit is a gift I always appreciate."

"Next to Jesus, you're the best Christmas gift." She stood and hugging him, relished being in his arms.

Next morning while Maggie stirred oatmeal, Keith asked, "Get an answer about where to send money?"

"I feel like God's telling me not to send money to any of them ..." He shot her a questioning look. "Though passing up that child rescue agency will be very hard. I think we're to take that money and make a nice Christmas for Selma. Remember Sunday she said her family wouldn't be coming this year?"

"Because her grandson was killed in Afghanistan, wasn't it?" He drained his coffee mug.

"Yes. The rest of the family is going to his widow and kids' place. It'll be the first time Selma's alone for Christmas."

Selma was surprised when Maggie rang her doorbell. "Hello, Dear. Come in out of the cold."

Maggie entered the foyer and held out a handful of mail. "Morning, Selma. Thought we'd bring this in. The box won't close."

She responded with a grin and a hug. "Thank you, that's very thoughtful."

"You're welcome." Maggie's gaze looked intent. "You mentioned that your family won't be coming for Christmas this year. Please spend it with us."

"Oh, dear, I—"

"Please do. We'd love it. You know the kids think of you as another grandma, don't you?" Maggie held her hands together like a child making a prayer.

Selma grinned. "Well, I'd like that

very much. But you must let me help."

"Done." Maggie gave her a quick hug and left.

Selma moved to the door and waved to the boys. This morning she was graced with return waves and went to prepare breakfast with a smile.

After eating, she took her cup of tea to the parlor and sorted the mail into stacks. The mound of requests for aid weighed heavy on her heart, so she prayed about them.

Christmas Eve, cold and snow-dusted, the McKnights took Selma to the candlelight service, then home to celebrate. Maggie put cocoa and cookies on the coffee table, and smiled watching Ty who literally bounced. *A human Tigger.* Lights twinkled on the tree, the fire crackled, and music floated in the background. Selma nestled on the cushy sofa. *Thank you, Lord, for reminding us of Selma.*

"So, boys," Keith's rich baritone blended with the music. "What's your favorite thing about Christmas—besides getting presents?"

"I like you bein' off work so we can do stuff together," Jake bubbled. "Selma, my dad's takin' us sledding tomorrow before dinner."

"Yeah, sledding." Tyler did an excited dance.

"O-o-h, sounds like fun." Selma matched the boys' grins. "I used to love sledding."

Jake turned to her with big eyes. "You can come with us."

"You're more than welcome," Keith added, choosing a cookie.

"Thanks, but I'm past my sledding prime." Selma giggled.

They shared holiday memories until Keith announced it was time to open Christmas Eve gifts. The boys opened

storybooks, a tradition, then new trucks that Maggie knew would hold them until morning.

Maggie gently placed a sparkling package on Selma's lap, setting smaller ones on the couch. Selma appeared speechless, and Maggie, noticing tears pooling in the older woman's eyes, put an arm around Selma's shaking shoulders. "We're sorry you've had so many losses."

"You're such dears," she said, looking at each one. "You've given me much joy. I don't even need to open these to feel it."

"But open 'em," Ty crowed, shattering the sadness.

She grinned. "Want to help, Ty?" They laughed and worked together. She lifted the box lid and sat open-mouthed, her fingers stroking an ivory fleece robe that resembled a cloud. The satin collar and cuffs, embroidered with gold garland, sparkled in the firelight.

"Why, this fluff is softer than Emily's flannel baby blanket. I never ..." Her eyes misted again.

Jake and Ty handed her packages until all were opened. Piled in front of her were matching quilted slippers, afghan, a pewter picture frame, and a basket of teas, honey, biscuits, chocolates, and tea cup and saucer.

"I hope these remind you daily that you're loved," Maggie said.

"They will, dear." Again Selma glanced at each one. "I wonder if you know you're part of God's answer to my prayers."

"How so?" Keith said.

"I love Christmas, but without my family around, this one was going to be hard. I tried not to be discouraged after my surgery, and then Michael's death ..." She blinked away tears. "Then you invited me into your home. And this robe." She held it to her cheek. "It'll be warm as one of my Joe's hugs. Thank

you for a wonderful Christmas.”

Keith and Maggie exchanged a glance.

Selma continued. “God answered another prayer in a most unusual way. I asked Him what to do with the money I planned to spend on Mike for Christmas.” Selma gulped. “I expected He’d tell me to give it to Mike’s widow, or maybe a military charity. I was confused—and sure missed Joe and his wisdom.” A faint smile appeared, then grew. “But the Bible says God is father to the orphans, husband to the widows—and sure enough, He told me what to do.”

Each looked at her expectantly.

“He told me to give it to an agency

that sent a solicitation in the mail. They rescue kids.” She lifted her eyebrows. “Isn’t that strange?”

“Not for God, Selma.” Maggie smiled and lifted her eyes to heaven. *Everybody’s expecting their best gifts tomorrow. I just got mine.* ■

Mary Kay Moody is a free-lance writer with a passion for exploring life at the intersection of our plans and God’s purposes. If you stop by her website or blog, www.marykaymoody.com, sit a spell at the crossroads and chat. Merry Christmas, all.



Mary Kay Moody



The **SECULAR** vs. the **SACRED**



Can we celebrate Jesus and Santa on the same day?

by JON HUCKINS

Is it possible to celebrate Christmas and the birth of Jesus on the same day? There is certainly a warm, nostalgic feeling about the Christmas season. Social media fills up with pictures of Starbucks holiday cups and we get the play-by-play of Christmas trees being purchased and filled with homemade ornaments. Holiday parties become about as frequent as breathing and there is a general sense of camaraderie among people who wouldn't otherwise interact.

As a local practitioner and neighbor, I'd even go as far as saying this season brings about the most opportunity for new relationships and shared life in the realities of every day.

Last year, I was talking to my then-3-year-old daughter about Christmas. She knew we were going to see grandparents and cousins and even knew a thing or two about gifts being exchanged.

And then I asked her, "Whose birthday do we celebrate on Christmas?" With a big smile, said, "Santa!"

Now, I get it. She was 3 years old, it's kinda cute and harmless and whatever.

But there is something to this.

Our family never talks about Santa Claus, but we regularly talk about Jesus and even go as far as trying to live like him as best we can. When we do talk about Christmas and presents, we try to

talk about how we will be giving them away to friends, family and people who need them.

But, despite our best efforts, Christmas is associated with Santa Claus. Now, if it was the historical "Santa Claus" who gave away his best to save the lives of some children, that'd be awesome. But, no, this is the Santa Claus of consumption who promotes values of selfish acquisition rather than sacrificial giving.

With all this being said—and as followers of Jesus—we have to ask the question, "Is it possible to celebrate Christmas and the birth of Jesus on the same day?"

To begin to answer the question, we have to first understand that Christmas and Jesus' birthday are not synonymous. In fact, historically, they really have nothing in common.

Christmas as a holiday didn't even come around for hundreds of years after the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. As with many "Christian" traditions and holidays, it didn't come around until after Constantine announced Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th century. Its roots are largely pagan (like Easter) and it almost certainly isn't celebrated anywhere near the time of year that Jesus would have been born in first century Palestine.

So how in the world did 300 years of Jesus followers celebrate the birth of their King until this holiday was constructed? Well, it seems they were quite content celebrating his birth by doing their best to live like him every day of the year.

What could that have looked like?

It looked like a people who were radically committed to living out the values of a new kind of Kingdom that Jesus came to inaugurate, not through power and acquisition, but through suffering and self-sacrifice. A Kingdom whose manifesto was articulated on a mountain in Northern Galilee among a diverse group of folks who otherwise should have never been hanging out together. A Kingdom that warned against the idols of money, power and reputation, and instead invited people to be marked by selflessness, sacrifice and servanthood.

So, as we enter into a holiday season where we hear stories of people being killed under the feet of shoppers scrambling for the best discount in a mega mart, and feel the internal disconnect between the myth of Santa Claus and the reality of a living Jesus, we are confronted with the very anti-Kingdom constructs we have built around a holiday that somehow celebrates the birth of a homeless refugee who calls us to a

whole new way of living. A way that is marked much more by a cross than a noble fir with an angel on top.

In short, the themes of consumption and selfishness run in direct contrast to the Kingdom inaugurated in Jesus. For us to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the holiday would have to look a lot different than it does in its modern, Western, industrialized iteration.

Now that I have totally kicked your peppermint mocha off the balcony, lit a small fire under your Douglas fir and crushed my daughter's hopes and dreams, let me ask again the question I posed at the beginning, "Is it possible to celebrate Christmas and the birth of Jesus on the same day?"

Without hesitation I give a resounding, "YES!!" But not because it's Dec. 25. Rather, because every day we are to celebrate the birth of Jesus through the way we live, love and lead in a way that embodies the values of a Kingdom whose King took the throne through offering the greatest gift of all; himself.

With that in mind, I can release my daughter's preoccupation with Santa Claus (maybe even celebrate it! ... OK, maybe not), because the faith we're inviting her to live doesn't look like one day a year.

It looks like 365. ■



Jon Huckins is the co-founding director of The Global Immersion Project, Missional Leadership Coach with Thresholds, family man, speaker and author of "Thin Places" and

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10 Tips for a stress-free holiday



by CAROL LEBEAU

I love the holidays. Pumpkin pie. Decorating the Christmas tree with my favorite ornaments. Picking out cool, new shirts for my nephews. Baking my husband Tom's favorite (but decidedly UN-healthy!) seven-layer bars. Placing the shepherds and wise men in the same manger scene I used to arrange "just so" as a child. It's a wonderful time of year.

But I have to be honest. The intensity of the weeks between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day has also brought some unwelcome guests over the years ... in-

cluding stress and depression.

And it's no wonder. In an attempt to pull off a perfect holiday, many of us find ourselves facing a dizzying array of demands: parties, shopping, baking, cleaning and entertaining. (I'd like to know who decided that in the few weeks between Thanksgiving and the New Year, we need to touch base—in some way (phone calls, cards, lunch dates, parties, gifts, etc.)—with everyone we've ever known. It's overwhelming! And it's not as though we get to take off work and other regular commitments to make it all happen.)

Once you're committed and stress is at its peak, it's hard to stop and regroup ... like being caught in a vortex. What works for me is staying ahead of the game by preventing the symptoms of stress and depression before they hit.

Want to keep the peace and joy in your holiday season? Here's a list of 10 strategies that help me get over the holiday hump:

1 Acknowledge your feelings.

If you've lost someone close to you or can't be with loved one, it's OK to feel sadness or grief. Have a good cry. Express your feelings. You can't make yourself be happy just because it's the holiday season.

2 Reach out.

If you feel lonely or isolated, look for community, religious or other social events. We all need support and companionship. Volunteering can help lift your spirits and make new friends.

3 Be realistic. (This one's key for stress control!)

The holidays don't have to be perfect—or just like last year. As families change and grow, move and marry, traditions and rituals often change as well.

Choose a few to hold on to and be open to creating new ones. (For example, I don't love doing Christmas cards. Sorry, I find the process a drudge. So, because I know it's an important way to stay connected, I send cards every other year. I haven't lost a friend yet!)

4 Set aside differences.

Try to accept family and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to your expectations. Set aside grievances until a more appropriate time for discussion. And when others get upset or distressed, be understanding. They may be feeling the effects of stress and depression, too. (If the situation is too ugly or toxic, avoid it all together. I believe it's better to be alone than with mean-spirited or emotionally sick people.)

5 Stick to a budget.

Decide in advance what you want to spend on gifts and food—then stick to it. Don't try to buy happiness with pricey gifts. Some alternatives: Donate to charity in someone's name. Give homemade gifts or start a family gift exchange.

6 Plan ahead.

I know. Easier said than done. But it works. Set aside specific days for shopping, baking, visiting friends and other activities. Make lists and work from them especially when it comes to menu planning. That'll prevent last minute scrambling to buy forgotten ingredients.

7 Learn to say no.

Saying yes when you should say no can make you resentful and overwhelmed. People actually understand that you can't participate in every activity. If you can't say no when the boss wants you to work overtime try to remove something else from your schedule to make up for the lost time.

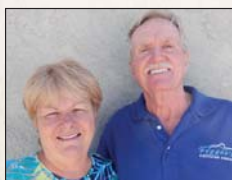
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8 Don't give up healthy habits.

Don't let the holidays become a free-for-all. Overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt. Have a healthy snack before holiday parties (this really works!) so you don't go overboard on the sweets, cheese and drinks. You'll feel better if you continue to exercise and get plenty of sleep.

9 Take a breather.

Make some time for yourself. Just 15 minutes alone can refresh you enough to press on this holiday season. Take a walk in the evening and stargaze. Listen to soothing music. Read a good devotional and meditate on it. Find something that reduces stress and clears your mind.

10 Don't be afraid to seek professional help.

Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless and unable to face routine chores. These are classic symptoms of clinical depression. I know from experience. These symptoms can be successfully treated. You can get back your peace and joy, whatever the season.

So don't let the holidays be something you dread. Take control. With a little planning, you may find you actually enjoy the holidays this year more than you thought possible. You really do have the power! ■



Carol LeBeau is a former 10News anchor, Staying Healthy reporter and current Health Champion for Palomar Health, avid runner, bicyclist and ranked, rough water swimmer. Learn more at www.carollebeau.com.



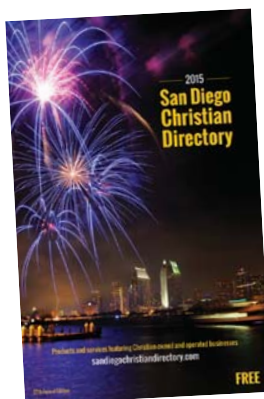
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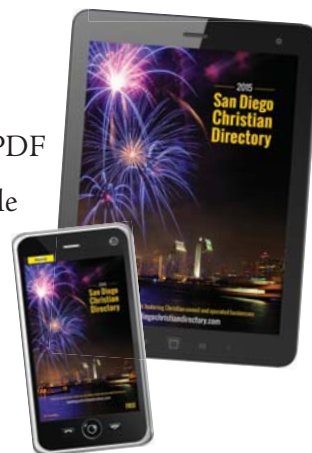
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More than window dressing

Faith helps artist brush away grief after wife's miscarriages

by LORI ARNOLD

It's hard to conceive of losing a child, but Dan Clarkson and his wife, Amber, lost four babies in five years through miscarriage. Zachary, at eight months gestation, nearly made it to full-term.

"After we lost our son, I went out in the backyard and I started building and I built a ship," Clarkson said. "I had actually started on a pirate ship before we lost Zachary, so I was already building for that boy. When we lost him I started working really hard and got it finished really quick.

"My neighbors used to peek over the wall at one o'clock in the morning and say 'Dan, are you going to go to sleep?' because I would be out there working. I wouldn't be hammering, but I would be drilling or doing something and they could hear me. Obviously it was devastating to lose that child so, for me, my therapy was to go out and build and work."

While the building project brought some solace, it was faith that provided the moments and pockets that eventually led to the couple's healing.

"I think for Amber and I there were times when we had to press through even when we weren't feeling it, just to remain faithful," he said.

The biblical story of how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead was particu-

larly comforting for Clarkson, who said he related to the grief of Lazarus' sisters, who chided Christ for not coming to their rescue sooner.

"It showed me the importance of grieving," the El Cajon resident said. "Prior to losing the other babies my wife and I had really not grieved together. We walked on that journey by ourselves. We didn't really enter into each other's grief enough.

"When Jesus approached Mary and Martha he knew that He was going to resurrect Lazarus, bring him back to life, but He didn't pull out the God card and say, 'I'm going to fix all this, just trust me.' The Bible says He entered in their grief and He wept with them. That showed me the importance of giving the proper place to grief. When we don't and we just bury our sadness it's going to come up in other ways."

So the Clarksons clung to each other as he constructed his own ark, of sorts—a cathartic tribute to a father's love and grief. It was the pirate ship that brought another teachable moment, this time coming from a pastor friend who offici-



Dan "Dano" Clarkson's holiday handiwork is visible on retail store windows all over San Diego. What is not seen is the deep grief he and his wife, Amber, experienced through the loss of four preborn babies before adoption brought four other children into their family.

ated at Zachary's memorial service.

"He said, 'You know Dan, you were working so hard to build this ship for your son, and your son is in heaven and he can't wait for you to come up here and see what your Father has been building for you.'

"By pressing through, God made real beauty out of ashes. Because, for us, we thought we would never be parents."

Unexpected gifts

After enduring five years of grief in the loss of their babies, God ushered in the next five years of joy, bringing the Clarksons four children through infant adoption. Caleb, now 15, arrived first, with fraternal twins Cherish and Aubrey arriving two years later. Jordan, Caleb's biological sister, came a year later.

"I cut the umbilical cords for all of



them,” their proud papa said.

“It was like drought came before the harvest and during the drought we couldn’t see the harvest, but we still kept pressing through. We kept believing.

“He (the Lord) was grieving with us, but the whole time He was with us on the other side going, ‘Just wait and see what I have in store for you. You guys have no idea. I’m going to blow your mind.’ And He did. They are amazing kids. I can’t even tell you. They are actively serving the Lord.”

The adoptions not only saved the Clarksons from the heartache of being childless, but they also brought new life to the twins’ biological mother after Clarkson asked her what was keeping her from giving her life over to Jesus.

“She said there’s too much junk in the trunk. I said, ‘Well, tomorrow, speaking of trunks, we’re going to drive up here with a vehicle with two car seats in it. We’re going to put two baby girls who we don’t deserve, that we didn’t carry, in the back seat and we’re going to drive away. The same trust that we have to have in receiving this gift from you is the same that you have to give to the Lord. Trust Him. You don’t deserve it. You haven’t earned it but it’s a free gift. That concept made sense to her,” he said.

Clarkson said also likes to use the imagery cast by Lou Giglio, pastor and founder of the Passion Movement.

“He talks about (how) the Star-breather and the Star-maker has a desire to know us in a very small and intimate way,” Clarkson said. “So as vast as God is, He’s also tangible. He makes himself simple enough and easy enough that we can easily take hold of Him. It’s not beyond our reach.”

Yoked passions

The Clarksons, who have been married for 25 years, met while traveling and performing with the Continental Singers. During his five years with the group, Clarkson visited 36 countries. Today, they still perform together locally as a



Dan Clarkson's creative skills are not limited to painting. He has built a Disney-style playground in his backyard with a pirate ship, dozens of vignettes, a fireman's pole, tiki areas and more, making it a most fascinating party venue for family and friends.

gospel duo.

“We met singing all over the world,” he said, adding that their talents meshed as both enjoyed singing, acting and painting.

His love for singing emerged as a child.

“I used to stand up at the restaurants on the chairs and start singing and I would ask everybody, ‘Do you like that song?’ It was early on in my growing up that I wanted to commit my music to the Lord and not be singing just for myself.”

By the time they met, Clarkson, then living in Fresno, had already logged quite a few years as a sign and window painter, specializing in holiday windows. Early on, Amber helped with the windows until becoming a full-time mommy. Now that their children are older, the whole family helps Clarkson with his “glass canvas” work. His work takes him across Southern California, where he pushes to complete hundreds of window designs during the holiday season alone.

“Ever since I was a kid I remember I was drawing and doodling,” he said.

Clarkson also hand carves wood signs

for area businesses, recently completing an impressive 15-foot piece for Christian Community Theater’s summer production of *Les Misérables*, for which he also did set design work. His commitment to CCT is not limited to behind the scenes, as the entire family also acts with the troupe, including its popular “Traditions of Christmas” show.

The couple also heads Heritage Christian School’s drama department, where Amber teaches high school art.

“Since all of our kids are at Heritage, it was kind of an easy fit for us to do,” he said.

A new canvas

Years after building the pirate ship in his Santee backyard, the family relocated to El Cajon eight years ago where Clarkson started all over again.

“We have a brand-new canvas,” he said. “We’re still working on stuff. It’s a work in progress.”

The result is a mind-boggling playground for children (and children in adult bodies). A cross between Disneyland, Knott’s Berry Farm and New Or-



Dan Clarkson, who shares his love of acting with his wife, Amber, and their four children, is pictured with them at the 2012 Traditions of Christmas.

leans, the space is replete with a swimming pool, dozens of vignettes, including a fireman's pole and tiki areas with palapas. It's favorite gathering spot for friends and family, and the Clarksons recently hosted a post-production cast party for *Les Misérables* that included skits and singing.

"My goal would be to please the Lord with what I do, with what I create, and to bring joy to other people when they see something," he said. "I think of our backyard and when we have parties and we have people over; it's exciting to see how the little kids just run around in this

big playland. That's fun for me."

The backyard oasis has created a perfect avenue for Clarkson to put to good use his unusual collegiate pairing: a major in mechanical engineering and a minor in music.

"It's two sides of my brain constantly at battle," he said.

Though both sides battle, Clarkson is clearly in tune with his creative side and its power to transform.

"I think artwork and music is an extension of the beauty that God's given to our lives," he said. "I see artwork as a form of praise because when you draw

and create you are thanking the Lord because you are describing His creation in art in one form or another. All we are doing is drawing a picture of what God has created. He's the one who has ultimately created the masterpiece. We are just replicating it.

"You know, if the Bible says we are created in God's image, then, if you look at the creativity of every person and how everybody has different creative elements, it must please God because He sees himself in us. Just like when we see our children do something that is really precious and it makes us proud." ■

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Painting the town

by LORI ARNOLD

Under the deft hand of Dan Clarkson, proprietor of Dano's Signs Graphics & Designs, Santa Claus gets a ferocious workout surfing, unclogging toilets, rooting for the Chargers, sledding on toothbrushes, delivering pizza, jet-skiing, and line dancing Rockette-style with reindeers.

Santa is not the only one on the move.

Thanks to Clarkson's brush, reindeer are prancing in bikinis, while others hula dance. Frosty the Snowman finds himself encircled by happy children; elves are refinishing furniture. And before Thanksgiving it wasn't uncommon to see turkeys snacking on corn on the cob or yogurt or running with giant cheeseburgers.

Clarkson and his paints have kept Southern California windows in the pink—and red and green and yellow and blue—for nearly 25 years, painting promotional signs and holiday scenes on store-fronts as wreaths, holly, candy canes, snow, trees and ornaments all come to life on these see-through canvases.

He launched the business 35 years ago as a Fresno teen. Always a dabbler in art, his first job came at age 15 while working for his father at an area convalescent hospital.

"There was a woman who did the windows at Christmastime and she left the company. So my dad told me that the 'boss heard you enjoy art and he wants you to paint the windows for Christmas.' I was scared to death. I didn't want to do it so I told my dad, 'No.' And my dad told me, 'Yes.'"

He created a Currier and Ives-style scene that took about a dozen hours to complete. It featured ice skaters and old-fashioned snowmen.

"It took me forever and then people liked what I did," he said. "Something in my head said I could make money doing

this."

He went out and signed up five other businesses. The first was a Radio Shack store.

Each year, he paints hundreds of windows for the holidays for clients that have included Goodwill thrift stores, Sprouts, Trader Joes, Boot Barn, San Diego Chargers, San Diego Padres, CVS/Pharmacy, Coco's Bakery Restaurants, McDonald's, Burger King, KFC, Pizza Hut, El Indio Restaurant, Soapy Joe's Car Wash and Rapid Transmissions.

Clarkson's style is distinct as he tries to tie in the windows to each business while weaving in a sense of motion and humor with each panel. During a recent project at Reed's Hobby Shop, a train store and La Mesa fixture, the artist created a "flying" Santa as he was being pulled behind a train. At the local Goodwill stores, each of the windows boasts white and blue poinsettias with snowflakes that read "Good will to all."

Sometimes the ideas germinate with his wife, Amber, who worked with him before they adopted four children; sometimes they come from the kids, who help from time to time.

"What's expressed in the window is our family and our personality," he said, adding that there is usually a sense of mischievousness in the depictions.

"I enjoy what I do and I look at the work and I have fun with it," he said. "I always try to make something slapstick with what I am doing."

Although Clarkson enjoys painting Nativity scenes they are time-consuming and are less in demand.

"Even if they are Christians, a lot of times they (business owners) have to be calculated as to how much of a state-



ment they make during the Christmas season," he said.

Non-holiday treats

In addition to the windows, Clarkson paints murals and custom signs, with previous clients including Indian Hills Camp, Shadow Mountain Church, New Venture Fellowship, Horizon Christian Fellowship and Sunrise Community Church, where he is a member.

"I do want to make the Lord proud with what I create," he said. "Sometimes it's scary when you take on certain projects that feel a bit overwhelming and a bit bigger than what you think you can accomplish. You say, 'OK Lord, help me get this done.' Then you see the Lord's help in making something happen."

Even with the holiday crunch time that keeps him in high gear for several weeks each winter, Clarkson said he's grateful for the opportunity to support his family with his craft.

"I think that if we can use the tools God gives us and the creativity to bless Him back it has to be pleasing for the Lord. I'm sure there are many people with beautiful gifts that aren't getting to exercise them. For me, every day, to be able to get out and create something is pretty exciting because it's always something new." ■

Learn more at www.danossignsandiego.com.



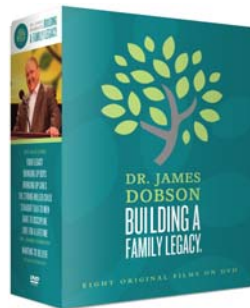
Christmas gift showcase



“Building a Family Legacy” 8-DVD Set

This DVD collection includes all of the teachings in the “Building a Family Legacy” series from Dr. James Dobson and his son, Ryan Dobson. The series of hour-long films uses the Dobson wisdom, insight and humor to help to strengthen marriages and aid in the remarkable challenges of raising children. \$50 suggested donation.

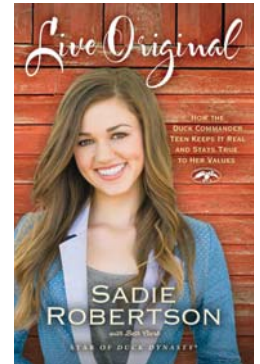
www.drjamesdobson.org



“Live Original” — *How the Duck Commander Teen Keeps It Real and Stays True to Her Values*

Sadie Robertson—the 17-year-old star of A&E’s “Duck Dynasty” and “Dancing With the Stars” and daughter of Willie and Korie Robertson—shares a simple list of principles that led to her personal and spiritual growth and fostered relationships she has with her friends and family. \$22.99.

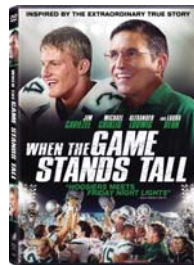
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VeggieTales Nativity Playset Toy

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store.veggietales.com



“When the Game Stands Tall”

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www.sonypictures.com

Playset Full Armor of God

The boxed six-piece playset includes a Helmet of Salvation, Breastplate of Righteousness, Belt of Truth, Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith, Gospel of Peace Shin Guards and a Parents’ Guide to help parents teach Ephesians 6:11-17 to their children. \$29.99.

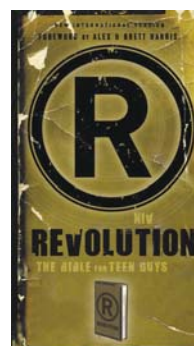
www.davidcook.com



“Christmas Goes Gospel: ’Tis the Season” Collection

The 12-track compilation album features Christmas favorites performed by Mandisa, Donnie McClurkin, CeCe Winans, Mary Mary, Temptations and Take 6, among others. \$9.99.

www.mackavenue.com



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A green gift box with a gold and green bow. The box is open, showing its interior. The bow is made of shiny, metallic-looking material. The box is a vibrant green color.



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Christmas happenings

Family friendly events offer holiday cheer

by LORI ARNOLD

The popular Holiday of Lights at the Del Mar Fairgrounds is taking its own holiday of sorts this year as the track undergoes turf renovation. The drive-through event with 400 themed displays and thousands of lights was a family favorite, drawing more than 100,000 annually.

With the lights dark this year, families will have a great opportunity to try something new, perhaps finding an all-new Christmas tradition. San Diego County has plenty to offer to fill the gap. Perennial favorites are boat parades and the San Diego Zoo's Jungle Bells. New to the mix this year, though, is the Holiday Wonderland at Petco Park, offering a wide range of Christmas themed activities.

Holiday Wonderland at Petco Park. Petco Park, on its winter hiatus from baseball, will host the Holiday Wonderland on weekends from 5 to 10 p.m. Dec. 5 to 21, with the added days of Dec. 22 to 24. The festival will include lighting displays, Polar Express trains, a Candyland, live reindeer, and photos with Santa and a 40-foot Christmas tree. Holiday-themed concessions and merchandise will be available throughout the ballpark. Admission is \$15 for adults, \$10 for children 3 and older. Children 2 and under are admitted for free.

Holiday in the Park is a two-day celebration of the holidays, highlighted by the 64th Annual **Las Posadas** re-enactment. The festival runs from noon to 9 p.m. Dec. 13 and features treats, seasonal activities, caroling and extended shopping hours in the festively decorated shops.

The annual **Los Posadas** observance, which commemorates the centuries-old Mexican celebration of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, begins with music from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m. on Dec. 14,

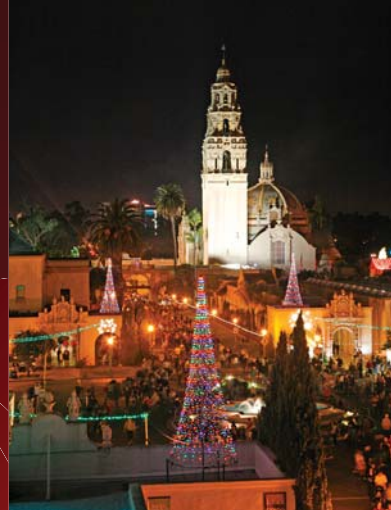
with the procession running from 5 to 6 p.m. A Piñata After-Party starts at the conclusion of the procession.

Balboa Park December Nights, formerly known as Christmas on the Prado, celebrates its 36th gathering during its Dec. 5 and 6 run. More than 350,000 people are expected at the festival, which runs from 3 to 11 p.m. Friday, and noon to 11 p.m. Saturday. During the event families will have free access to all Balboa Park museums from 5 to 9 p.m. each night. The multicultural experience offers food, music and entertainment from around the world. Del Cerro Baptist Church will also present its annual production of the Christmas Story Tree.

The **San Diego Bay Parade of Lights**, with its 80 or so festive boat entries, will sail past Shelter Island, Harbor Island, the Embarcadero, Seaport Village, and the Ferry Landing in Coronado beginning at 5:30 p.m. Dec. 14 and 21. This year's theme is Children's Stories. The parade starts at 5:30 p.m., advancing to prime viewing spots along Harbor Island, the Embarcadero, Seaport Village and the Ferry Landing on Coronado about every half hour.

"America's Largest Balloon Parade," **The Port of San Diego Big Bay Balloon Parade**, arrives to the bayside streets of downtown at 3 p.m. Dec. 26. Affiliated with the Holiday Bowl, the family friendly parade includes world-class marching bands, floats, drill teams, horse units and the event stars—dozens of giant character balloons. Viewing is free, though first-come, first-served grandstand seats are available for \$20. Early parking is recommended.

Guests near the television area will be able to see the finals of the 17th annual **Wienerschnitzel Wiener Nationals** and the **Bumble Bee Seafoods 5K**.

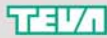


The shores of Mission Bay light up beginning at 7 p.m. Dec. 13 with the **Mission Bay Christmas Boat Parade of Lights**. Sponsored by the Mission Bay Yacht Club, this parade begins at Quivira Basin and makes its way past Crown Point, the east side of Vacation Island or the west side of Fiesta Island. As many as 100 vessels participate annually.

The Pacific Southwest Railway Museum—Campo Depot offers a new attraction with its **Santa's Toddler Train**, designed for younger children who may not be able to stay up late enough for the now-sold-out North Pole Limited trains. Highlights of the Dec. 14 excursion include Christmas carols, snacks served onboard, a visit and photos with Santa and a scenic train ride through East County's high desert. The train leaves the depot at 1 p.m. Tickets are \$5 for toddlers on the lap of a parent, \$30 for children 2 to 12 and \$40 for adults.

Christmas arrives early to Balboa Park with **Jungle Bells at the San Diego Zoo**, set for Dec. 13 to Jan. 4. Taking advantage of extended nighttime hours, guests will be able to board the Twinkle Light Trolley, view animal presentations and experience lighted animal sculptures on display throughout the park. Dr. Zoo-little's lively version of "Twas the Night Before Christmas" will be presented. Additional activities include carolers, the Toy Shop Hop trampoline acrobats, special music and entertainment, holiday treats and visits with Santa. Free with paid admission, though the trolley is \$2 for children, \$3 for adults. ■

Visit www.refreshedsandiego.com for many more Christmas events and a comprehensive calendar of events.



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Memorial vigil honors homeless

SAN DIEGO — The San Diego Rescue Mission held a procession and candlelight vigil Nov. 2 to honor the 56 homeless people who died on the streets during a one-year period ending on Sep. 30.

The 14th annual procession featured 56 people, each carrying a pair of shoes representing one who died. The procession stopped for prayers at various churches and ministry sites on its way to the County Administration Building.

The mission holds the annual event to raise awareness of the county's homeless, currently estimated at 8,900 men, women and children.

Christmas concert in Lakeside

LAKESIDE — Lakeside Community Presbyterian Church and its Joyful Noise Choir will present Vivaldi's "Gloria" at 7 p.m. Dec. 12.

The free concert will also include the choral ensemble, women's chorus and chamber orchestra from the San Diego School for the Creative and Performing Arts.

A free-will offering will be held.

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

Toys for Joy donations sought

SAN DIEGO — Rock Church is seeking donations for its 18th annual Toys for Joy community outreach, which will be held at sites in central San Diego, El Cajon and San Marcos.

Church officials are expecting 16,000 people to attend this year's event. Donations of toys and clothing are needed. Along with a toy for each child up to age 11, families also receive clothing, groceries and meals for their entire family. Last year, Toys for Joy distributed more than 9,000 toys, 195,000 articles of clothing, and 8,700 bags of groceries.

This will be the first year the program has expanded outside the city of San Diego.

"Christmas is a time when God showed His love for us, and we're ready to show God's love in the communities where we live and serve," said Pastor Miles McPherson, founder of Rock Church. "That's the purpose of the church."

Learn more at www.toys-for-joy.org.

Comedian Jeff Allen in San Diego

SAN DIEGO — First Baptist Church of San Diego will host a night of comedy with Jeff Allen at 7 p.m. Dec. 14.

Allen, a 30-year veteran of the craft, specializes in home humor that celebrates everyday family life and the joy derived from healthy marriages.

He has been featured in the films "Apostles of Comedy, Onwards and Upwards" and "Thou Shalt Laugh." He's also performed at the National Prayer Breakfast, the inauguration of George

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The church is located at 5055 Governor Drive.

Learn more at www.fbcSD.com or call (858) 457-4827.

Former QB to speak

MISSION VALLEY — Men with a Purpose, a networking ministry that stresses transparency and grace, will hold its monthly luncheon from noon to 1:30 p.m. Dec. 18 at the Doubletree Hotel.

Neil Jeffrey, a former All-American quarterback at Baylor University and quarterback for the San Diego Chargers, will be the guest speaker. Jeffrey serves as a speaking/teaching minister at the 28,000-member Prestonwood Church in Dallas, Texas, where he has served for more than 25 years. He is the author of the new book "If I Can, Y-Y-You Can!"

The group meets the third Thursday of every month. Tickets are \$20, which includes free parking. January's guest speaker will be Capt. Ludwowski, executive director of the Cru Military Ministry.

Reservations may be made by emailing dwight@cts.com or calling (619) 222-3688.

Holiday worship session

POINT LOMA — Straight Up Praise, an evening of worship designed to usher in the holy days, will be held at 7 p.m. Dec. 6 at Rock Church.

The free event features soul singer Marz JukeBox and the worship band, Hear & Fear.

Straight Up Praise is a spirit-led worship ministry created to nurture the body of Christ through "local intimate gatherings where all are welcome to come and experience the unconditional love that Jesus has to offer, and to rest in the presence of God."

Learn more at www.facebook.com/straightuppraise.

EVENTS ONLINE

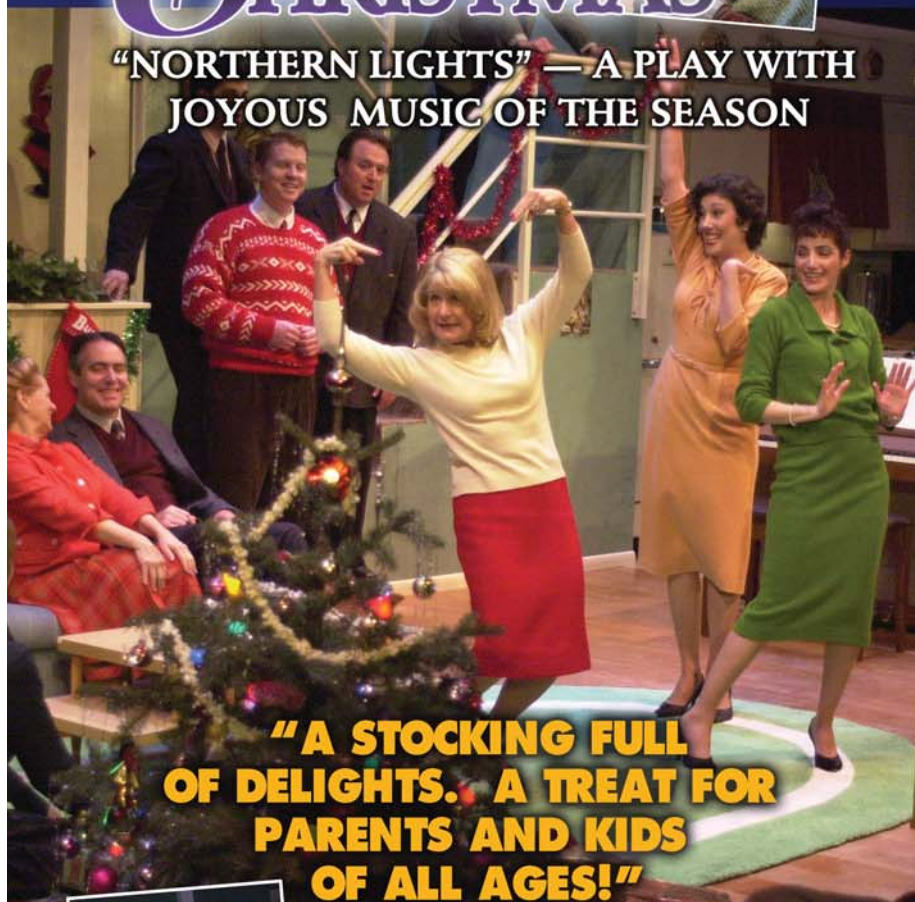
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MARK LARSON

Embracing life's melodies

"Raindrops on roses, whiskers on kittens"... For some reason, the song "My Favorite Things" is not only a timeless show tune, but it's also become popular during the Christmas season. When trials come, like bee stings and bites, the singer reflects on her favorite things.

I can't help but think that little boys prefer stomping on bees instead of rhapsodizing about potential pain. But little girls enjoy all the magical imagery. And then they grow up. But some things never change.

As I walked my daughter Kristin down the aisle at her wedding recently, these kinds of songs were bouncing around in my noggin. They were all coming back to me, those tunes from her childhood that we would sing and play over and over.

Each mental note brings reminders of that simpler time when my little girl was such a bundle of energy and music. She still is, of course, but my brain keeps racing between then and now.

Flashbacks to the days of Barbie dolls and "My Little Pony," leading to real ponies and bigger horses. Then there were those father-daughter trips and all the

other things dads try to do with their children.

The wedding ceremony was simple and beautiful, in God's Big Cathedral—that is, under a clear blue sky, crisp autumn day, on a large pier hovering over spectacular Lake Tahoe.

Everything went along so smoothly, following the precise steps we practiced at the previous day's rehearsal. I am prone to deal with stress by cracking jokes; I found that's not the best thing to do when wedding ceremonies are involved.

Daughters know exactly what they want and during the process they prefer dads just keep the mouth zipped, and write more checks, of course. *Just listen to the wedding planner, Dad.*

When the big timemoment came I did follow instructions properly, but still tried a little humor while slowly pacing down the aisle, mainly to keep her calm. Right before our cue to move, she had said she was so wound up she felt like passing out. Months of anticipation had built to a tipping point. My plan: Make her laugh and she'd keep breathing and standing. I didn't want to see her fainting and dragging both of us into the gorgeous, but cold, lake.

It worked, and now as Kristin reviews her zillion wedding photos she wonders why it sometimes appears that my mind is elsewhere. When I'm not breaking the ice with wise-cracks, she will know this: *I was hearing those songs, those lyrics.*

Even lines from crazy kids' songs I'd play on the cassette in our family van when it was my week to drive the carpool. It was widely observed that our ve-

hicle was bouncing and kids were extra-wired by the time we got to school.

Making their own way

Children all grow up way too fast, and in our family Jeff, Brandon and Kristin make us proud every day. They are strong, independently minded adults now, thank God.

As I said at the wedding reception, the last time my daughter did exactly what I needed her to do (like "Get into bed and go to sleep, Peanut") she was 3.

As the evening moved on and it was time for the after dinner "Dad and Daughter Dance," we couldn't help it. While the unconventional Led Zeppelin song "Thank You" played, we began slowly and respectfully, then I think both of us suddenly heard all those other tunes in our minds, all at once. The music had sweet lyrics as we burst into a zany combination of every goofy choreography move we ever did in the family living room. Total "Spazz Dance" antics, puzzling to many, perfect as we saw it. A life medley.

Then the song was drawing to a close as I whispered, "Put your feet on my feet and follow my lead, like we did when you were a little girl."

Ah, the memories. She was so little then, and now tall, slender and beautiful. And this time, our soundtrack was syncopated to my groans of "Ow, ouch." Time flies. We get all get older.

But the melodies always linger on.



Larson is a longtime Southern California radio/television personality. His voice is heard on KPRZ 1210AM, and his weekday talkshow airs 6-9 a.m. on

KCBQ 1170AM. He is also a news analyst on KUSI TV. Learn more at www.marklarson.com.



PHOTO BY CLIFF ALBERT

Cultivating a year-round attitude of gratitude

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”

Philippians 4:6 (NASB)

I’m thankful for _____ (you fill in the blank).

The list of things we can be grateful for is endless. You can never run out of things for which to be thankful, regardless of the time of year. Saying “thanks” causes you to cross over from the ranks of the have-nots to the ranks of those who know they have-much.

Cicero, the Roman philosopher, said, “Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others.” When a person is grateful—when he or she has an attitude of gratitude—they become an all-around better person and all the other good virtues flourish.

Scripture abounds with encouragement and commands to be thankful. In fact, the command to be grateful, either direct or implied, occurs over 100 times.

According to Philippians 4:6, we can reduce our anxiety today by thankfully remembering how God has helped us in the past. In the past 20 years the field of psychology has discovered that we can have better attitudes if we think about positive things. Well, God certainly knew this a long time ago. If we can have an attitude of gratitude, our whole perspective will change.

But, if gratitude creates such a positive change in our attitude, then it should be self-reinforcing and a much more common experience for each of us. So, why aren’t we more grateful, more of the time? There are certainly many reasons, but I would like to suggest a unique idea for you to consider: We simply do not realize all that we have been given.

What is it that keeps a child from

feeling grateful for the love and protection of their parents? Could it be that children have no awareness of the price their parents paid to the obstetricians, the pediatricians, the hospital, or anything associated with their birth? The child grows up oblivious to the daily sacrifices made by their parents.

Maybe the same is true for each one of us with regard to our Heavenly Father. We do not realize how much He provides and protects.

If we had just an inkling of an idea of how little we know about ourselves, our world, our lives (both physical and spiritual), then maybe we would be more grateful. The Bible says in I Corinthians 13 that we now see in a mirror dimly, but someday we will see things clearly.

So, how dimly do we see?

Answer: Very dimly.

For example, did you know that 80 percent of the information we receive from our five senses comes through the avenue of the eyes? But if all the energy of the electromagnetic spectrum were comparable to a piano keyboard, your visual abilities would be equal to less than one note. In other words, far more goes on around us than the scope of our five senses.

So, we don’t see things as clearly or completely as we think we do. And, as Christians, we also believe in a spiritual world that lies beyond our understanding. The gratitude we should have is derived from the realization that our thoughts are so far below God’s thoughts. We truly are like small children who don’t realize how dependent

they are on their parents’ love and protection.

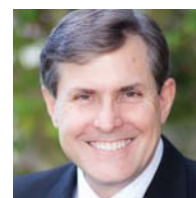
In Isaiah 55:8 the Lord declares, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.” In I Corinthians 1:5, the Apostle Paul writes, “For the foolishness of God is wiser than

human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”

In other words, we are all sophomores in this thing we call life. What is a sophomore? The word itself means “wise fool.” It is someone

who has a little experience or learning, and they often think they know it all. But, the truth is, they don’t know what they don’t know. There’s an interesting paradox here—the more you know, the more you realize how little you really do know. It makes you humble and it makes you grateful.

As we enter the season of remembering the birth of Jesus Christ, let us be grateful for the tremendous sacrifice he made on our behalf by coming to this world. We may only know in part all of the gifts that God has promised to us as a result of Christ’s birth, life and sacrifice, but we certainly can be grateful.



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.

JANICE THOMPSON

Power-up principle: Keep the woe, woe, woe out of your ho, ho, ho



*

Woe
Money Woes
Relative Woes
Shipping Woes
Perfect Gift Woes
Too-Many-Party Woes
Christmas Sweater Woes
Martha Stewart-You're-Not Woes
Where-to-go-Christmas-Morning Woes

Do you get the picture? If you are someone who feels conflicting emotions about the Christmas season, you are not alone! Many of us—while anticipating the blessedness of the celebration of when God became Man—are often sidetracked by the many things that assault us in our culture. I'm hoping to offer you a few simple antidotes for your *money woes* with the hope it may help keep you centered on the wonder of Christmas.

From my professional experience, here are two “woes” that lead to poor financial decisions during the Christmas season:

No Plan. Simply put, pressure keeps us a step behind, joy keeps us a step ahead! If you are not financially prepared for Christmas, it is a sure-fire way to take some of the joy out of your holidays. With advertisers screaming for your attention, it is easy to overspend. If you don't have a budget in place this year, try establishing some “caps” to your purchases *before* you head to the mall, and then make it a high priority to establish a plan for next year. A master plan *with a budget for the holidays* is a must!

Emotional Shopping. Many well-meaning people seek contentment, security or significance through the gifts they buy, often trying to impress by

the cost of the gift. When the desire to please is so compelling, wise purchases are often difficult to make, especially with last-minute shopping. Buying impulsively and emotionally may render a momentary thrill but it also can result in disappointment and guilt. It goes without saying that the nurturing of relationships and investing time in loved ones throughout the year outlasts any gift we could give seasonally ... those purchases are often forgotten, discarded or even re-gifted.

Here are some simple tips to help keep the Ho Ho Ho in your Christmas:

Freeze your credit cards—literally. The best way to keep from overspending is to use cash. I have actually encouraged people to put their card in a jar of water and freeze it if they have a tendency to overspend. That way, if they need the card for a genuine emergency, they can always thaw out the card. The odds of taking a frozen card to the store are slim!

Wait 24 hours before buying anything that costs more than a pre-established amount. During our first year of marriage, my husband and I decided on the following policy: if anything was more than the amount we had decided upon (and not in the budget), we wait 24 hours to assess its value. After the day passes, if the item still holds its appeal, we then purchase it purposefully rather than impulsively. More often than not we discover it really wasn't that important to us. We still operate off of this principle.

Be thankful for what you have. Generally speaking, if you are reading this article, you have far more than most of the world. There is no better cure for your Christmas woes than a grateful heart.

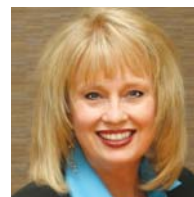
Give charitably to someone in need. Consider a gift of service or a financial gift or maybe even adopting a family in need. There is nothing quite like giving sacrificially at this time of year. After all, isn't this really the true spirit of Christmas?

It is both a challenge to have little money and a challenge to have much. The person on a tight budget may struggle to even buy the basics at Christmas. The person with abundance may overspend without a thought to good stewardship. There are so many distractions that can keep our eyes off the greatest gift of Christmas. Wherever this season finds you, it is my hope that you will reflect on two things:

- First, on the joy and privilege of buying and giving appropriately
- Second, and most importantly, on the unfathomable gift of the babe in the manger

As J. I. Packer so eloquently put it in his classic book, “Knowing God,” “the taking of manhood by the Son is set before us in a way which shows how we should set it before ourselves and ever view it—not simply as a marvel of nature, but rather as a wonder of grace.”

Here's *ho-ho-hoping* you have a blessed, grace-filled Christmas!



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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4 countercultural ways to keep Christ the focus of Christmas

Every now and then, you watch a movie that makes a point the director likely didn't even intend.

My wife and I were watching such a film a few months ago in which a teacher asked a group of elementary school students to list one word describing the "spirit" of Christmas.

I was begging for someone to shout "Jesus," but it didn't happen. One kid shouted, "Joy!" Another one, "Santa!" The teacher smiled and told everyone "Good answer," and the scene ended.

That kind of summarizes America's view of religious-themed holidays. We celebrate bunny rabbits at Easter, turkeys at Thanksgiving, and reindeer at Christmas.

I've never been to a birthday party where the cake, cards and napkins all have the wrong name on them, but the way Americans celebrate Christmas has a similar feel.

Sometimes as a parent, it's tempting to just give up and join in the what-am-I-getting-this-year bash, but we shouldn't. With a little determination, it really is possible to keep Christ at the center of Christmas.

Here are four suggestions:

1. Avoid materialism. We all set out to do this, but often go off course when we make one question the center of the holiday: "What do you want this year for Christmas?" It's fine to give our children gifts, but Christmas isn't about toys or dolls or games or gadgets. It's about the birth of the Savior of the world. Sure, we can tie this tradition into the Christmas message and say that Jesus was the greatest gift, but for so many children, Jesus gets lost deep under the pile of wrapping paper. Besides, all that stuff you buy will be abandoned in a few days, or broken in a few weeks, or sold in a yard sale in a few years. Should we stop

buying presents for our kids? Of course not, but as Christians our practice should be radically different from the average American. This season, consider scaling back.

2. Focus on others. Attack materialism by taking your children to the toy section at the local store and having them pick out presents—for *someone else*. Ask your local church for specific ideas. Our family has a yearly tradition of filling a box for Samaritan's Purse, the Christian ministry that delivers Christmas gift boxes to needy children worldwide. This year, I told my 6-year-old son we were going to buy presents for a boy his age who literally had *no* toys. "How does he have fun, then?" my son asked, struggling to grasp this reality. We discussed the types of toys that little boy might enjoy, and then we visited a toy section with the understanding that everything we bought was for that boy. We wrote the boy a short note, placed it in the box, and then we talked about how Jesus sacrificed daily for others—and how He was the greatest gift of all.

3. Put a new spin on the Christmas story. Personalize it for your children: Jesus was as tall as you are, and He laughed just like you do, and He played with His friends just like you do. Ask them questions: What kind of food do you think Jesus ate? What types of games do you think He played? Help them see that Jesus was a real person who was fully human. I told my oldest son once that Jesus always obeyed His mother and father—that He lived a sin-

less life. My son knew Jesus was perfect, but he had never pondered the part about Jesus obeying His parents. He was floored. Help your children understand that Jesus was God-Man—that that little baby literally had created the world. If that's hard for you to understand, join the crowd. It's hard for me, too. But it's a wonderful reality.



4. Watch "A Charlie Brown Christmas." It's broadcast every year on television, despite the fact its climax includes a Bible passage. The cartoon was written and broadcast first in the 1960s, and it's even more relevant four decades later. Charlie Brown searches for the meaning of Christmas and is unsatisfied until his friend Linus tells him about the birth of Christ. The gang ends with a rendition of "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." The fact that it's still broadcast every year on television is a small miracle in itself. It's worth watching—over and over.



Michael Foust is the father of three small children, a writer and editor, and blogs about parenting at www.michaelfoust.com.

Peace on earth *and* at the dinner table

"Help! I've fallen and I can't get up!" You've seen the commercial for the life-saving medical device. Have you stumbled recently? Not a physical fall like the senior in the TV ad but a fall or departure from a goal, a commitment or a healthy behavior that you so want to have victory over?

The holidays are upon us, and many of my patients are experiencing a surge of anxiety. Calorie overload, excessive temptations and a flurry of commitments that sends us rushing and doing rather than being and enjoying. Instead of experiencing the fullness of family and friends, we settle for surviving the holidays rather than "thriving" the holidays.

What if peace on earth could begin at the dinner table?

Imagine sailing through the next month of parties, dinners and festivities without worrying about what to eat, how much to eat and how to say no to the relatives who have their own tradition of wanting to stuff both you and the bird.

Janice Baker, one of San Diego's most respected registered dietitians and diabetes educators, recently spoke at our weekly support group. She offers Refreshed readers her clever tips and suggestions for healthful holiday eating. With more than 10 years experience in teaching and nutrition counseling, Janice empowers her patients by sharing new tools as well as the latest research in overcoming health challenges.

Six essentials for holiday success:

Limit Choices. We consume more calories when we are offered a large variety of food. We want to try everything! Instead, select one food item from each category when at a party. For example, one appetizer, one dessert and one beverage. For lower calorie selections such as veggies and proteins take one serving

to start with and return for seconds if you are truly still hungry.

Consume water-based foods. Try reaching for "water-rich" heavy foods such as fruits and vegetables instead of chips and crackers. Any time you pair water and fiber it's more filling and holds your hunger in check.

Think small. Use smaller plates and select smaller servings. Enjoy each food item by chewing slowly and noticing the tastes and textures, but avoid excessive calorie intake. This way you won't feel deprived and you'll experience the variety of foods usually reserved for the holidays.

Keep moving. Schedule exercise into your day. Don't wait until the end of the holiday season. Exercise regulates your appetite and keeps you on track.

Drink water before dining. Water helps reduce your appetite. It creates a sense of fullness so you are less likely to over-indulge. (Alcohol is an appetite stimulant and is also full of calories.)

Limit party drinks. One cup of eggnog equals 350 calories. That's like drinking ice cream! One cup of punch is about 150 calories.

It's all about a plan

Many times when we are put in situations, like in the non-stop "culinary offerings" during the holidays, establishing structure and having a plan in place can be very helpful.

Janice also shared The Intuitive Eater's Holiday Bill of Rights, which promotes inner peace and a healthier waistline:

- You have the right to honor your fullness, even if that means saying "no thank you" to dessert or a second helping of food.
- It is not your responsibility to make someone happy by overeating, even

if it took hours to prepare a special holiday dish. You can take home leftovers to savor the next day.

- You have the right to eat pumpkin pie for breakfast!

New year, new you

Consider these two simple health-provoking questions as we approach the New Year:

If you could paint a mental picture of a healthier, happier you, what would it look like?

And what are three things you can do right now to get you closer to that new you?

One of my patients said it best when she told me the first two letters in the word goal are "go," which means we need to take action and put forth the effort.

Remember, in pursuing new, healthier habits this coming year we are never alone. This is wonderful news! We always have an advocate.

Psalm 43:8 gives us this assurance; "The Lord will command His loving kindness in the daytime; And His song will be with me in the night, a prayer to the God of my life."

Wishing you peace, perseverance and wonderful Christmas memories.

Please feel free to email me if you have any questions or comments on health-related topics to: kim@ucprx.com.



Kimberly Ruby, certified nutritionist at University Compounding Pharmacy, has been in the wellness industry for more than 20 years. She has been facilitating one of the

longest running weight management support groups in the nation, meeting weekly in the North County for 10 years. Her health segments have appeared on local news channels.

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JOANNE BROKAW

The perfect gift

Ah, Christmas, that wonderful time of year when brightly wrapped gifts under the twinkling tree contain treasures untold—like a reindeer sweater with a light-up nose or a gift certificate to a store whose clothes you haven't fit into since junior high.

"I saw this and immediately thought of you," the gift-giver beams, while you're wondering what it was you've said or done to make them think membership in the Vegetable-of-the-Month Club would be high on your holiday wish list.

I've tried to make gift giving easier on my family by offering specific ideas. One year, for example, I told my husband that I really wanted a gift certificate to the office supply store.

"I'm not giving you that," he said. I explained that it was a perfect present considering my office supply addiction, but he wasn't going for it. "It's too impersonal."

I got it. He wanted to actually pick out presents for me instead of just handing me money and letting me buy what I wanted. "OK, then, why don't you get me a plastic file crate, and fill it with stuff. I could use some manila folders, paper clips and staples, and I really need a new highlighter, and some toner for my printer..."

"I'm not giving you office supplies for Christmas," he said, and that was his final answer.

Fortunately, he passed my gift certificate request along to his brother. In January, when I was out of both printer toner and money, I was thankful someone had listened to me.

Thankfully, a good thing about my mother is that she really wants to give gifts you'll like. If you give her an idea, she'll make your wish come true in a way that also feeds her own addiction to discount, dollar and surplus stores. Last

year, I told her I really wanted family pictures.

My mother has suitcases and boxes under her bed filled with photos of my sister and me as kids, and of family and events long forgotten. Whenever she pulls them out we spend hours immersed in family stories, photo by photo by photo. As the family genealogist, these memories are priceless to me.

She considered my request and then responded, "That's all? Old pictures? Nothing else?"

I could sense her disappointment. That idea wouldn't leave much room for creativity on her next shopping spree at the stuff-mart.

"Yes," I assured her. "I want pictures."

She shrugged her shoulders and said, "OK. If that's what really you want."

On Christmas Eve, she handed me two wooden boxes decorated with snowmen (proving that the discount store has something for even the most difficult person on your gift list). The boxes were filled with family photos.

"Awesome!" I said, pulling out picture after picture and passing them around the room. "Look at this. When I was 7 or 8, I dressed up like Carol Burnett for Halloween. Look at how young Grandpa looks in this picture. Wow, is this you, Mom?"

There were photos of aunts and uncles, my grandparents and other relatives whose faces mirrored our own. "Look at the family resemblance!" we cried. There were weddings and parties and candid snapshots and formal portraits. The annual school pictures of me and my sister, chronicling our descent from kindergarten adorable to junior high nerd, made us giggle, and we teased each other ("You look exactly the same!") while my mother repeatedly assured us that we were both beautiful.

We were still laughing as I put the lid



on the last box. "Thanks, Mom," I said. "This was the perfect gift."

And I meant it.

I suppose that it's probably time to make a wish list for this Christmas, but there isn't really anything I need. I already have more stuff than I know what to do with and I'm actually all set for office supplies.

Besides, Christmas is about more than what Santa leaves under the fir tree. It's remembering the perfect gift that arrived more than 2,000 years ago, wrapped in swaddling clothes and tucked into a manger under a starry Bethlehem sky.

Thirty-three years later, it was given again, wrapped this time in a crown of thorns and nailed on a wooden cross at Calvary.

When it comes to presents, everything else pretty much pales in comparison.



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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