

CHANGE YOUR LIFE. CHANGE YOUR WORLD.

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Vol 12 • Issue 12

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, JESUS!

Celebrating the Savior

God's Christmas Gift

The perfect fit for every heart

A Time for Reflection

9 ways to maximize the season



PERSONALLY SPEAKING

If you're finding it harder than usual to get into the Christmas spirit this year, you aren't alone. It's been an especially tough year for this weary world of ours.

The first two months alone saw popular revolts break out in 13 North African and Middle Eastern nations, following Tunisia's lead a few weeks earlier. Some were bloodless, others bloody, but all proved that there are no overnight fixes for longstanding social and economic disparities. We all hope for the best for the 300 million people in those countries, but we must also realize that change will be a long, slow, and probably painful process.

Nature struck next. An earthquake powerful enough to shift the earth on its axis rocked Japan. Tsunami waves crushed property and spirit alike. Over 27,000 people were killed or recorded missing, and damage to nuclear reactors raised the specter of a Chernobyl-level disaster.

Those weren't the only unsettling events of 2011, of course, or necessarily the worst for us personally. It's usually events that don't make headlines that affect us the most—the loss of a loved one, severe illness or injury, financial troubles...

As 2011 draws to a close, we ask the age-old question: If God is all-powerful and truly loves us, as the Bible says, why doesn't He do something to relieve our pain and suffering?

He did. He sent Jesus.

God feels our pain. He understands our heartaches and sympathizes with our losses. He longs to draw us close, to soothe, to heal, to comfort, to reassure. He wanted so badly to help us that He sent His Son in human form, to live among us; to experience our hardships, to be His hands, to reveal His heart, and to put us in direct, personal contact with His love and power. God didn't send Jesus to remove all of our problems, but to equip us to get through them and become better for them.

And that is why we have reason to hope this Christmas.

Keith Phillips
For *Activated*

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A Time for Reflection

BY ABI F. MAY

MANY PEOPLE LOOK FORWARD TO CHRISTMAS WITH MIXED FEELINGS. There is happy anticipation of celebrations, good food, a break from work, and time relaxing with family and friends, but also the anxiety that comes from especially busy days of decorating, shopping, cooking, baking, and entertaining. Some also face the likelihood of friction when their family gets together, while others face loneliness.

No matter what our circumstances or expectations, we can all have a meaningful and truly blessed Christmas if we will take a few minutes each day for quiet reflection on symbols of the season like these.

★ NATIVITY SCENES

From live reenactments to miniature models in an endless array of styles and materials, the figures of the Nativity are a visual reminder of the central characters of the Christmas story. Joseph stands tall and steadfast. Mary's head is bowed in humility as she reflects on the Christ Child she

has delivered. Shepherds kneel in adoration. Three kings in fine robes approach with gifts in hand. The donkey that Mary rode to Bethlehem stands alongside sheep and perhaps a cow. All attention is directed toward the tiny baby lying in a manger. He is at the center of Christmas, yet the scene would not be complete without each of those other figures.

Each of us also has a role to fulfill in the scene of life. With Christ at the center, the picture is complete.

Christ beside me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me—King of my heart;
Christ within me, Christ below me,
Christ above me—never to part.

Christ on my right hand,
Christ on my left hand,
Christ all around me—shield in the strife;
Christ in my sleeping, Christ in my sitting,
Christ in my rising—light of my life.
—“*St. Patrick's Breastplate*,” adapted by
James Quinn

★ THE WREATH

One of the most universal Christmas decorations is the wreath, a circle of evergreen that is often adorned with ribbons, baubles, candles, or other trimmings. The circular shape reminds us that God's love, which He sent to us in Jesus, knows no end. The evergreen reminds us that Christ lives forever.

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.—*Isaiah 9:6–7*



★ CHRISTMAS TREATS

Gingerbread was possibly the first treat to be associated with Christmas. It was first baked in Germany during the Middle Ages, and over the years other sweets have become traditional

Christmas favorites in various countries around the world: marzipan and colorful Christmas cookies throughout Europe and North America; fruitcake and trifle in English-speaking countries; *panettone* (sweet bread) in Italy, Latin America, and with a slight variation in Romania, where it is known as *cozonac*; *pan de Pascua* (sponge cake) in Chile; *vánoční cukroví* (iced Christmas cookies) in the Czech Republic; *stollen* (fruitcake with marzipan) in Germany; *cougnot* (sweet bread) in Belgium; almond cakes in Spain; and *ponche crema*, a sweet hot Christmas drink in Venezuela—to name just a few. All can serve as reminders of the sweetness of God's presence through Christ in our lives.

Sweet Jesus, is there anything sweeter than You? The memory of You is more delightful than anything else. Your name is joy; it is the true gate of our salvation.—*Saint Anthony of Padua (1195–1231)*



★ CANDLES

Twinkling lights, red ribbons, and shiny tinsel adorn homes and public places, announcing the arrival of the festive season. Candles, representing the light that Jesus brought to our world, are rarely missing among the decorations. They symbolize God's light entering the world at Jesus' birth.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined.—*Isaiah 9:2*

★ CAROLS

Listening to Christmas carols or singing along while decorating the tree or baking Christmas cookies can relieve stress and lift your spirits. Singing carols together also draws family and friends closer and adds substance to the celebrations as you join the choir of angels who announced Jesus' birth.

Silent night, holy night,
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon virgin mother and Child.
Holy Infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.
Silent night, holy night,
Shepherds quake at the sight;
Glories stream from heaven afar,
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia!
Christ the Savior is born,
Christ the Savior is born!
—*Josef Mohr*

★ BELLS

“Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,’ which is translated, ‘God with us.’”¹ The jubilant sound of Christmas bells, proclaiming the arrival of God’s Son, is among the most joyful sounds we associate with Christmas.

Ring Christmas bells, merrily ring,
Tell all the world, Jesus is King,
Loudly proclaim with one accord
The happy tale, welcome the Lord.
—*Mykola Leontovich (translation: Ray Conniff)*

★ CHRISTMAS EVE

Many of us are busy right up until the evening of Christmas Eve, but we shouldn’t miss reflecting on the drama of that night 2,000 years ago. A young woman must give birth in a stable. Her newborn’s first bed is the animals’

1. Matthew 1:23

feeding trough. But in the sky a new star has appeared, and on a nearby hillside angels proclaim to lowly shepherds that the Savior is born.

O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend
to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in, be
born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the
great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our
Lord Emmanuel!
—*Phillips Brooks*

★ GIFTS

Christmas shopping starts earlier every year. Although we may not enjoy the shopping process, there’s a special pleasure in tracking down something that will be a happy surprise for our children, other family members, and friends. While wrapping presents or arranging them under the tree, take a moment to remember the One who came to give His life for us.

Dear Jesus, it is Your birth I am celebrating this Christmas. The shepherds brought their wonder and worship; the wise men brought their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to honor You. I bring love and gratitude.



★ WHEN CHRISTMAS FEASTS ARE OVER

Sometimes the days following Christmas can seem anticlimactic. Presents have been given, and visitors have come and gone. We eat leftovers from Christmas dinner, and tidy up the house. In a few days a new year will begin—another round of ups and downs, happiness and pain. But the joy and magic of Christmas do not have to fade. We can keep Christmas every day by reaching out to God and being touched by His love.

Celebrate the feast of Christmas every day in the temple of your spirit, remaining like a baby in the bosom of the heavenly Father, where you will be reborn each moment in the Divine Word, Jesus Christ.—*St. Paul of the Cross (1694–1775)*

ABI F. MAY IS AN EDUCATOR AND AUTHOR BASED IN GREAT BRITAIN, AND AN *ACTIVATED* STAFF WRITER. ■

God's christmas gift

BY PETER AMSTERDAM



CHRISTMAS CELEBRATES THE MOST IMPORTANT BIRTH IN HUMAN HISTORY, when the Creator of the universe entered our world in bodily form as both God and man in Jesus. An angel appeared to announce Jesus' birth to a few shepherds who were watching their sheep at night. "I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people," the angel proclaimed, "for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."¹

As I was thinking about that, I was reminded of another event that took place a few days later. When Jesus' parents presented Him in the temple, in accordance with the Mosaic Law, they met an old man who had received a personal promise from God. The man's name was Simeon, and God had told him that he would not die before seeing the Messiah. When Simeon saw the

baby Jesus, he took Him in his arms, praised God, and said, "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel."²

Both proclamations make it clear that Jesus came to bring salvation to "all people"—anyone who would believe in Him, regardless of race, religion, background, or anything else. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."³

"Whoever believes." Salvation is God's Christmas gift to you and me.

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

If you haven't received God's ultimate Christmas gift, you can right now by welcoming Jesus as your Savior. Simply pray a prayer like the following:

Jesus, I want to experience God's love and care, which are promised through You, "the way, the truth, and the life."⁴ I open my heart and invite You in. Amen.

In classic Christian thinking, iconography and paintings ... the more spiritually alert folk—his mother, the wise men, Simeon and the shepherds—all seem to know what is happening. Salvation is coming through this one child: it will cost God everything, and you nothing. You cannot help God but he has come to help you. —Martyn Percy

1. Luke 2:10–11

2. See Luke 2:26–32.

3. John 3:16–17

4. John 14:6



Happy Birthday, *Jesus!*

BY HELENE MINEO

BECAUSE I GREW UP IN THE SOVIET UNION, I didn't celebrate my first Christmas until 1991, when I was 16. Until then, I had never seen a manger scene, never heard a Christmas carol, and never been told the story of Jesus' birth. But that year the truth and spirit of Christmas stormed my heart and mind and left me feeling tipsy with happiness from December 25th (Christmas in the West) to January 7th (Christmas according to the Julian calendar and the Russian Orthodox Church). I spent those two weeks with members of the Family International who had recently introduced me to Christ. We wished a happy Christmas to everyone we met, and passed out colorful posters with the Christmas story to thousands of people, many of whom, like me just a short while

before, were hearing it for the first time.

I had turned 16 shortly before I found Jesus, and to celebrate my birthday my family and friends had organized the biggest party I had ever had. Now, however, I hardly remember the party or presents, but I can still describe every detail of how I met Jesus. He filled my empty life with His love and happiness, and that was by far the best present I have ever received—beyond my wildest dreams!

I remember standing outside with some friends at midnight on the Orthodox Christmas Eve, our faces turned up toward the clear, starry sky, yelling, "Happy birthday, Jesus!" at the top of our lungs. I still get goose bumps remembering how happy I was at that moment.

To this day, every time Christmas comes around, you will find me singing "Happy Birthday, Jesus" on Christmas Day.

That first Christmas after I came to know Jesus, I wanted to give Him another present I was sure He would be pleased with—other people introduced to Him, so He could fill their hearts with as much joy as He had given me. That desire hasn't diminished over the years, either. I may not pass out posters on the street this Christmas, but I will find other ways to share Jesus with as many as I can.

God's infinite, all-encompassing love—the heart and soul of Christmas—never ceases to transform those it touches. Let's each do our part to give Jesus a very happy birthday this year by giving Him to others.

HELENE MINEO IS A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN FRANCE. ■



The Heart of the Matter

BY CHRIS HUNT

AT A SOCIAL EVENT, I was pleasantly surprised to meet up with two colleagues with whom I had worked decades earlier. We chatted about the intervening years until our conversation turned to the joint project we had worked on. While we agreed on the sequence of events and the final outcome, each of us remembered different details. To get a clear understanding of what actually happened, someone would have needed to merge our recollections.

I thought of this recently when rereading the accounts of Jesus' birth in the gospels. None is complete in itself, but together they tell an amazing story.

Matthew begins with the dilemma Joseph faced when learning from an angel that his wife-to-be was expecting a child of whom he was not the

father.¹ Matthew also tells us that certain wise men, or magi, followed a star from their homes in the East to bestow gifts on the newborn King;² that the wise men and Joseph were warned in dreams about the evil intentions of jealous King Herod; and that Joseph, Mary, and the infant Jesus escaped by fleeing to Egypt.³

Mark adds nothing to the story. His gospel begins when Jesus is a grown man about to start His public ministry.

Luke provides many details that Matthew doesn't, including how the archangel Gabriel visited Mary with the news that she would give birth to the Messiah,⁴ her initial reaction,⁵ and a later one—a passage now known as Mary's Song of Praise, or the Magnificat—in which she extols God and His plan for the Son she will bear.⁶

Luke also explains how it happened that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, even though Joseph and Mary were from Nazareth; how it came to pass that the King of Kings, the Savior of the world, was born in a stable;⁷ how angels announced His arrival to nearby shepherds;⁸ and how the shepherds, after visiting Him, spread the news far and wide.⁹

John gives no details, but in one of the most powerful verses in the Bible goes straight to the heart of the matter: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."¹⁰

CHRIS HUNT LIVES IN GREAT BRITAIN AND HAS BEEN READING ACTIVATED SINCE IT WAS FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1999. ■

1. Matthew 1:18–25

5. Luke 1:38

9. Luke 2:15–18

2. Matthew 2:1–11

6. Luke 1:46–55

10. John 1:14

3. Matthew 2:12–15

7. Luke 2:1–7

4. Luke 1:26–37

8. Luke 2:8–14



ANGELS in the CHRISTMAS STORY

BY ABI F. MAY

GOD SENDS A PROPHET TO PREPARE THE WAY.

An angel appears to the priest Zacharias and tells him that his wife, Elizabeth, will have a baby boy, even though she is long past childbearing age, and that they are to name the baby John. The angel also explains that the baby has been sent by God to prepare the way for the Messiah. The baby grows up to become John the Baptist. (Luke 1:5–25)

THE ANGEL GABRIEL VISITS MARY.

A young woman, pledged to be married to a carpenter named Joseph, is visited by the angel Gabriel who foretells that she will bear a son—Jesus. She wonders how this could happen, considering she is a virgin, but Gabriel tells her that her child will be the Son of God. (Luke 1:26–28)

MARY IS SAVED FROM SCANDAL.

An angel appears to Joseph in a dream, encouraging him to marry Mary as planned, foretelling that her child would be Jesus, the Savior. (Matthew 1:20–24)

A HEAVENLY HOST ANNOUNCES JESUS' BIRTH TO SHEPHERDS.

Shepherds watching their flocks in the fields near Bethlehem are visited by angels on the night of Jesus' birth. First an angel tells them that the Savior has been born; then the sky is filled with more angels proclaiming God's glory. (Luke 2:8–20)

THE INFANT JESUS ESCAPES AN ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT.

An angel appears to Joseph in a dream, warning him to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt because King Herod plans to have the child killed. (Matthew 2:13–18)

BACK TO NAZARETH

Once again an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, advising him to return with Mary and the child Jesus to their homeland of Israel, as King Herod is now dead. (Matthew 2:19–23) ■

Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With th' angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"
Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!"
—Charles Wesley



The angels who sang praises on the night Jesus was born still sing today. Their voices are drowned out some by the noise and busyness of life, but if you take the time to listen carefully, you'll hear them. Join them in singing praises to our heavenly Father.—Alex Peterson



THE BEST PART OF CHRISTMAS

By JOSIE CLARK

AS I RUSHED AROUND THE STREETS OF MORELIA, MEXICO, the stoplights were crowded with beggars. It was Christmas Eve, and I had gone out with my 10-year-old daughter for some last-minute shopping.

“Look at her!” Cathy drew my attention to an old woman who had stopped begging momentarily and was rubbing her cold, bare feet.

“She’s someone’s grandmother,” I thought aloud, “but instead of being home with her family, she is out here in her bare feet, trying to scrape together a little money for Christmas dinner.” Then an idea struck me. “Cathy, let’s go home and get together some food for her.”

It was already getting dark, so she probably wouldn’t be working that stoplight much longer. We raced home, found a couple of sturdy

bags, and began going through our well-stocked pantry and refrigerator. Rice, beans, dried jalapeños, a jar of salsa, corn tortillas, a cooked chicken. It was easy to fill the bags from our abundance. A loaf of bread, jam, bacon. I tied the bags with large bows, and we headed off to find the old woman.

At first we thought we had taken too long and missed her. Then we saw her trudging slowly down the street, her shawl wrapped tightly around her, probably on her way home.

“Hello!” Cathy greeted her and continued in Spanish. “We saw you at the stoplight and brought you some food for Christmas dinner. We hope you and your family will feel God’s love this Christmas.”

The old woman looked at us with wonderment, and tears welled up in her eyes. Then she took Cathy’s hands in hers and kissed them.



“Thank you. Thank you. God bless you. You are beautiful. You are a Christmas angel.”

She took the bags and continued down the street.

Our own Christmas Eve was festive, as usual, and the next morning Cathy opened her gifts. When I asked her if she was having a good Christmas, she replied, “You know, Mommy, seeing that old woman so happy last night, and having her kiss my hands—that was the best Christmas present I got. I think giving is the best part of Christmas!”

“Don’t forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!”¹

JOSIE CLARK IS A FREELANCE WRITER IN THE U.S. AND A LONG-TIME *ACTIVATED* READER. ■

1. Hebrews 13:2 NLT



POINTS to
PONDER

The reason for the season

JESUS TEMPORARILY RENOUNCED THE RIGHTS OF HIS CITIZENSHIP IN HEAVEN AND BECAME A CITIZEN OF THIS WORLD. Though He was rich, for our sakes He became poor that we through His poverty might become rich. He not only adapted Himself to our bodily form, but also conformed to the human ways of life, customs, language, dress, and living, that He might understand and love us better and communicate with us on the lowly level of our own human understanding. He did it that He might reach us with His love, prove to us His compassion and concern, and help us understand His message in simple, childlike terms that we could grasp.
—*David Brandt Berg*

As you enjoy all the blessings of life this Christmas, stop and think about what meager circumstances Jesus was born into. He had so

much, yet became so little. He became nothing so that we could have everything. All that we have, we owe to Him.
—*Maria Fontaine*

Oh Christmas star, shine your light and guide us all to the true meaning of Christmas! Direct us to the Savior, the Prince of Peace, that we too may have peace in our hearts and good will toward all men.
—*Troi Fountain*

It is Christmas every time you let God love others through you. Yes, it is Christmas every time you smile at your brother and offer him your hand.
—*Mother Teresa*

There is a lot going on this Christmas. But it is not in the shops and the parties and the pulsating lights. To be part of it you need to find time to be quiet, to be

silent and still, to contemplate his presence in your hearts and in your minds. He is there. He wants to embrace you. Let him. And having discovered what is really going on at Christmas we cannot, in the end, keep quiet about it. We cannot live in a world that, in spite of the tragedies and sorrows, is still a world full of gifts, without saying 'thank you'. We cannot be part of what Christmas is really about without praising and glorifying God.
—*Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor*

Christmas is not a time or a season but a state of mind. To cherish peace and good will, to be plenteous in mercy, is to have the real spirit of Christmas. If we think on these things, there will be born in us a Savior and over us will shine a star sending its gleam of hope to the world.
—*Calvin Coolidge* ■

It is the personal thoughtfulness, the warm human awareness, the reaching out of the self to one's fellow man that makes giving worthy of the Christmas spirit.
—Isabel Currier



SPECIAL TREASURES

BY MARY ROYS

EACH DECEMBER I ASK MY CHILDREN, Toby and Kathy, now seven and nine, to go through their toys and clothes and set aside what they have outgrown or no longer use. Then I check what they've selected, weeding out worn-out items and exercising my veto power in a few cases, and box up the best of the rest to give to others who have less than we do. Besides instilling in the children a spirit of giving, I have found this to also be an effective way to trim down on clutter and put "gently used" items that they no longer need or want to good use.

Last Christmas both of my children seemed more materialistic about the holiday—more focused on the presents they were hoping

to receive, and less inclined toward giving. I wondered why, as well as whether or not they were aware of their change in attitude.

I decided to take an indirect approach. "What do you think is the true meaning of Christmas?"

Of course they knew that Christmas is a celebration of Jesus' birthday, but they stopped at that.

"On the first Christmas, did God give us only His rejects?" I asked.

"No," Toby replied thoughtfully. "He gave us the very best He had—His most special treasure."

"And that is the true spirit of Christmas," I explained. "To give of our best to others, like God gave us His best to us."

The kids thought about this for a bit and then came up with a plan

to give away some of their favorite toys, rather than just the ones they were tired of. Toby chose to give some of his favorite Matchbox cars, and Kathy decided to give one of her dolls. We packed these with the rest of the items we had set aside, and I took the children with me when I dropped off our Christmas donations.

Instilling values in my children is one of my greatest responsibilities as a parent, and teaching them to think of others before themselves is a big part of that. Giving sacrificially shouldn't be a once-a-year occurrence, of course, but Christmas is a perfect opportunity.

MARY ROYS IS A PARENTING LIFE COACH IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. ■



CHRISTMAS *on the Road*

BY ROSANE PEREIRA

SOME YEARS BACK, my husband and I were serving as missionaries in northern Brazil when an opening came up for us to take part in a new venture helping young people in Buenos Aires.

At the time we had three children, and I was pregnant with our fourth. My husband is from Argentina and was hoping we could arrive in time to spend Christmas with his elderly father, so a few days before Christmas we set out on the 7,000 km (4,350 mi) overland journey. The trip went fine until we arrived at the border.

Unable to drive our van into Argentina due to paperwork complications, we decided to leave it in Brazil until we could sort things out. Someone gave us a ride from the border to a truck stop in the city of Concordia, from where we planned to take a bus the rest of the way. The first bus to arrive was full, and when we inquired about the bus schedule in the truck stop restaurant, we were told that there wouldn't be another bus until the next day.

Our hearts sank. We felt like Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. December is chilly in northern Argentina, but it was warm inside the restaurant. The waiter, who was there alone, said we could stay as long as we needed. We said a fervent prayer.

That prayer was answered only a few minutes later. Several cars pulled up, and a party of about 30 people filled the huge table in the center of the restaurant. They turned out to be the owners of the truck stop and their families, and they invited us to join their festivities, which included a delicious Christmas dinner. It was midnight before we knew it, and we all exchanged hugs and warm Christmas wishes, as carols played over the sound system.

We felt so loved. We had arrived cold and hungry at a lonely, empty truck stop in the middle of nowhere, but God hadn't forgotten us. He sent His Christmas angels—first the waiter, then the owners and their families—to cheer us up and share a wonderful celebration.

At 12:20 AM, two bus drivers stopped at the restaurant for a cup of coffee. They were returning to Buenos Aires with an empty tourist bus, and offered to take us there free of charge. We slept soundly on the bus and arrived to a beautiful pink sunrise over La Plata River.

It didn't go as we had planned, but it was a Christmas we will never forget.

ROSANE PEREIRA IS AN ENGLISH TEACHER AND WRITER IN RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL, AND A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL. ■

occasion to love

BY MARIA FONTAINE

FOR MANY OF US, since we were young children, Christmas has been a special time of celebrating Jesus' birth, giving and receiving gifts, and spending time with family and friends. But Christmas is not only a time to enjoy these blessings ourselves; it is also the greatest opportunity of the year to tell the world about our precious Savior. Perhaps more than any other day of the year, it's a time when people think about the miracle that is at the heart of Christmas—God sending His own dear Son into our world to lead us back to Him. Even in non-Christian cultures, people are interested in learning the true meaning of Christmas.

We who have experienced God's love in Jesus have a chance to give the very best gift this Christmas, not only to those we know best and hold dear, but also to neighbors and strangers who share our world. There are those around us whose hearts are sad and weary, who cry out for a comforter, who yearn for a Savior. Some are overwhelmed by fear and uncertainty. Others are filled with despair and hopelessness because they have no goals and find no meaning in life. Others are laden with burdens of bitterness and guilt, or are imprisoned in emptiness, or are plagued by pain, or are otherwise beset by problems too big for them to solve on their own.

Jesus loves them and wants to take them in His arms. But He who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving must have *our* help! We are His eyes that can search them out, His ears that can hear their cry, His voice that

can respond and comfort them, His arms that can embrace them.

Will you do your best to help them? Will you give of yourself? Jesus did. He stepped outside the most wonderful place that has ever been created to come here to earth and endure discomfort, humiliation, mocking, and pain—all in order to save us.

You can make a difference this Christmas. Even the humblest attempt to share the little you may have can shine as a very bright light in others' lives, a ray of hope to penetrate the darkness that shrouds them.¹

Reach out to others. Tell them how Jesus came to earth to love them, how He died to save them, and how He rose again to deliver them into a wonderful new world that they can experience right now on earth and also enjoy forever in heaven. Proclaim that we celebrate

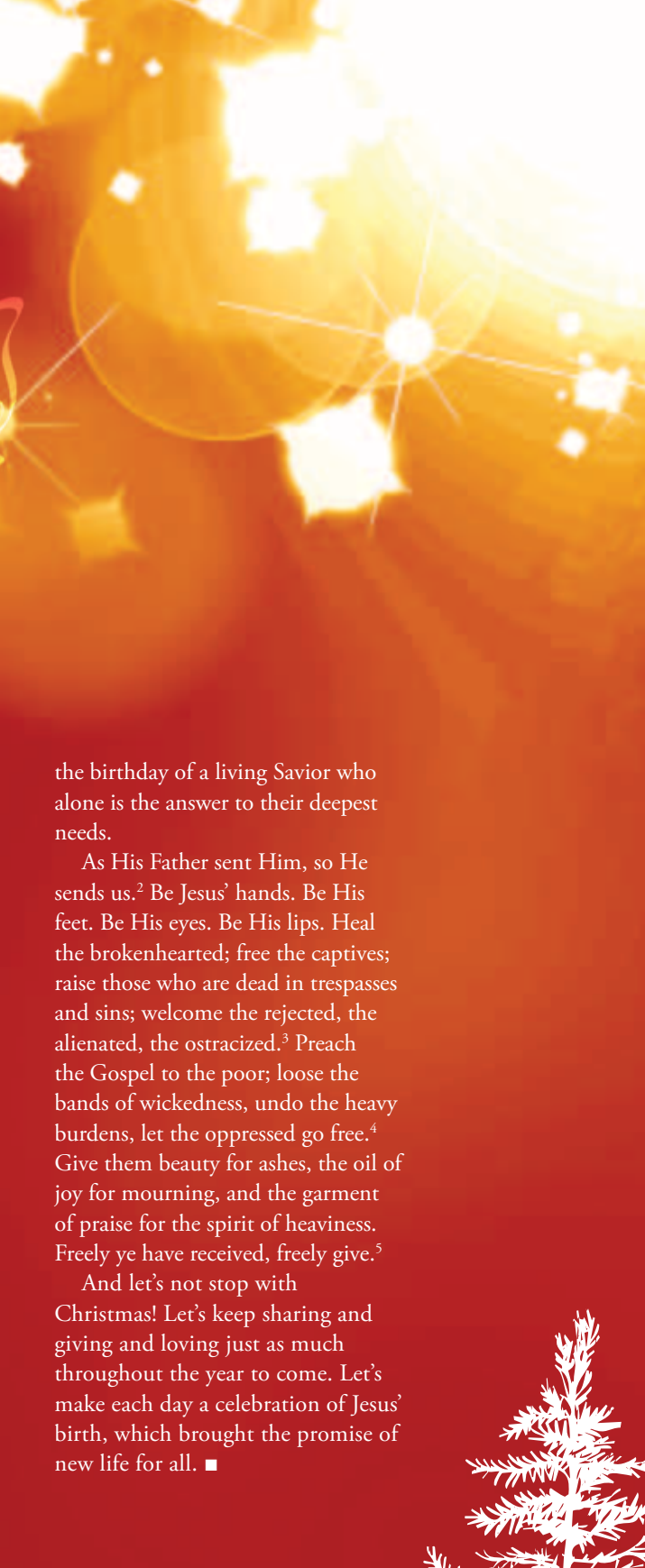
1. Matthew 5:14–16

2. John 20:21

3. Isaiah 61:1,3

4. Matthew 11:5; Isaiah 58:6

5. Matthew 10:8



CHRIST, the gift of CHRISTMAS day

Christ, the Gift of our Christmas Day,
Come afresh to our hearts, we pray!
Of Thy fullness may we receive,
Every promise may we believe;
Richer treasure than this world's best
Thou dost offer—Thou Royal Guest;
Unto those who thankful hearts uplift
And take Thee—the Father's wondrous gift.

Christ, the Light of our Christmas Day,
Shine into every heart, we pray!
Dearer art Thou than Bethlehem's star
To those who see Thee, though afar.
Onward still in Thy pathway bright
Lead us as children of the light,
Till the morning breaks, and shadows flee
And we find the perfect day with Thee.

Christ, the Peace of our Christmas Day,
Fill our hearts with Thy rest, we pray!
Though sin and sorrow surge around,
Yet is there peace where Thou art found—
Peace in the calm of sin forgiven,
A Father's smile, and an open Heaven;
Though clouds should gather, and fears increase,
Thou wilt keep Thine own in perfect peace.

Christ, the Joy of our Christmas Day,
Fill our hearts with Thy joy, we pray!
Dear ones missed from our loving throng,
Voices hush'd in our Christmas song.
Can we rejoice? Oh, yet the more
For them we bless Thee and adore.
Lord, grant us all at length to see
Fullness of joy with them—with Thee!

—*From The Fireside, published 1889, anonymous* ■

the birthday of a living Savior who alone is the answer to their deepest needs.

As His Father sent Him, so He sends us.² Be Jesus' hands. Be His feet. Be His eyes. Be His lips. Heal the brokenhearted; free the captives; raise those who are dead in trespasses and sins; welcome the rejected, the alienated, the ostracized.³ Preach the Gospel to the poor; loose the bands of wickedness, undo the heavy burdens, let the oppressed go free.⁴ Give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. Freely ye have received, freely give.⁵

And let's not stop with Christmas! Let's keep sharing and giving and loving just as much throughout the year to come. Let's make each day a celebration of Jesus' birth, which brought the promise of new life for all. ■



A close-up photograph of a man and a woman embracing. The man is on the left, and the woman is on the right, her head resting against his. They are both looking towards the right, where a bright sun is setting over a body of water, creating a warm, golden glow. The background is softly blurred.

FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

The gift of a thankful heart

What can you give Me this Christmas? A thankful heart is one gift I love to receive anytime. You make Me happy when you are appreciative of My blessings, great and small, because I love to see you happy. I love to see you smile, and that makes Me smile in return. I love to see you laugh, and I love to laugh with you. Each smile or laugh tells Me that you love and appreciate Me.

Think of specific things that make you glad, and thank Me for them. And when something happens that makes you feel happy or loved, thank Me for that. When you do either of those, it becomes a personal gift exchange between you and Me. I give you blessings, which makes you happy, and you give Me thanks, which makes Me happy.

It is even more beautiful when you find things to thank Me for in spite of difficult or unhappy circumstances. It's easy to be thankful when everything is going well, but when you can remain thankful in the midst of adversity, it shows even greater love and trust that I will work things out for you. That's special, and I give you special blessings in return.

So thank Me in happy times and in sad times, in laughter and in tears, in health and in sickness, in success and in failure, in times of abundance and in times of lack. Thank Me because you know that everything is in My hands and under My control.