

# *True Gifts of Christmas*

*A December Devotional and Prayer Guide from  
Calvary Baptist Church*

*Every good thing given and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father  
of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. James 1:17*

Let the stable still astonish;  
Straw—dirt floor, dull eyes,  
Dusty flanks of donkeys, oxen;  
Crumbling, crooked walls;  
No bed to carry that pain,  
And then, the child,  
Rag-wrapped, laid to cry  
In a trough.  
Who would have chosen this?

Who would have said: "Yes.  
Let the God of all the heavens  
And earth  
Be born here, in this place"?  
Who but the same God  
Who stands in the darker, fouler rooms  
of our hearts  
and says, "Yes.  
let the God of Heaven and Earth  
be born here—  
in this place."  
--Leslie Leyland Fields

**Sunday, December 1:** *"And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior'" (Luke 1:46-47).*

The angel told Mary that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and "the power of the Most High" would overshadow her so that the "Holy One Who is to be born will be called the Son of God." Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to Your Word." As we celebrate this holy season, let us remember to be obedient to the Lord and to share this special story with others who need to hear.

**Prayer: Our Heavenly Father, we thank You for sending Your Son to be born to humble, obedient parents, to be lovingly wrapped in cloths and laid in a manger for us. May we put You first in our hearts so that we can say with confidence and joy—My soul magnifies the Lord! My spirit rejoices each day in You, my precious Savior.**

**--The Calvary Prayer Team**

**Monday, December 2: *"Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity"* (Psalm 133:1).**

*"The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed: nor will they say, 'Look, here it is! or 'There it is!' For in fact, the kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:20-21).*

### The Christmas Spirit Is Real

I am amazed during every Christmas season of the evidence that the giving spirit of so many confirms that God's love is indeed a reality—right here among us. Helping hands appear, smiles become broader, attitudes grow warm, generous and caring. Happiness replaces a lot of previous sadness. The evidence materializes through the widespread participation of loving acts of many through the Christmas season.

Our family has been a recipient of such a loving act. We, though four hundred miles apart, have stayed determined to always share Christmas with one another through all the years. Of course, one of the families has to make the long trip, as well as attend to all the detailed preparations of such a busy season.

In the Christmas of 1965 the joy truly began when my sister and her family arrived safely to start the holiday together. Now the season was complete—or so we thought. At 10:30 p.m. on Christmas Eve, as we began spreading gifts and stocking stuffers under the tree, it was discovered that my sister and her husband, in their haste to get on the road, had left many of their gifts—safely packed for the trip-- in a closet back home in Georgia.

Gloom descended. No solution was in sight. The much anticipated joy of seeing family members open the carefully selected gifts was snuffed out at 10:30 on Christmas Eve.

A light came to my mind. After a heart-pounding call and explanation to a neighbor, he said, "Meet me at my store in a few minutes, and we will take care of this."

As we walked the aisles of his store finding replacements for the original gifts, my neighbor called to us, "Don't rush; take your time." Here we were shopping at 11:00 for Christmas gifts—in his store and during his Christmas Eve activities. Could you ever imagine such!

Now what further evidence does one need to recognize that the Spirit of God's love is quite real. Such acts of giving selflessly multiply during the Christmas season by the miracle of God's love coming down at Christmas.

It is all around you. Don't miss seeing it.

**Prayer:** Dear Father, grant us the wisdom and strength to multiply the gifts of giving in all ways to those we meet daily. May giving and loving grow daily among all of us and be a testimony to thy Glory.

–Frances Marcum, BYKOTA Class

**Tuesday, December 3:** *“And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Hebrews 13:16).*

During the Christmas season my sister Meredith and I enjoy our advent calendar. Each day we add a shepherd, wise man, gift, angel, and, finally, baby Jesus to the set. Growing up Meredith and I always fought over who got to put up the new addition each day. It became a race to get to it first each morning. Eventually we learned that we needed to take turns putting up the new piece each day. This showed me one of the true meanings of Christmas because I learned it is not all about me; it is about sharing with other people and making someone else happy. Many years later, I still remember having to trade off with her, but it taught me that sharing with my sister was more important than getting everything for myself.

**Prayer:** Lord, you have given us many temporary gifts for this life on Earth, but let us not forget that you sacrificed your Son to give us the gift of eternal life with You. Help us to share our time and resources so that we can please You. Amen.

--Mark Dill, Senior, Henry Clay High School

**Wednesday, December 4:** *“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother, Mary” (Matthew 2:1, 10-11a).*

A magical time of the year, with families spending time together, fun and even quirky traditions upheld, warm spirits abound, and Christianity is in the forefront. Christmas is such a special and meaningful time for me. I revel in the traditions, playing Christmas carols on the piano and ardently maintaining childhood rituals. I even write a letter to Santa and set out cookies, milk, and then carrots for the reindeer at the age of twenty-eight! However, my traditional Christmas was altered one year, and it produced dread for me in the months leading up to the holiday. I played high school basketball, and my team traveled to Florida for a Christmas tournament, forced by my coach to leave on Christmas morning. In all my love for Christmas time and its traditions, I was devastated. My parents and sisters were sweet and accommodating, allowing our family to celebrate and open presents on Christmas Eve. In my heart, it still wasn't the same. On that snowy Christmas morning, my parents waved goodbye as I headed up the bus steps, and I was melancholy. At my mother's suggestion, I took my Bible and read the Christmas story from Matthew and Luke as we drove down I-75. It was not my typical Christmas day, amidst a bus full of rowdy teenagers. Yet I was able to take great comfort in reading and reflecting on Jesus' birth and initiate a new Christmas tradition. While some holidays are not always conventional or planned as we hope, there are always opportunities to celebrate Christ's birth and the true significance of Christmas.

**Prayer:** Father, thank you for the magic of Christmas with your Son's amazing arrival on Earth. May we seek opportunities to worship and glorify You in all circumstances.

–Anna Yuhás; Beginning Life Together Sunday School Class

**Thursday, December 5: "I will praise the Lord with all my heart, as I meet with His godly people" (Psalm 111:1).**

We were poor, but we were rich.

I was ten years old in 1952. Our family lived on Pyke Road in a small apartment over a grocery. My mom worked part-time in the store so we could live there. Dad was in the VA Hospital being treated for long-term injuries from World War II. Mom had a fulltime job at SS Kresge's selling toys. We were very poor, but Mom kept all of us clean as a pin. Our mother was sweet, refined, and God-fearing, as were all her friends at Calvary Baptist Church. And she sang in Ruth Fife's choir.

For my tenth birthday, my uncle gave me a mold to make lead fishing sinkers. I would make the sinkers and go house to house selling them for a nickel each. One day I knocked on Martha Rayborn's door on Gibson Avenue. She introduced me to her brother, Charles Edwin Gillespie, a victim of polio. Charlie's legs didn't work, but his truck was rigged so he could control it with only his hands. He hired me to sell Christmas cards with him after school and on weekends. He drove, and I sold. We sold a box of 25 cards for a dollar, and Charlie shared the 50 cent profit with me. I made 20 cents a sale...and we went all over the city.

Christmas was approaching, and my dad was unable to come home from the VA, so Christmas looked bleak for all of us. I had made over sixty dollars, which was a big help to my family, but my mom insisted that I keep five cents a box for myself. So I asked Mrs. Rayborn what I should get my mother for Christmas. She suggested a pair of white cotton gloves, an essential in that day.

It would be a wonderful Christmas surprise, I thought, but when Mom told us she was going to the Christmas party at Ruth Fife's, my brother and sister urged me to give her the gloves in time for the party. We agreed the gift would be from all of us.

When Mom opened her early Christmas surprise, you would have thought she had just received a million dollars (or back then, a thousand!). She rode the bus to the choir party wearing spotless white gloves.

At that party my mom met some people who helped her get a job at Ades Dry Goods Store, working with Texie Kirkland, also from Calvary. This blessing allowed us to move to an apartment in Meadowthorpe within walking distance of my father in the VA Hospital. Mom worked there for twelve years before becoming a secretary at the University of Kentucky, eventually moving up to be the personal secretary for two UK presidents! She always claimed it was all because of the white gloves she received that Christmas.

I learned a lot that Christmas. I learned the importance of being part of a wonderful church. I discovered the joy of giving and the importance of relationships. I came to know the value of a dollar and to appreciate every gift, no matter how large or small. I learned that "little is much when God is in it." And I saw the significance of having Christian women in your life, women who sacrifice for their families.

I also realized that what you sell is important. I was so proud to sell those Christmas cards. Fishermen might need sinkers, but *everyone* needs the message of Jesus Christ. And those gloves taught me that simple, small gifts can make a world of difference. God surely showed us this by sending a tiny, sweet Baby to bring hope to all the earth.

Eventually we moved into a house in Meadowthorpe where I enjoyed wonderful Christmases every year. Fifty years ago this December, I left the home of my parents to live with another great and gentle woman—Jo Ellen Pike Stotz, a beautiful servant whose love and sacrifice reflect the heart of her Savior. And we will celebrate in the very church where I first learned what Love is.

**Prayer: Holy Father, thank you for your extravagant love. You are generous and compassionate beyond our understanding. Help us to remember that Your nature is to give. Surely, You expect us to be givers, too. Help us to be generous in giving and full of appreciation for all we receive. Thank you for the birth of Jesus—the greatest gift ever given. Lead me to give like You give and to love like You love. Amen.**

**--Louie Stotz, Calvary member for 64 years**

**Friday, December 6: “...the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord’” (Luke 2:10-11).**

#### Telling the Greatest Story

It was a simple Christmas pageant in a humble Baptist church in the Philippines. We gathered to see Joseph, a newly-converted Muslim, and Mary, a newly baptized Christian, formerly a Catholic, re-enact the greatest news on earth. The angel said it well...“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”

**Prayer: Oh, Father, may all the people accept the good news that their Savior, Christ the Lord loves them. Amen.**

**--Jan Hill, member of the Calvary Prayer Team**

**Saturday, December 7: “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16); “And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the LORD your God has blessed you” (Deuteronomy 12:7).**

#### A Christian Christmas

Every December my middle brother asks us to come to his house for Christmas; my brother is an unrelenting atheist, in every sense of the term. My parents decided that joining my brother and his family on Christmas was the most Christian thing that we could do—to shine a light on them by sharing our celebration of Christ’s birth and keeping alive the possibility of redemption in their lives. My maternal grandmother and aunts decided to stop coming, decided that Christmas was a pagan holiday that had nothing to do with Christ’s birth. Their choice saddens me because they haven’t been able to witness the wonderful closeness that the rest of my family has experienced through what we chose to be a meaningful time to joy in Christ and love others in his name.

During the years of tension following the retreat of my middle brother and his family from the church there were many Christmases filled with raw debate. It taught me to make a defense to anyone who asked me about the reason for the hope I had in Christ (1 Peter 3:15). Hours of arguing over the

plausibility of the theories of Charles Darwin, what it means to be a religious extremist, and whether Michelle Obama owns too many clothes, slowly simmered down until Christmas became less and less about being right and more about being a family. Tears that were shed and mental trophies that were held all collapsed as I grew in faith in what God was doing.

Christmas of 2011 epitomizes our journey together. My parents and I had a little celebration at our house and opened a few presents in the peacefulness of our home and had a breakfast of pancakes and bacon that my mom and I made together. That afternoon, when we went to my brother's house, things finally seemed different, and even though my brother and his wife and kids were as far from Christ as they were ten years ago, things felt Christian. The floor was covered in presents that we had bought and made for each other. We shared food that we all cooked together, and then we made and decorated cookies. My one year old nephew and five year old niece made a mess of beautiful icing colors, and my eldest brother made little cartoon people. My thirteen and seventeen-year-old niece and I all painted our nails in Christmas colors and added stick-ons. Even though I had learned to love the debates we had, and even though they made me stronger in my faith over the years as I studied in order to divide the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15), I was glad that the only fighting that went on that year was with fake, stuffed snowballs that we hurled across the house, my eldest nephew taking the crown. The day was only about us loving each other like Christ loved us and about acting like the kind of family we'll be in Heaven.

The next day my dad and I escaped to Cincinnati to draw the season to an end. It was just myself and the man who had discipled me in Christ my whole life, the one who first led me to fall in love with Jesus. We went to the Tower Place Mall downtown and took pictures of the outrageous price tags and giggled as we walked past the saleswomen. We got Graeter's ice cream and talked about life and about God—even if we didn't say his name-- He was in the air of everything that was spoken and every smile. It made me feel connected to my family and to God in the midst of a really difficult first year away from the home I grew up in.

Even if half of my family had abandoned the Christmas holiday, and the other half had abandoned the true God of it, I still had my dad to bring me to God's face and my mother to show me how to be a witness with complete abandon, even when all seemed hopeless. Our family was Christian that year, even if not all of us were, because Christ showed up and was born in our hearts as we shared them with one another.

**Prayer: God, Dad, thank you for showing up on Christmas when we show up for You. Thank You for carrying us through every day and giving us the grace to have You in our lives when everything else has been lost. In any way that this season isn't about You, we will make it about You because our being and our breath are for and about You. Make Yourself known to us this Christmas and show Yourself to our friends, our family members, and ourselves who have forgotten what it's like to be with You and be joyful with You. Show us how people need to be loved and how You want to love them so we can be Your instruments. We love You so much. Amen.**

**--Kaitlyn Marsh, Classics Major, University of Kentucky**

**Sunday, December 8: *"But Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart"* (Luke 2:19).**

The Christmas of 2004 we were expecting our first baby. As I read the Christmas story that season, Mary's experience became real to me, and this sweet scripture jumped off the page.

For the first time, I wondered--did Mary's legs and back hurt at the end of each day, too? Did she wake in the middle of the night from anxious dreams, and daydream about the first time she would hold her baby in her arms? Did she worry about being a good mother... *to the savior of the world?*

Whatever fear and anxiety she must have experienced along with the joy and excitement, the scripture tells us tenderly that she "treasured all these things, and pondered them in her heart." Boy, did I get that.

Having waited a long time for this baby, we were giddy with the promise of this precious daughter who was coming into our lives. Although we hadn't met her yet, we loved her intensely. We already felt protective of her, worried about her, and were actively and meticulously planning for her safety, well-being, and her future. We had plans for her, but knew that whoever she was and whatever she did, we would love and adore her every day of her life.

Like Mary, I treasured each of these things, and my thoughts were consumed with this little life that was being entrusted to us. That Christmas, amid the presents and parties and activities that kept us busy all month, the most precious gift I received was understanding, in a "hands on" way, how much God loves me. Becoming a parent revealed the unconditional, intense, merciful love that God has for me. I finally realized how love could be strong enough to forgive any wrong, and how being loved back would bring me such joy, but was not a prerequisite to my love for this precious child.

It doesn't have to be a baby. God places special people in our lives to teach us how to love each other, and to help teach us how much He loves us. If we slow down long enough to "treasure these things" and to hold closely in our hearts the people that God has *gifted* to us, God offers us a glimpse of the depth of His love. When that love - *the true gift of Christmas* - takes over our lives, we grow closer to Him, and are blessed with a desire to share his unconditional, intense, and merciful love with others.

**Prayer: Gracious and loving God, this Christmas, I praise You because You are my creator. I thank You because You love me, and because You have given me special people to teach me that. Remind me to treasure them this holiday season and every day. Forgive me when I let the hectic pace of schedules keep me from taking time to "ponder" them in my heart, and treat them with the love and the time they deserve from me. Thank You for putting them into my life. Thank You, most of all, for Your gift of Jesus, the most important person You have gifted to me.**

**--Amanda Hale, 5th Grade Sunday School Leader**

**Monday, December 9: *"As apostles of Christ, we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom of glory"* (1 Thessalonians 2:6-16).**

The best Christmas present I ever received was from my daddy. I was a small girl – somewhere around five, and he was living paycheck to paycheck as a new hire at the local sawmill. I still remember how huge the gift seemed in comparison to my skinny little frame. It was as tall as me, and it was definitely

fatter, and I wondered what tiny elf could have made a red mesh stocking so big. The elf surely had to stand on a ladder to have filled it up so tightly with all that plastic food.

I remember the overwhelming joy I felt when I first dumped out all of those groceries, surveyed the contents and imagined the feasts and tea parties I could plan. Plan I did! I played with that plastic food for years to come - until the last apple pie finally came apart at the seams, and, sadly, had to be thrown away.

As much as I adored that food, the most incredible thing about that gift I did not even understand until many years later – long after the groceries were gone. I did not know at the time that my father had planned to get me a much grander, much more expensive gift for Christmas that year, but the week before Christmas his wallet was stolen. He had nothing extra – everything he had was in his wallet. He counted up the pocket change he had saved in the green glass bowl on his chest of drawers, and that is what he used to buy the stocking. He had given me all he had.

My father received criticism for giving me such an inexpensive gift. He was even told that “no gift would have been better than that shabby stocking.” I am so glad he chose to ignore those words and to just give. He did not burden me with the weight of what had happened. He did not complain about how he had been wronged or how Christmas had been ruined. He chose not to hold a grudge or allow a chip to rest upon his shoulder. He simply forgave and moved on.

He gave me everything he had in a giant red stocking that cost \$8.99 at the local K-Mart. More than that, he gave me a tremendous display of Godly character. He taught me to give what I have and to give it in love, because the best gifts do not come in shiny packages.

**Prayer: Heavenly Father, You are the giver of all good gifts. I thank you, Father, for the good gifts of love and true friendship. I thank you, Father, for teaching us about pure, honest love. And, for giving us, Father, everything you had, in the life of a tiny baby wrapped up in a dirty rag. Thank You for teaching us, Father, that no gift is too small, too shabby, or too poor. Help us, Father, to love each other in that way. Help us to use our gifts to encourage and to comfort one another and to inspire each other to live lives worthy of You, Father. Amen.**

**--Dana Sizemore, KIT Class, wife of Mark Sizemore and mother of Molly and Asher Sizemore**

**Tuesday, December 10: *“I give you a new commandment, that you should love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you, too, should love one another. By this shall all men know that you are My disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).***

Over ten years ago, my father passed away from cancer on December 10. He had been able to spend a wonderful Thanksgiving with his two daughters, family from out-of-state (we claim them even though they are from Tennessee), and dear friends. It was a special time of love as we ate, laughed, and played games, and all of this in the comfort of his own home. As Christmas approached, I found myself alone. My sister had returned to her home in Colorado. My mother had gone to be with the Lord five years prior to my dad.

My dad had always enjoyed Christmas season to the utmost. As a child, I remember Dad working feverishly to hang as many multi-colored lights on the house as possible. He was the one who set up card tables and devoted much time to writing Christmas cards. He decorated not one, but two trees in his

home. Traditions had been established over the years and were almost non-negotiable. We always attended Christmas Eve services at First United Methodist, opened up our presents one by one, a very lengthy process, and were not allowed to open the gifts until we had eaten a bountiful breakfast of country ham and eggs. For several years, I would drive up from my home in Memphis, and Dad would even wait for my arrival to place ornaments on one of his trees.

Suddenly, with Dad gone, everything was different, and I felt lost. A good friend, without my asking, invited me to join her and her family on a trip to Gatlinburg to celebrate Christmas. I know that God was in the midst of this plan, and she had listened to Him. I was able to spend Christmas with “family,” and I truly felt like I belonged. We even attended a Christmas Eve service at a little Methodist church. They had reached out in love, and that was definitely what was needed to comfort me during this time of grief and transition.

Because He loves us so much, God gave us Jesus Christ, His beloved Son, and Jesus is the most precious gift we could ever receive. Jesus taught us to love one another, selflessly and consistently. My friend and her family demonstrated that love to me in an awesome way and at a critical time. I will always be thankful.

**Prayer: Father God, we cannot thank you enough for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. By Your Spirit, help us to love one another lavishly, not just at Christmas, but always. Please reveal to us any persons in our lives who need a special touch of God’s love right now and lead us to be a vessel for that love. Thank You for the times You have used someone to be a reflection of Your love in our lives. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.**

**–Susan Scott, The Calvary Prayer Team**

**Wednesday, December 11: “And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Hebrews 13:16).**

One of my favorite things to do around the holidays is to make Christmas goodies. The smells of sugar cookies, gingerbread, and fudge remind me that Christmas is right around the corner. Of course, I enjoy eating these treats, but I also like sharing them with our friends and neighbors. I like to think of this as a way to show love to others during this special season. Just as God showed His love to us by sending His son that first Christmas morning, we can do many things during Christmas to share His love with others. Helping with the Calvary Christmas Project, sending a card to someone who lives alone, visiting people in a nursing home, donating money to your favorite charity, or buying a homeless person a meal are all small ways that we can make a difference in another person’s life. Isn’t this what Christmas is all about? Jesus was God’s greatest gift to the world. Showing love and kindness to others during this Christmas season is a gift we can offer to everyone.

**Prayer: Dear God, help us to share Your love with others this Christmas season by doing something kind for another person. Thank You for all the ways You have blessed us and for the wonderful gift of your son, Jesus Christ.**

**--Grayson Fuller, 8th Grade**

**Thursday, December 12: *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life"* (John 3:16).**

### The Best Gift I Never Got

My bicycle, my primary means of "locomotion" in my twelfth year on this earth, was the slowest bike in the neighborhood. It had a rusting red frame and fenders that must have been made of solid iron. Not only was this two-wheel monstrosity slow, it also wobbled and shook violently. The frame had been bent the previous summer when my friends and I held a contest to see who could ride the farthest down a neighborhood street with our eyes closed. I had a close encounter with a maroon Buick Roadmaster and the bike never was the same. My social standing and my sense of goodness and fair play cried out for a new bicycle for Christmas.

Now it was my habit in those days to do investigative work around the house in the weeks before Christmas. On the Friday after Thanksgiving, with both of my parents out of the house, the hunt commenced. A thorough check of their usual gift hiding places yielded nothing. Finally I remembered the big walk-in closet off my parent's bedroom.

Peering into the darkness of the closet I couldn't see anything. I turned on the closet light, but it revealed no treasures. Backing out, I looked one more time and saw something shiny--way in the back. It was a metallic blue Schwinn Corvette bicycle with sleek chrome fenders you could see your face in. It had a blue and white racing seat, racing tires, and racing handle bars. In a word, it was the perfect gift, just what I wanted. How about that? My mom and dad had really come through.

In the days immediately following my discovery I would sneak up to my parents' closet at opportune moments to gaze at this magnificent machine. Then I got an idea. If I cleared back the clothes on both sides of my parents' closet I could make a path wide enough to get on the bike and ride from one end of the closet to the other, about fifteen feet. Two revolutions of the pedals would propel me the length of the closet. Then I would back up and make the trip over and over and over again. For three weeks, I rode among the coats, the shirts, the dresses and the shoes.

Christmas morning I played it cool, showing remarkable restraint as I sauntered down the steps into the presence of our tree in the living room. My reaction of stunned ecstasy had been well rehearsed. But when I saw the presents around the tree, I didn't have to act stunned. There was no bike! Sure there were some gifts from Santa and a couple of smaller boxes from my parents – but no bike.

As I sat down to open gifts with my sister, I began to rationalize about the situation. My dad had a flair for the dramatic. Maybe he was going to wait until I opened everything and then wheel out the bike in a blaze of Christmas glory. Yet when all the gifts were opened, no movement was made by anyone. I couldn't believe it. My parents had forgotten my main Christmas present. They must have blown a gasket and blanked out. But what could I do? How could I tell them they had forgotten a present I wasn't supposed to know anything about?

Then the phone rang. It was my next door neighbor and close friend. "Come on over right now," he said. "I got a new bike for Christmas, and it's just like the one you said you were getting."



prepared by our parents—we ate in the dining room, and we got to eat at the grown-up table. A Big Deal. No sooner than the breakfast dishes were cleaned, we had to choose one toy, pack up more food and presents, and leave to spend the rest of the day with the other side of the family for Christmas Day dinner and fun. Of course my brother and I had no idea how much work was involved in making Christmas happen. It all just happened, and...

It was all wonderful. But...

The schedule had hardly any breathing room. Nonetheless, every year my parents always managed to carve out time for just the four of us. Before church on Christmas Eve, they would call us over to the Christmas tree, turn out all the lights so that only the glow of the tree was shining in the room, and my Daddy would read the Christmas story from Luke. Everything was quiet except the sound of his voice and the melody of the story.

It was quite beautiful.

The true gift was the lesson learned: there is strength and beauty in quiet time with God. It would have been so very easy to skip right over this family tradition for all the others, but my parents closely guarded our little family oasis. Only in adulthood did I understand why; that short little interlude in the grand symphony of Christmas provided energy and real peace in remembering the “reason for the season.” Just a little time, a little toning down, greatly enhanced our joy. In the whirlwind of family and friends it was a little jewel, just for us.

**Prayer: Dear Father, we love all our traditions and celebrations but sometimes they can flat wear us out. Help us to carve out time for ourselves with You so that we can hear the low whisper. Help us remember to make a little time to be quiet and gather strength from the abundance of Your presence. Amen**

**--Robin Thomerson, Youth Sunday School Teacher**

**Saturday, December 14: *“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea...Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him’....After they had heard the king, they went on their way and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route” (Matthew 2:1-2; 9-12).***

#### A Ripstick Moment

I have always been drawn to the story of the Magi. The stark contrast between these men of means and a helpless baby strikes at the heart of the season. The Magi were men of wealth and power, but more importantly, they were men of faithful obedience. God gave them a mission (worship—including expensive gifts), the means (a star—no directions needed) and they obeyed. They brought extraordinary gifts to a family in desperate need. These gifts could provide safety and security—food, shelter, transportation, etc., but equally telling was their behavior. They came leaving their gifts expecting nothing in return and departing by a different route, thus protecting Jesus from harm. Furthermore, as

far as we know, Jesus and the Magi never crossed paths again. And we don't know what happened to the Magi...did they live to a ripe old age at home, did Herod hunt them down for not returning to him...who knows? The moral of this story is God gave the Magi an opportunity to serve His son, Jesus, at one of the most vulnerable times of Jesus' life, and they obeyed!

A few years ago I had completed shopping for the Christmas Project, but when it was announced that several children still remained, my husband decided he wanted to shop for one more—specifically a boy. He picked up a card, read it and looked at me puzzled, saying, “What is a ripstick?” I was as clueless as he was. His problem-solving, engineering mind went to work and by the next morning we knew two things. First, a ripstick was a type of skateboard, and, second, they were one of the hot Christmas items that year—they were out of stock everywhere! We headed to Walmart in search of an alternate gift. As we perused the aisles looking for inspiration, suddenly before us on a shelf all by itself—one lone ripstick! We picked it up, and my husband said, “What if it costs more than we are supposed to spend?” I looked at him and immediately replied, “It doesn't matter what it costs-- this is a God thing!” It was a Magi opportunity, or as I dubbed it, a “Ripstick Moment.” A “Ripstick Moment,” an unexpected opportunity God gives us to serve. The hitch, of course, is we need to be paying attention and respond. The Magi could have ignored the star and stayed home, but they didn't. The Magi set a great example by not lingering; we need to take that to heart. We all have a tendency to expect gratitude or to want to influence an outcome—but if we aren't careful, we will interfere with God's plan. During this season we need to be Magi-like—look for those stars, follow God's will and then move on!

**Prayer: Lord, during this season help us to be observant enough to see the star, faithful enough to accept the opportunity to serve You, obedient enough to complete the task set before us and willing to walk away when our part is finished, leaving the rest to You. In Your name I pray, Amen.**

**--Carol Davis, BYKOTA Sunday School Teacher**

**Sunday, December 15: *“For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice From that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this” (Isaiah 9:6-7).***

#### Gifts of Transformation

The two most notable gifts I ever received both came the Christmas of 2011. I am a high school teacher, and as all teachers know, the gifts we receive from our students can range from touching to puzzling to downright scary. On the last day before Christmas break, one of my students came proudly into my classroom with his gift for me: two dozen cookies and two pieces of coal. I thanked him for the cookies and inquired what I had done to deserve coal for Christmas. Without cracking a smile, he said, “Mrs. Onkst, don't you realize that in a thousand years those are going to be diamond earrings?” After laughing at his cleverness, I didn't know exactly what to do with my coal. I took it home and absent-mindedly put it on my mantle, amidst the traditional greenery, Christmas lights and nativity members. Sitting there in all its bizarre glory, that coal has become one of my favorite Christmas decorations. Although I don't think I'll make it to see that coal become the diamond earrings I've been promised, those dusty rocks are such a symbol of the transformation of Christmas and the promise we've been given—that our flawed ugliness will be perfect through the gift of Jesus Christ.

The second gift of 2011 was far less tangible and arrived about a week later—David and I found out we would be having a baby. We told our families that we were expecting on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and the entire holiday was spent joyfully imagining the baby that would be with us for the next Christmas. For the rest of my life, the excitement of Advent will be twofold as I anticipate Christmas and remember those first, indescribable feelings of joy knowing I would be a mother. The gift of a child has been transformative, as well. As we try to navigate parenthood with our wonderful, spirited Josie, I know how *our* worlds have been changed. It is even more awe-inspiring to think of that first gift of Christmas—a Child that changed the *entire* world.

**Prayer: Dear Lord, please give us an Advent season that transforms. Take the best parts of ourselves and make them better to serve you. Lead us to transform the lives of others through the gifts of love, compassion, and understanding. Take a broken world, and bring it peace and justice. Amen.**

–Ashley Williams Onkst

**Monday, December 16: “...You are the Helper of the fatherless” (Psalm 10:14).**

#### A Fatherless Christmas

It was Christmas 1940 when I first remember the celebration that accompanies this special time of the year! It was not because I knew the reason for the celebration, for I was only eight years old at the time. But perhaps it was because earlier that year, just after my eighth birthday in January, my father died on February 15, 1940.

My father was a Signal Maintainer on the L & N Railroad, and we lived in Loyall, Kentucky, at the time of his death. He injured his back while lifting a two-man rail car off the tracks to avoid being hit by an oncoming train. To correct the injury, Dad had undergone surgery in Louisville and had developed pneumonia during his recovery. But before the newly-developed life-saving drug, penicillin, could be flown from Chicago, my father died at age 41.

In my father’s memory, a close friend in Loyall, Al Greynolds, wrote the following poem:

In Memory of Jerome A. Perkins  
September 30, 1898 – February 15, 1940

God has called away our loved one; one whom we loved so dear.  
But his memory will linger with us all from year to year.  
We’ll remember all his kindness; for it was his great delight  
to be doing things for others, and to make their pathway bright.  
Deeds of Kindness was his motto; there was not a task too great.  
In serving God, his family, or a neighbor, he the load would gladly take.  
Though our hearts have all been saddened, because he has been taken away,  
we know that we again shall meet him, in that Home above some day.  
So as we travel down life’s pathway, and we near that Heavenly Home,  
It will make the way seem brighter, to know that we again shall see Jerome.

In the Spring of 1940, we had moved back to my birthplace, and the house that my father had built in 1929 in Williamsburg, Kentucky, to be close to my paternal grandparents and other family members. The

country was still lingering in the Great Depression of the 1930's, and gift-giving was sparse. On that Christmas Day in 1940, I remember the bag of candy and fruit that was under the huge Christmas tree at church for each us children. And at our grandparents' house, there was a Christmas dinner, with each of the adults opening his or her gift received from the family member who had drawn their name at our Thanksgiving gathering. And at our house, my two older brothers and I received the basic gifts (socks and underwear) that our mother could afford. And also, under our small, sparsely decorated Christmas tree, there was a handkerchief for each of us boys from the Greynolds family, our family friends from Loyall--a reminder that God remembers the fatherless through simple acts of kindness and love expressed by those who hear His voice and respond to His Holy Spirit by reaching out to those who need it most through a simple poem of remembrance, and a small Christmas gift of a handkerchief.

**Prayer: Our Heavenly Father, we thank You for those who hear the urgings of Your voice and reach out to those in need at Christmastime, and throughout the year. Especially, may we be aware of the fatherless among us; and may each of us be blessed with the honor of being Your instruments here on earth to share Your love through service to others in their time of need. Amen.**

**--J. Hunt Perkins, Ecton Sunday School Class**

**Tuesday, December 17: *"But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord'" (Luke 2:10-11).***

The Good News of Jesus' birth is meant for all people, not just people who go to church with me and look like me. Every year at the Christmas Project I get to show God's love to the families who come to church to pick out clothes, toys and food. I love helping organize the items and look forward to seeing who gets to go home with a special item that I placed carefully in a special spot. Sharing Jesus' love with these families reminds me of the true gift of Christmas given to the world so everyone may know God's love for all people.

**Prayer: Lord, thank you for sending Jesus into the world. May we be forever grateful. Help us to keep in mind the true meaning of Christmas is not toys and games, but Jesus' birth which is joyful news to be shared with all. Amen.**

**--Emma Jinright, 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Sunday School Class**

**Wednesday, December 18: *"Then the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end'" (Luke 1:30-33).***

***"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit" (Psalm 51:10-12).***

Christmas has always been special to me. I have loved everything about it --decorating the trees, baking special treats, listening to Christmas music, gathering to celebrate with family and friends, and shopping for just the right gifts.

However, a few years ago, for some reason, things changed. I got bogged down in all the commercials, the shopping, the decorating, and the constant hullabaloo. Even the music didn't cheer me. I felt rushed and harried and generally Scrooge-like. I went through each day, doing what I had to, always wondering "why bother?" On Christmas Eve, as we made our trip into downtown for the special service at church, I announced that I was only attending because it was expected of me, but wasn't going to sing or even hold a candle! You could almost hear the "bah humbug" in my voice. When we arrived, we found a seat in the middle section and sat quietly behind a sweet young friend with her husband and small children. She was holding the youngest – a baby boy only a few months old. As the service began, she turned to me to ask if I would like to hold the baby. Well, yes, of course! What woman of grandmother age doesn't want to hold a baby? I took him and cuddled him close, watching this beautiful bundle intently as he slept.

Then it hit me; I had been so focused on the tasks before me, I had forgotten the real reason for the season – the baby. Oh my, how could I have become so engaged in the daily tasks of the holiday that I had ignored the most important aspect? The main focus of Christmas should be about Jesus--who He is and what He did – for us! My special gift that year was a young mother following the leading of the Holy Spirit who understood I needed a heavenly reminder about the significance of this special season of love and redemption.

**Prayer: Thank you, Father, for sending the Holy Spirit as an encourager. Thank you, also, for a church family that loves and cares for one another on good days and on "bah humbug" days.**

**--Joye Smith, Women's Ministry Director**

**Thursday, December 19: *"If you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers you will surely be rewarded"* (Matthew 10:42).**

I know it is Christmas when we do the Christmas Project. On Friday night before delivery day, a big truck comes with food, and we take the boxes and fill them up for each family. Then the next morning, families come to get their box of new presents for the kids and the box of food. Also, when they come to get the boxes, they can go into Fellowship Hall and pick out clothes and more toys and home goods. That's when I know it is Christmas when I see the faces of those families because it is all about giving and not receiving.

**Prayer: Dear God, please help the less fortunate who do not have all the things that we take for granted and that they might have the things they need this winter to stay warm and comfortable. Not everyone is as lucky as us. Thank you for warm houses and everything that goes with it. Amen.**

**--Christopher McKinley, 7<sup>th</sup> Grade**

**Friday, December 20: *"Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it"* (John 1:3-5).**

Christmas, the summer break of winter. There are a myriad of reasons we look forward to Christmas: no school, presents, good food, family, etc. December 25 also marks the date of Jesus' birth. While I

acknowledge this fact, I've never really taken the time to think about what the true meaning of Christmas is. In fact, it never really hit me until recently.

Every year Calvary offers a Christmas Eve service, and if we're in town, my family will try to go. Near the end is the candlelight service. One year, as I was holding my unlit candle, I was overcome with this sensation of peaceful quiet. I observed as slowly, one by one, each candle in the room was illuminated. Everyone stood in silence just waiting for the first chord of "Silent Night" to ring out in the room. I sat looking at the tiny candle in my hand with an energetic fire dancing back and forth. That tiny flame also reminded me how God calls us to be lights of the world. I may be one tiny candle, but I help make up a bigger group. God wants us to spread the good news, and He has saved us a seat in heaven. But this is only possible because Jesus died for our sins. On December 25 we aren't celebrating that Santa brought us gifts, we are celebrating the fact that on this day our Savior was born.

**Prayer: Dear Lord, open our eyes and help us to see the true meaning of Christmas. Lead us to be the lights of the world You are calling us to be. Amen.**

**--Haley Todd, daughter of David and Samantha Todd, sister to Christopher, ninth grader,  
Lafayette High School, SCAPA Creative Writing Major and Pre-Engineering program**

**Saturday, December 21: "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for Me" (Matthew 25:40).**

As the mother of three sons, it recently occurred to me the impact of the expression, "A son's a son 'til he takes a wife, but a daughter's a daughter all of her life." I *love* being the mom of a man clan, but the thought of my boys coming for Christmas every *other* year and possibly not having all of them together was overwhelming. Then, the light bulb was lit... the Christmas Project.

Our first year to serve the Christmas Project was 1993. We had just begun visiting Calvary. Our oldest was almost three, and I was pregnant with my brown-eyed son. (Thomas and Christopher insist that they have served on the project the longest since they have served their *entire lives*.) We've participated in many facets of the project over the years, but each year on distribution day, as we wrap up the day, we say, "Christmas has happened." So, when my boys have families of their own, my prayer is that all three generations will serve on distribution day, and then afterwards we will celebrate Christ's birth as a family. The calendar date doesn't matter. Christ should be celebrated all year anyway.

**Prayer: Lord, I lift up to you those families who will be served through the Christmas Project. Many are hurting in ways we will never know. I lift up those who will serve this year, whether they are first timers or "old" pros. Let all of us remember the true Gift of Christmas.**

**--Ann McKinley, a.k.a. Ms. Ann**

**Sunday, December 22: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17).**

One of my favorite memories of Christmas is what did NOT happen - a non-memory. I have no Christmas memories of grandparents and cousins, aunts and uncles, all gathered around a groaning table of too much food. There are no stories to share about the gifts and games, or the time someone broke grandma's favorite turkey platter, or about Aunt Sally bringing fruit cake AGAIN, or the time we all got

measles. No memories of going out to the woods with grandpa to cut the tree, or pickup basketball games in the driveway with the other kids... None of those things are familiar to me except from books, movies, and stories I have heard from friends. But please, please do not feel sorry for me. I have wonderful Christmas memories. Memories I would not trade for anything.

Because my father was a pastor, we did not travel for holidays. We were needed at our home church in Frankfort. Since all of my grandparents and most of my cousins, aunts, and uncles lived in Georgia, it was too far to go "over the river and through the woods" - or rather, "down I-75 and east on I-20" for Christmas. So it was just our little family for Christmas. We went to our church together on Christmas Eve for the Candlelight Service. We came home together after church, put on our pajamas, sat in the living room, listened to the Mormon Tabernacle Choir sing "Messiah," drank hot spiced tea while admiring the lights on the tree, and had close family time. I always got to wake up in my own bed on Christmas morning. It was just the five of us with presents, and breakfast, and naps. It was lovely.

There were other things that I did not experience at Christmas besides Grandma, cousins and travel. I never went to bed hungry or cold. I never faced the Season alone or homeless. I never felt unloved or unwanted. I never thought Christmas was about Santa Clause instead of Jesus.

I am truly blessed to have been born into a loving, Christian home. It is a privilege I do not take lightly. God could have placed me elsewhere. Whether your family is big or small, close or scattered, we need to remember to be grateful, not just for the good memories of Christmas past, but grateful for the memories that never were.

**Prayer: Dear Father, we come to You with hearts full of gratitude for our many blessings - for the things we see and for the things that remain unseen because You protected us. We thank You for sending us the Light of the World. Help us to be reflections of that light into the dark places that need Your love. Amen.**

**--Mona Carpenter, Bible student, preacher's kid**

### **Monday, December 23: Preparing Our Hearts for Christmas**

#### **THE LIGHT FORETOLD**

*"For behold darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the people. But the Lord will arise upon you, and His glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to Your light, and kings to the brightness of Your rising"* (Isaiah 60:2-3).

#### **THE LIGHT COMES**

*"The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned"* (Matthew 4:16).

#### **THE LIGHT IS THE SOURCE OF LIFE**

*"Jesus spoke to them saying, 'I am the light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life'"* (John 8:12).

## THE REFLECTED LIGHT REMAINS

*"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" ( 1 Peter 2:9).*

The Candle Light Communion Service held at our church in Frankfort on Christmas Eve attracted the largest attendance of any worship hour of the year other than Easter Sunday. We omitted the choir to allow all members of the church to attend as families--including infants. We observed the ordinance of the Lord's Supper to remind us that the death of Jesus on the cross made possible our celebration of His birth. Following this ordinance, the Sanctuary was darkened, and the Christ Candle was lighted. From that light the individual candles of the congregation were ignited, symbolizing that Jesus reminded us that we were to be "the Light of the World." It was a highly spiritual hour which emphasized that we were celebrating the greatest gift God could give to men-- the sacrifice of His own Son making possible the forgiveness of sin and the wonderful gift of Eternal Life.

**Prayer: Thank you, Father, for Your love which made possible such a sacrificial and ever-lasting gift to me.**

**--Malcolm Lunceford, retired pastor Immanuel Baptist Church of Frankfort  
and Mona Carpenter's father**

**Tuesday, December 24:** *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).*

I am thirty-three years old, and I have attended a Christmas Eve Candlelight Service on every Christmas Eve that I can remember. A tradition in my family, I always look forward to the full congregation, the anticipation in the sanctuary, the decorations, the singing of familiar carols, and the voices of children. Most of all, however, I look forward to the lighting of the Christ Candle. There is something so magical about when it is lit, the way one tiny flame is shared among so many, and how quickly a dark room is transformed. It is such a beautiful symbol of God's light in each of us, and in our church family. What an amazing parallel to the smallness of Christ's birth in a manger and how over time it grew into hope, meaning, and spread throughout the world.

During each season of my life, God has used this service to speak to me in different ways. His quiet whisper has always provided me with comfort and peace. When I was a child, the music and the candles in the service taught me the excitement present at Jesus' birth. As a teenager, I was humbled that God loved me so much that he sent Jesus to be born for me! As a college student I better understood God's faithfulness when I witnessed the Kingkades walk down the aisle to light the Christ Candle holding Matthew. Last year, God enabled me to get a better glimpse into the depth of His love for us, because I held Annie, my newborn daughter, in my arms throughout the service. What love Christ has for us! What a reason to celebrate together!

**Prayer: Dear God, thank You for loving us enough to send Your Son into the world. Use the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service to prepare our hearts and homes as we celebrate the birth of Jesus.**

**--Nan Baker Richerson, Journey Sunday School Class**

Wednesday, December 25: *"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!'"*  
(Luke 2:13-14).

Let our hearts and lips praise God on this Christmas Day! Let us echo the words of the angels—  
"Glory to God in the highest!" Let us spread the joy of Jesus wherever we go—today and *every* day!  
We leave you with this Christmas Prayer by Robert Louis Stevenson.

--The Calvary Prayer Team

Loving Father,  
Help us remember the birth of Jesus,  
That we may share in the song of the angels,  
The gladness of the shepherds,  
And worship of the wise men.

Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world.  
Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with every greeting.  
Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings,  
And teach us to be merry with clear hearts.

May the Christmas morning make us happy to be thy children,  
And Christmas evening bring us to our beds  
With grateful thoughts, forgiving and forgiven,  
For Jesus' sake.  
Amen.