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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION MAGICAL SEASON

A few years ago, a very talented friend of mine spent untold hours building a wonderfully intricate Christmas model out of salt dough. The centerpiece was the stable, but the scene stretched well beyond that, deep into Bethlehem and the surrounding countryside.

The buildings were painted, the streets were strewn with very fine gravel, there was moss in the gardens and on the hills, and the village was alive with mansions, hovels, shops, inns, and a multitude of people (and stray cats) milling about.

There is no way I could build something remotely as impressive! To be honest, it's a stretch for me to successfully fold a reasonably aerodynamic paper airplane. This friend's genius was matched by his altruism, as early in the next year, he gave away the entire set.

I was fascinated by how the scene gave a view not just of what was happening in the stable but also what might have been going on in the rest of town that night. It brought to life how, apart from the shepherds who saw and heard a choir of angels singing and praising God, most people were likely going about their business without a clue.

In some respects, that's how things still are. It's easy to find ourselves going through Christmas without experiencing it to the full. Even while enjoying the holiday spirit and festivities, it's possible to let the deeper meaning of the season pass us by.

Unbeknownst to most of Bethlehem's inhabitants on the night of the first Christmas, something marvelous was happening in their midst, and something wonderful can happen this season in each of our lives as well if we open our hearts to it. It may not be something flashy or huge, and if we're not careful we might miss it, but I believe that Christmas is a magical time, and I'm looking forward to what it has in store. I hope you are too.

A very happy Christmas to you!

Samuel Keating  
Executive Editor

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# SHINY RED APPLES

By ANNA PERLINI

**CHRISTMAS 1984 WAS OUR FAMILY'S THIRD CHRISTMAS AWAY FROM EUROPE**, and the remote village in eastern India where we had moved to help as volunteers had become a second home. After some initial difficulty in adjusting to such a different climate and culture, we soon came to appreciate the wonderful people we lived around and to embrace the new sights, sounds, tastes, and fragrances. I began to especially look forward to shopping at our local market, which seemed to have a year-round selection of fabulous juicy fruits—mangos, bananas, lichees, papayas, jackfruits, limes, and others.

It was on one of those trips to the market that we happened to see a stand that was selling—at an

exorbitant price—some beautiful apples. We were told that these had arrived from the far north of the country, which explained the price tag.

Memories from my childhood surged, and of course, Christmas is a time when memories seem to carry special potency. My eldest daughter was accompanying me that day and put my feelings into words: “It would be so nice to have an apple for Christmas.”

That’s how the idea for our family’s Christmas surprise came about. My husband and I spent an evening wrapping small cardboard boxes filled with cookies, nuts ... and one big, red apple!

On Christmas morning, the kids opened their boxes and jumped up and down at the sight of those apples! I think we parents had just as much

fun watching them and—since we also got a Christmas box—savoring our own precious apple.

We returned to Europe a number of years ago and have since had plenty of apples, but our entire family still cherishes the fond memory of that one “poor” Christmas when we experienced that “rich” feeling of thankfulness for a simple apple.

May we always find a simple, humble reason to be grateful—not just at Christmas, but in every celebration and event all year round.

ANNA PERLINI IS A COFOUNDER OF PER UN MONDO MIGLIORE ([HTTP://WWW.PERUNMONDOMIGLIORE.ORG/](http://www.perunmondomigliore.org/)), A HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATION ACTIVE IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA SINCE 1995. ■



# TIMELESS CAROLS

BY PETER AMSTERDAM, ADAPTED

**SOMETHING I'VE ALWAYS LOVED ABOUT CHRISTMAS** is listening to and singing the beautiful Christmas carols that have been written over the centuries. I like them so much that I often listen to them at other times throughout the year. Many are masterpieces and deeply moving. Recently, when looking online for the words to some of my favorites, I was impressed by the beauty of their poetry as well as

1. Originally in French, written by Placide Cappeau (1808–1877), set to music in 1847 by Adolphe Adam.

the power of their purpose in a way I hadn't been before.

What struck me was how in the midst of the rhyme and repetition that songs require, they deliver such powerful and nuanced messages. They speak deep truths about Jesus, His incarnation, mission, purpose, and power, along with His love and sacrifice for humanity. They are not only a strong witness to the message of the Savior and salvation, but are also a reminder to those of us who follow Him of the deep truths that we believe.

For hundreds of years, these carols have told the story of the One who

left heaven to bring salvation to all people. They remind us, as they have done for centuries, of the importance of this day we celebrate—the birth of Christ—Jesus, God's Son, who lived among us and laid down His life for us so that we may live forever. Embedded within the beautiful Christmas carols is the truth of what God has done to bring salvation to humanity.

“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” was written in 1739 by Charles Wesley. Originally set to solemn music, it was turned into the joyous and beautiful carol it



is today by William Cummings, who based the music on a piece by Felix Mendelssohn. The message of reconciliation with God, the peace brought by the Prince of Peace, and the rejoicing that Jesus is King make this a deeply meaningful Christmas carol.

♪  
*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 the angelic host proclaim,  
“Christ is born in Bethlehem.”  
Hark! The herald angels sing,  
“Glory to the newborn King!”*

♪  
“O Holy Night” is my favorite Christmas carol—and in fact, my all-time favorite song.<sup>1</sup> It is so powerful in both melody and word, and drives home the overall message of hope available to all who believe in Jesus and the effect He has on the lives of those who come to know Him. Here are a few excerpts:

♪  
*Long lay the world in sin and error  
pining,*

*‘Til He appear’d and the soul felt its  
worth. . . .*

*Truly He taught us to love one another;  
His law is love and His gospel is peace.  
Chains shall He break for the slave is  
our brother;  
And in His name all oppression shall  
cease.*

♪  
This additional verse, which is seldom sung, contains a touching word picture about comfort in difficult times.

♪  
*The King of kings lay thus in lowly  
manger,  
In all our trials born to be our Friend.  
He knows our need; our weakness is no  
stranger.*

*Behold your King! Before Him lowly  
bend!  
Behold your King! Before Him lowly  
bend!*

♪  
Jesus is always there for us. Through the journey of our lives, through each of our tests and trials, He is there. As the carol says, He’s born to be our Friend. He’s no stranger to our weaknesses and frailties. He knows all about us—the good, the bad, and the ugly—and loves us in

spite of how we are. He wants to be part of our lives, to share not just in our difficulties when we cry out to Him in need, but also in our times of joy and happiness, when we celebrate our achievements and those of our family and friends.

At Christmas, we are reminded about Jesus’ birth, and it’s a wonderful time of year to think about Him and all that He has done for us, which goes way beyond the Christmas season. He is an integral part of our lives and wants to be part of all we do—and He can be, as much as we’ll let Him.

As we sing Christmas carols this year, it’s a great time to reflect on what they mean, what Jesus did, and how deeply He loves each one of us and each one of our fellow human beings.—And to carry those thoughts and that love throughout the year ahead. Love Him, love His creations, and be grateful for all He’s done.

Have a wonderful Christmas in Christ.

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



BY MARIE STORY

# HE CAME TO US

**RECENTLY**, I was reading about the history of Christmas and where our various Christmas traditions come from, including ones that may have originated in pagan rituals or festivals, and it struck me that one of the most fundamental truths about Jesus is how He accepts each of us where we're at.

Jesus says that He'll never reject anyone who comes to Him.<sup>1</sup> His circle of friends isn't an exclusive club with strict requirements. In fact, He does more than just accept us; He often adapts Himself to meet our needs.

It's interesting to see how Jesus did just that during His ministry on earth. When He was with Nicodemus—an educated high-ranking member of the clergy with a strong background in and grasp of theology—Jesus spoke in ways that piqued his interest and challenged his intellect.<sup>2</sup> When Jesus was with children, He took them in His arms and gently talked with them.<sup>3</sup> When He was in the company of tax collectors and sinners, He went into their homes and ate and drank and laughed with them.<sup>4</sup> A couple of times after teaching large crowds, He knew that their most important

concern was their hunger, so He fed them.<sup>5</sup> Whether with a crowd or one on one, Jesus did whatever was necessary to reach each person and show them that He loved them.

This is how Jesus lived His entire life. He took on a human body and got down and messy with us. He dealt with daily life, hunger, and fatigue. He probably felt discouraged at times. But He went through our human experience so that He could feel what we feel and understand the things that are important to us.

He can take the things that you know and love—the things that are important to you, like your Christmas traditions—and give them even greater meaning.

This year, as you enjoy your Christmas celebrations, as you open gifts, sing carols, and eat good food, let those things remind you of Jesus' deep love for you. Regardless of where these traditions originated, you can let them point you back to the great gift Jesus gave each of us by coming to earth, living, and dying for us.

MARIE STORY IS A FREELANCE ILLUSTRATOR AND DESIGNER, AND A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN THE U.S. THIS ARTICLE WAS ADAPTED FROM A PODCAST ON [WWW.JUST1THING.COM](http://WWW.JUST1THING.COM), A CHRISTIAN CHARACTER-BUILDING WEBSITE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE. ■

1. See John 6:37.

4. See Matthew 9:10.

2. See John 3:1–21.

5. See Matthew 14:13–21; Mark

3. See Mark 10:13–16.

6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–15.

# REPAINTING THE ANGEL

THE STATUETTE OF AN ANGEL HOLDING THE HAND OF A LITTLE BOY had been placed on a neglected back shelf in an antique shop. It was covered with soot and dust, lost amidst the clutter of jars, dishes, and ornaments. A man browsing through the shop discovered the figurine and had an inspiration: He would rescue it from oblivion, restore it, and give it a place of honor among his Christmas decorations.

At home in his basement workshop, the man covered the angel and the child with glistening white paint. Then he painted the wings of the angel and the hair of the little boy with sparkling gold. Each brush stroke worked magic. The old, grime-covered statuette vanished, and a shining, new one appeared. The statuette was transformed before his eyes into a thing of radiant beauty.

As the man painted, he thought, *Isn't this what happens to people at Christmas? They come to the end of the year dust-covered from the struggle. And then Christmas inspires them to repaint their nature with love and joy and peace.*

The art of repainting the angel! This is our lifelong task: to never stay down in the dust and the dirt, but, heroically, to rise again after each fall.



Repainting the angel! We need never lose our ideals, dreams, and purposes. We can always make them gleam again with the glory of renewed hope.

This story reminds me how life takes on a special glow at Christmas. It starts with the wonder of a little baby who came carrying a message of love and hope. For those in families, it continues with the happiness and camaraderie of celebrating together with loved ones. For all people, alone or with others, it is completed when we contemplate what Jesus has done for us and thank Him for the blessings He has given.

Christmas is special because we enjoy not only what God has done for the whole world, but also for us personally. He has “repainted” us with new qualities that we couldn’t have given ourselves. He has put His love inside us. He has given us peace, as the angels promised. He has forgiven all our sins and failures, and now He accepts us as His children. He lets us feel the joy that knowing Him brings. We are transformed by Christmas.

THIS ARTICLE WAS ADAPTED FROM A STORY BY WILFRED PETERSON AND APPEARS IN *THE WONDER OF CHRISTMAS*, A GIFT BOOK AVAILABLE FROM [WWW.AURORAPRODUCTION.COM](http://WWW.AURORAPRODUCTION.COM). ■

# THE CHRISTMAS SHOES

BY STEVE HEARTS



**THE CHRISTMAS SEASON**—undoubtedly my favorite season of the year—holds many unforgettable memories. It was on a snowy December day when I was six years old that our family flew home to the U.S. from the Philippines, where we had been missionaries for the previous several years. This was the first time I met my grandparents and the first time I experienced snow. When I was 15, I spent the Christmas season playing percussion in a band that had come to Mexico from Washington D.C. to hold benefit concerts. I had a blast.


But the two most memorable Christmas seasons for me occurred in 2002 and 2003, and they are linked together by a simple song and its impact on my life.

Christmas 2002 was an especially joyous occasion. My mother had been declared cancer-free several months earlier and was feeling much stronger than she had in quite some time. One day in December, she was baking something for a gathering the next day. I remember the aroma filling our Southern California apartment. The radio was set to a station that played holiday favorites

24-7. The repertoire consisted mostly of lighter carols, such as “Jingle Bell Rock,” “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town,” etc. Then suddenly the tone drastically changed when a song began to play that captured my attention. I put aside what I was doing in order to tune in to it. (I later found out that it was titled “The Christmas Shoes,” performed by Newsong.)

The song tells the story of a man who found himself in line at a fancy department store on Christmas Eve, trying to finish his last-minute holiday shopping. In front of him was a little boy, with an appearance that made it obvious he had no business being in that store at all, holding a pair of shoes. When his turn came to pay, he said he wanted to buy the shoes for his mother who was sick and didn’t have much time left—he wanted her to look beautiful if she were to meet Jesus that night. The boy put all the change he had on the counter, but the cashier shook his head and told him it wasn’t enough. He turned and looked at the man imploringly. The man in line behind him paid the difference and couldn’t forget the look on the boy’s face as he thanked him and left.





As I listened, tears rolled down my cheeks. I realized how fortunate I was to still have my mother by my side. I imagined how sad I would have felt if I were in the place of that little boy who was about to lose his mother. The song stayed with me through the remainder of the Christmas season, eventually fading as the new year was ushered in.

In the course of 2003, Mother's cancer recurred and she again took a turn for the worse. By Christmas, she was in a nursing home, and the staff had informed us that the only thing they could do was try to keep her comfortable until the end. One day, I was running errands with my brother, listening to the radio as we drove around. Suddenly, on came the same song, "The Christmas Shoes." How true to life it rang this time around!

Moved by the song, my brother and I immediately bought Mother a pretty pair of shoes, which fit her beautifully and gave her great joy. She left us (in the physical, at least) only weeks later.

Today, this beautiful song helps me look beyond the hectic side of the Christmas season with all its activities, plans, and preparations for festivities, family get-togethers, and

what have you. When the ceaseless activity threatens to drive me nuts and I find myself succumbing to frustration, I hear my mother's voice whispering to me, *Remember the "Christmas Shoes" song.*

With this reminder, the stress and frustration dissipates, and I remember to count my many blessings. I think of my family and loved ones who are still alive and well and give thanks for my own life and health too. I say a prayer for the many who find themselves in painful circumstances during the Christmas season—as the little boy in the song did, or as my family and I did in 2003. I ask Jesus to lead me to such people and give me an opportunity to be of comfort to them. He often does.

Gone is the nervousness I feel over the approaching singing engagement I don't feel sufficiently prepared for, the irritation I feel when important details are overlooked, and all other such cares, as I strive to simply appreciate the fact that I am alive and able to enjoy another Christmas.

STEVE HEARTS HAS BEEN BLIND SINCE BIRTH. HE IS A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL. ■



# THOSE DIRTY SHEPHERDS

BY MARIA FONTAINE

**“THERE WERE SHEPHERDS LIVING OUT IN THE FIELDS NEARBY,** keeping watch over their flocks at night.”—*Luke 2:8 NIV*

When I was a child, one of my favorite pictures of Jesus depicted Him as the Good Shepherd, carrying a lamb around His shoulders. If you're like me, you might have expected that those shepherds watching their flocks on the hillside the night He was born would have been respected members of society, considered honest, dependable, believable witnesses, trustworthy and upright. Why else would the angels have entrusted them with such an important message as testifying of the coming of God's Son?

The facts seem to be a little different: According to some historians, shepherds in first-century Palestine were considered the lowest of the

low. The term used for them by the Pharisees is sometimes translated as “sinners”—a derogatory term meaning vile and ritually unclean. Their lives were spent handling animals, often sleeping outdoors surrounded by dung and possible disease. It seems they were not even considered worthy to offer a sacrifice to God.

From man's limited perspective, God was sending a band of outcasts to be the greeting party for His Son and to spread the good news of salvation to all who would listen. By today's standards, that might equate to an angelic choir appearing to a group of garbage dump scroungers. Yet God looks at the heart. It doesn't matter to Him what someone's occupation is or how they're dressed.

The Bible says the shepherds ran to see the babe, so they didn't have time to take a bath or change to a nice set of clothes, which they most likely didn't have anyway. They ran as they were, straight from the hilltop into

the presence of their Savior.<sup>1</sup> We can imagine them excitedly recounting their experience to Mary and Joseph and being welcomed by them with love and acceptance.

Why would God choose the shepherds? Why would He offer this priceless privilege to these who were so unworthy in man's eyes? Perhaps because He knew they would believe with pure and simple faith. They could be counted on to run to the side of God's newborn Son with sheer enthusiasm.

Not only were the shepherds honored by God, but they were also given the privileged task of spreading the good news to others. In telling others of the Savior's birth,<sup>2</sup> the shepherds became the first Christian missionaries.

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

1. See Luke 2:15–16.

2. See Luke 2:17–18.



# SKY BALLET

By CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER

IT WAS CHRISTMAS MORNING, and my wife and I were enjoying a break at the end of what had been a hectic December. The view from our hotel balcony—a pristine lake surrounded by snowcapped mountains—was idyllic, but as an avid bird watcher, it’s what was happening above that caught my interest.

Several large flocks of thousands of starlings were wheeling and turning in perfect synchronization. They would break off in small groups and then reunite. They ascended, descended, turned, and whirled as one body. The swarms constantly changed shape, with one edge of the flock meeting another and then

breaking off into a new formation to fly in opposite directions. The display lasted for over thirty minutes.

According to some ornithologists, this amazing sky ballet is due to birds seeking out thermals of warm air during the winter. The birds can ride these updrafts for hours. Louise Crandal, a former paragliding world champion, actually glides with her trained steppe eagle to get the best results. She advises other gliders:

“Follow the birds. They’re the masters of the sky, so do what they do. It’s as simple as that! ... I realized that birds don’t fly in circles. They turn, but never in neat 360s. Every single lap is different and they constantly adjust and move to where the thermal is stronger or even a couple of hundred meters to the side to find better lift. Whenever you get the chance to fly with a bird, try to follow it as closely as possible. Soaring birds automatically stay in lift for as long as possible, even with

an annoying paragliding pilot on their tails, so there’s always something to learn.”<sup>1</sup>

Back to Christmas Day and our view of the magnificent midair acrobatic show: It seemed almost like the birds were dancing in praise to their Creator, and I thought back on the first angelic choir proclaiming Christ’s birth: “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!’”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus promised: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.”<sup>3</sup> Let us join the angels in praises this Christmas, take wings, and soar heavenwards!<sup>4</sup>

CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER IS A SCRIPTWRITER AND MIME ARTIST ([HTTP://ELIXIRMIME.COM/](http://elixirmime.com/)) IN MUMBAI, INDIA, AND A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL. ■

1. “How to Thermal: Zen and the Art of Circles Part 2: Vertical Motion,” *Cross Country* magazine, March 23, 2006.
2. Luke 2:13–14
3. John 12:32
4. See Psalm 55:6.

# 1,001 GIFTS FOR JESUS

BY CHALSEY DOOLEY



**LAST CHRISTMAS**, the magical spark never came. I was bothered by all the commercialism that plagues our city months in advance. Somewhere between the flashy ads in magazines and feeling I didn't have much to offer Jesus due to the limitations of our circumstances, I lost my enthusiasm. I wasn't looking forward to decorating the tree, neither did I want the guilt and stress that would come from cramming and rushing to "make things meaningful."

This year has been the opposite, though. In fact, we started preparing in July! So what was different?

Back then, the children and I came up with a plan to give Jesus 1,001 presents by His birthday, and we've been sending a few more His

way every day since. The back of our kitchen door is covered with lists and charts, and now there are several hundred checkmarks and stickers indicating the gifts we've already given Him! There's a chart for good deeds done to help others. There's a chart for memorizing Bible verses. There's a chart for making simple Bible story audios to post for other children. There's a chart for writing letters to cheer the hearts of friends. There's a chart for the times we have stopped to spend time with Jesus. These are just a few of the gifts we're giving Jesus for Christmas.

This year, our Christmas season started months ago and it feels great. There's no rush, no pressure, no guilt, and no lack of focus. We're reaching our goals and using our time to make

Him and others happy. The charts are nearly filled up, and when they are, we'll place each list in a gift-wrapped box and place it under the tree. They are gifts from the heart—each one represents time, love, and effort we know He will be happy to receive.

We already know what the 1,001st gift will be—a simple birthday candle. We'll light it for a moment each day while we pray for others around the world to come to know Jesus' love. These prayers are also gifts we can offer the One who offered us His all.

CHALSEY DOOLEY IS A WRITER OF INSPIRATIONAL MATERIAL FOR CHILDREN AND CARETAKERS AND IS A FULL-TIME EDU-MOM LIVING IN AUSTRALIA. ■

BY SUKANYA KUMAR-SINHA

# WHAT WOULD THE BIRTHDAY BOY LIKE?



I LOVE MY BIRTHDAY AND EVERYTHING THAT COMES WITH IT—especially the many congratulatory phone calls, text messages, emails, Facebook wishes, and greeting cards from family and friends. For that one day, everything is about me—my favorite food, where I'd like to go, what I'd like to do, basically whatever I want. I love to bask in the “birthday girl” glory.

Sadly, I know of a birthday boy whose special day is becoming less and less about Him.

Today, Christmas has largely been reduced to a holiday from work, a time to shop, and a reason for relatives to get together. The decorations, exchange of gifts, and parties bring some excitement and merriment, but the Christmas spirit has been replaced to a great extent by the “holiday spirit.”

I once read about a small child who accompanied his grandmother

to the shopping mall at Christmas and was awestruck by all the decorations, the toys, and the replica of Santa's shed. Slowly taking the sight in, the child looked up at his grandmother and innocently asked, “Where is Baby Jesus?”

That child's question has a deep meaning. Amidst the glitz and glamour of modern Christmas, are we forgetting the true reason for the season? How many of us remember that Christmas is Someone's birthday and stop to think what He would like us to do for it?

I am sure He is touched by the time and effort we put into decorations and buying gifts for our earthly loved ones, but how happy He would be if we also gave Him a birthday present!

If you're looking for ideas for a birthday present for Jesus, consider these:

Tell Him how much you love Him. You can never do this enough.

Express your love to family and friends. You never know who might need to hear just that.

Give to the poor. Reach out to them in His name and invite them to share in the Christmas spirit.

Make amends with those you're holding grudges against.

This year, let's do something for the Birthday Boy!

SUKANYA KUMAR-SINHA IS AN *ACTIVATED* READER FROM INDIA. SHE LIVES IN GURGAON, AND WORKS AS DEPUTY DIRECTOR IN A DIPLOMATIC MISSION IN NEW DELHI. ■

## THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS

Give Jesus a gift this Christmas by opening your heart to Him. Simply say, “Thank You, Jesus, for coming into this world to save me. I welcome You into my life. Please stay by my side now and forever.”



# THE BABY WHO CHANGED THE WORLD

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONE AND ONLY SON, THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHALL NOT PERISH BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.—*John 3:16 NIV*

He was created of a mother whom He created. He was carried by hands that He formed. He cried in the manger in wordless infancy. He, the Word, without whom all human eloquence is mute.—*St. Augustine (354–430)*

The Christmas story reminds us once again it was not man's idea that the Son of God should be born in a stable. And so the first thing we learn from Jesus' birth is that the Lord will not always be found where we expect to find Him.—*James F. Colaianni (b. 1922)*

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1. *Bethlehem to Olivet* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1905)

We look for the glory of the life of Jesus in His manhood's years. Then He wrought great miracles, revealing His divine power. Then He spoke His wonderful words which have touched the world with their influence of blessing. Then He went about doing good, showing the love of God in all His common life and on His cross. ... Yet in no portion of the life of Jesus Christ is there really greater glory than His birth. Nothing showed more love for the world than His condescending to be born. We should say that the heart of the gospel was the cross, but the first act of redemption was the Incarnation, when the Son of God emptied Himself of His divine attributes and entered human life in all the feebleness and helplessness of infancy. In its revealing of love and grace, the cradle of Jesus is as marvelous as His cross.—*J. R. Miller (1840–1912)*<sup>1</sup>

God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.—*1 John 5:11 NIV*

Wander on life's highway  
Wait for a star so bright;  
Wake with the angels,  
Wonder at the light;  
Watch with the shepherds,  
Walk through the night;  
Whisper by the manger  
This Child will make things right.  
—*Abi May*

Let us remember that the Christmas heart is a giving heart, a wide-open heart that thinks of others first. The birth of the baby Jesus stands as the most significant event in all history, because it has meant the pouring into a sick world of the healing medicine of love which has transformed all manner of hearts for almost two thousand years.—*George Matthew Adams (1878–1962)* ■

# DECEMBER: THE EXTRAORDINARY MONTH

## QUIET MOMENTS

BY ABI MAY

DECEMBER IS A MONTH OF EXTRAS. There's usually extra preparation work to do at home, extra visitors, and extra expenses. Most of us get extra time off from studies or jobs. Many churches see extra people in their pews. Charities receive extra donations, even extra volunteers. We may eat and drink extra this month, and put on some extra pounds as a result.

But there is of course one bigger extra—God's extraordinary gift. We can imagine Him, two thousand years ago, looking down on the people of the earth and thinking: *They don't seem to get it. I've given them guidance and instructions, but look at what a mess things have become! Look at the selfishness and*

*misery! I need to do something extra for them ... I'll send them My Son. He'll show them My love in action; He'll go all the way for their sake.*

And so, in the most ordinary of settings but most extraordinary of circumstances, a very special baby was born. God's love was made manifest, and the potential for our relationship with Him took a whole new turn.

What an extraordinary Savior: "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation."<sup>1</sup> He came to bring us peace with God and among ourselves.<sup>2</sup> "God was pleased ... through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."<sup>3</sup>

The apostle John tells of when Jesus' followers met behind closed doors, discouraged and confused following His crucifixion. Miraculously, the risen Jesus appeared in their midst, telling them, "Peace to you!"<sup>4</sup> The same peace is promised to us, if we allow Him into our hearts.

December might be an extra-busy month, but it's also the month when we mark the birthday of Jesus. Don't let this time pass us by without some special moments in the presence of the One who makes it extraordinary.

"Thank God for his Son—his Gift too wonderful for words."<sup>5</sup>

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1. Colossians 1:15 NIV
2. See Luke 2:14.
3. Colossians 1:19–20 NIV
4. See John 20:26.
5. 2 Corinthians 9:15 TLB

FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

# YOUR CHRISTMAS GIFT

I have a special gift for you—one that's different from anything you've ever received from anyone else. It can't be bought or sold in any store, but I give it freely to everyone I can. It will never get old, never break down or wear out, and you can never outgrow it. No one can take it from you, and it will last forever. You can take it with you wherever you go and enjoy it anytime, all the time. It never changes and will never cease to surprise and amaze you. You can share it all you want, and there will always be plenty to go around. In fact, the more you share it, the more you'll have.

This gift is the promise of My presence.<sup>1</sup> I want to be nearer and dearer to you than any earthly friend or lover can be, and I have so much to give—more than enough to fill every day from now through eternity.

My love is true, unfailing, and unconditional, the kind of love you've wanted and waited for all your life. My love is the richest, fullest form of love there is, and the happiness it brings is out of this world. It's not a fleeting happiness, but deep, abiding happiness in all of its many hues and tones—joy, comfort, contentment, peace, stability, security, positiveness, delight ... And I'll always be with you to share in the good times and help you through the tough ones.

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1. See Hebrews 13:5.

