

LIGHT

Christmas
Together



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LIGHT

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Editorial:

Hungry for More?

by Jeri Lyn Rogge



My husband Aaron is our family's chef. Sure, I can turn out a decent meal because I've memorized recipes and know when to stay in my lane regarding more challenging techniques. Ask me sometime about how, as a 20-something newlywed, I

tried to make mayonnaise with cooked eggs. OK, maybe don't.

We have a fun house rule of declaring the person who's perfected a recipe as the master of that dish. Aaron is the master of roux, a flour-and-fat combination that's the base for gravies and sauces. His roux makes the most delectable sauce for baked macaroni and cheese, a family favorite. He also excels at knowing what to make for supper from the random items in our cupboards and fridge.

My area of mastery is baking. I enjoy spreading happiness with others by sharing the baked items I've created. Although my experience in the kitchen started by mimicking my mother's cooking, I've developed my own style when it comes to baking.

To my family's delight, I've been experimenting with banana bread recently. I started with a simple recipe and tweaked ingredients to suit our palates: reduced the sugar, significantly increased the politely suggested amount of cinnamon, and added other fall-inspired spices, like ginger and cloves. Sometimes, this quick bread is enhanced by adding blitzed raisins or cranberries. The result is always short-lived, delayed solely by the baker's demand that the consumers wait until the bread is cooled. Apologies if reading this has made you hungry.

Maybe you also enjoy baking, like Mary, one of this edition's authors. What are some additional ways you bless and connect with others? Do you spread joy through crafts, the written word, playing an instrument, volunteerism, or singing? Do you have another gift or talent you've shared with others? Christmas could serve as an "excuse" for reviving old hobbies or interests and provide inexpensive, heart-inspired gift ideas.

As we settle in for shorter days, longer sleeves, cooler weather, and all things pumpkin spice, our thoughts shift to this pinnacle season of giving and expressing love and care to our family, friends, and communities. Inside this edition of *Light* are stories about honoring family members, sharing cherished memories, tips for coping with grief and loss, a challenge to expand our thinking regarding hospitality, and an introduction to a fun way to bless people with folded paper.

Are you hungry for more? I invite you to curl up on the couch with a delicious snack, a cozy blanket, and your favorite hot beverage. We hope the following essays inspire you to consider how you'll share your blessings this Christmas.

Jeri Lyn Rogge is the director of Editorial and Outreach Ministries for Christian Record Services in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Christmas Is for Giving

by Allison Wilson Lee



HONORING PAPA

After my grandfather died on Valentine's Day in 2017, I grieved so much loss: My relationship with Papa, the end of my grandparents' marriage that had spanned over 65 years, and the absence felt so strongly at family gatherings. Although I was 43 years old when Papa passed away, it seemed a chunk of my childhood had been taken from me, too.

Papa had selected a nickname for each of his 11 grandchildren. Mine was "Pumpkin." With his passing, no other person would call me "Pumpkin." I wanted that back. I wanted my two sons to enjoy more experiences with their great-grandfather.

Of course, I still held memories. Papa served as our county's sheriff for almost 25 years before his retirement. As a child, I attended political rallies in hot, humid summer weather, handing out flyers encouraging voters to re-elect my grandfather. My little brother and I ran around on those sticky evenings waving handheld American flags and wearing t-shirts with a message in support of our beloved Papa.

At his funeral, I learned that Papa loved the gospel song "One Day at a Time" by Kris Kristofferson and Marijohn Wilkin, which is about asking God for strength to take life day by day. In fact, Papa would phone our local radio station to request the song be played while he worked at the sheriff's office.

Some memories still make my eyes misty, even as I write this: The quarters he gave me as a child for each "A" I earned on my report card; the orphaned calves he gifted to my brother and me one Christmas that we bottle fed until they grew to eat grass; his story of running away from home at age 16, lying about his age, and joining the army to fight in World War II.

Almost three years passed, and I discovered a proactive means of channeling my sorrow, an opportunity to celebrate Papa and my memories of him. Though I'd moved away from my hometown decades before, I still had its local newspaper delivered to me. Reading an issue one day after Thanksgiving, I noticed an article about a project sponsored by the sheriff's department. They asked for financial contributions to buy school uniforms for the public school students in the county and toys, shoes, and other essentials for children in need. The previous year, they'd been able to assist many children who had been referred to them through schoolteachers. This year, funds for their Christmas outreach were short of the goal, and the department expressed concern that they would be unable to respond to as many needs as possible.

In this plea for help, I saw an opportunity. I discussed my plan with my husband and then pulled out the checkbook. I wrote out an

amount and included a note — just a few words penned on notebook paper while homeschooling my sons. I explained how I wanted to honor Papa and his years of service with the sheriff's department in the rural county where I spent my childhood. I felt motivated to join the efforts to bless underprivileged children, but doing so in Papa's name felt equally significant. At Christmas, we reflect on the truth that Jesus broke through to our world to meet our needs. He came in the name of another, just as I had mailed my gift to the sheriff's department Christmas project in my grandfather's name.

God appointed Jesus to be present with us. I sent that check in an envelope in the hope of being present with those kids in their need. I wanted to give from a distance since I couldn't be there physically, to reflect "Immanuel" — a reference to Jesus meaning "God with us" (Matthew 1:23) — to these deserving children. Jesus intimately knew the Father; He arrived in human time and space to represent the Father and carry out His plans to seek and save the lost. In a similar way, I had experienced a close relationship with my grandfather, and I believed I could represent Papa's heart by participating in the sheriff's office program that Christmas.

Later, I read a follow-up article about the sheriff's office giving plan. Readers were moved by the plea for more donations. In the end, the

sheriff's department received a surprising sum of financial gifts, more than in the prior year, and blessed many children.

Accepting this invitation to contribute toward efforts in my hometown allowed me to represent "God with us" in a small way. Many years earlier, as a child myself, I experienced how an unexpected Christmas gift demonstrated another's representation of Christ to me.

THE GIFT AND THE GIVER

Standing at the record player, our girls' church choir instructor lowered the needle and started the music. Then, all the young girls in my choir class began passing brightly wrapped Christmas presents to the person on her right.

Mrs. Duncan, a minister's wife in our small town, organized this yearly holiday celebration. Each girl brought a wrapped gift and placed it in a basket with other presents from fellow choir members. The gifts waited there during rehearsal, teasing us with dreams of what might lie beneath the festive paper. We kicked off the fun at the end of choir practice on our Christmas party day.

Sitting down in a circle on mats in Mrs. Duncan's classroom, listening to cheerful Christmas carols blast from the record player, we awaited the opportunity to open a gift. We

were as excited to be surprised as we were about receiving a present. The unwrapped gifts made their way around the circle of girls as Mrs. Duncan played a snippet of music.

The tune paused, and the presents stopped circling among the group. Mrs. Duncan started the music once again. She played a few measures as we handed off and received present after present. Our anticipation mounted with each round.

Finally, Mrs. Duncan stopped the record player and told us the game had finished. We could open our long-awaited gifts. Whichever present we held when the music ended for the final time was the gift we'd unwrap and take home.

Except I couldn't. I sat empty-handed while every other girl cradled a present in her hands.

How could this be? I thought. Wasn't everybody supposed to bring a present? I brought one, and somebody is opening it. Why don't I have a gift to open?

Moments later, ripped wrapping paper lay scattered across the floor as girls showed one another their loot from the afternoon's party. Mrs. Duncan approached us, distributing Christmas candy. Then, she noticed my empty hands.

"Allison!" She must have sensed my

discouragement. "Don't you have a present?" Holding back tears, I shook my head. By this time, choir practice — and our party — had ended. Parents arrived to pick up their little singers. The other girls had already started the scramble to find hats and jackets.

Amid the hustle and bustle, Mrs. Duncan walked me to her desk. She fumbled among papers and folders, finally settling on a box of office supplies. From there, Mrs. Duncan pulled out a dark metal pencil sharpener. The sharpener acted as a pedestal, supporting a miniature globe.

"Here, Allison. I want you to have this," she stated, placing it in my hand. I curled my fingers around it, feeling its weight and the cold metal.

A pencil sharpener? My shoulders sagged. I'm sure Mrs. Duncan had the same thought: Second-hand school supplies didn't rate highly as a Christmas present for a pre-teen girl. The others took home fuzzy stuffed animals and gigantic tubes of bubble-gum-flavored lip gloss.

I would have done anything to keep from appearing ungrateful to Mrs. Duncan, though. I adored my choir teacher and tried to please her. I put on a brave smile and said, "Thank you," realizing Mrs. Duncan's sympathy for my predicament did as much for me as the impromptu gift.

Soon, my mother arrived to take me home. I left, disappointed with the gift I'd received — but not with the giver.

On the first Christmas, the Father offered something of His very own — His only, precious Son — for the emptiness in our lives, our neediness for hope, and restoration from sin (Matthew 1:21). Mrs. Duncan reflected God's generous love to me at that party, giving me something of her own to encourage my hope and fill my empty hands.

Jesus showed up as a baby at Christmas, and today, He shows up in the care His people extend — through His power and love — to others in ways big and small. That first Christmas, Jesus arrived as the greatest gift. Millenia later, Christmas is still for giving.

Allison Wilson Lee is a homeschool teacher and freelance writer from Belle Isle, Florida.

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Bible Quiz: Jesus, Son of David

by Richard Clark Jr.

Can you name these men and women in Jesus' genealogy? Answers from the NKJV.

1. God formed him from the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7; Luke 3:38).

2. The first person translated to heaven without facing death (Genesis 5:24; Luke 3:37; Hebrews 11:5).

3. The oldest recorded human who lived to the age of 969 (Genesis 5:27; Luke 3:37).

4. Lamech's eldest son. His name means "rest" (Genesis 5:28-29; Luke 3:36).

5. He rode out the worldwide flood with his wife, father, mother, two brothers, and their wives (Genesis 7:13; Luke 3:36).

6. Salah's father, who was born two years after the worldwide flood (Genesis 11:10-12; Luke 3:36).

7. Eber's son, who lived at the time when "the earth was divided" (Genesis 10:25; Luke 3:35).

8. Reu's eldest son and Abraham's great-grandfather (Genesis 11:20-22; Luke 3:35).

9. Abraham's grandfather (Genesis 11:25; Luke 3:34).

10. Abraham's father (Genesis 11:26; Luke 3:34).

11. Abraham and Sarah's promised son (Genesis 21:3; Luke 3:34; Matthew 1:2).

12. The Samaritan woman of Sychar came to draw water at his well (John 4:5-7; Matthew 1:2).

13. Judah's daughter-in-law, who bore twin sons — Perez and Zerah — and was probably a Canaanite (1 Chronicles 2:4; Matthew 1:3).

14. By faith, this converted Canaanite did not perish when Jericho fell. Salmon's wife and Boaz's mother (Joshua 6:25; Matthew 1:5; Hebrews 11:31).

15. David's great-grandmother, who was a converted Moabite. Boaz's wife (Matthew 1:5).

16. David's grandfather. Boaz's son (1 Chronicles 2:12; Matthew 1:5).

17. David's father (1 Chronicles 2:13-15; Matthew 1:5-6).

18. David's son, through whom Luke traces Jesus' lineage (1 Chronicles 3:5; Luke 3:31).

19. David's son, through whom Matthew traces Jesus' lineage (1 Chronicles 3:5; Matthew 1:6-7).

20. The mother of the two sons of David, through whom Jesus' lineage is traced (1 Chronicles 3:5; 2 Samuel 11:3).

21. The son of Shealtiel, who was governor of Judah (Haggai 1:1; Matthew 1:12; Luke 3:27).

Bible Quiz answers on pg. 22.

THE HIDDEN HUES OF CHRISTMAS

by Tina Neeley with Meredith Leigh Burton



“**T**hen Jesus spoke to them again, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life’” (John 8:12, NKJV).

Like an illuminated box of crayons, packages reflect the tree’s blue, green, red, and yellow lights. Springy curling ribbon bows bounce with childish delight, adorning gifts wrapped in foil paper covered with white-glittered snowflakes. Evergreen-scented candles make you look twice at the artificial tree in the living room corner. As traditional Christmas carols play in the background, there’s a gift in the moment’s stillness.

So many things about the holiday bring hurry and stress. No single element is to blame; it’s the collective weight of endless shopping, parties, decorating, wrapping, caroling, and cooking. Even though the season now seems to span from Halloween and beyond, there’s never enough time for it all.

Every year, in a moment of quiet, Meredith Leigh Burton walks to her Christmas tree and leans in, her face as close as she can get to its ornaments, garland, and lights. She turns her head one way, then another, and presses deeper into the tree. Finally, she sees it — the colorless pinhole of light she seeks every Christmas.



Burton, who developed retinopathy of prematurity as a newborn, sees very little, or so it seems. But God enables her to see more. She sees the colors of Christmas. While the traditional colors are part of it, an unexpected one precedes them.

“I think of the color brown because Jesus came in such humble circumstances, in a manger,” Burton shared. He came into a world in a state of constant decay.

Burton is reminded of *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Everything appeared to be dead, hopelessly strangled by weeds to Mary, the main character, until her young friend cut away the old wood, uncovering a brownish-green shoot where there was only gray moments before. Mary explored more, inquiring if a particular one was dead or alive. Using a rarely used Yorkshire word, “wick,” he informed her it was as alive as they were — a lesson in how things aren’t always what they seem. He taught her, too, how pruning is necessary for living things to blossom.

“Brown might be a humble color, but, to me, it represents sweetness because of all the goodies that are brown,” Burton said, mentioning gingerbread and chocolate, for example. “Jesus brings sweetness to our life,” she added.

There are other reasons, too, that we might

logically place brown first in the order of colors. It's foundational.

Burton explained, "We decorated a gingerbread house at school one year and put all of the candy on it, but you build on the gingerbread. Also, I remember one Christmas learning that Bethlehem means 'house of bread.' Jesus is the Bread of Life; that resonates with me."

Like the sighted, she sees red predominantly — the color of the blood Jesus shed for us. There's green, the color of eternal life made possible by His blood, symbolized by the evergreen trees at the center of our decoration.

"When I ponder the color green, I think about the life that Jesus came to give all of us."

And then there's purple, the color of royalty.

"If Jesus had been born as He deserved, He would have been in a palace. Jesus was a king, but nobody knew who He was. The Pharisees and people should have known because they had the prophecies. They didn't; they just ignored it."

Overlaying Burton's colors of Christmas is white.

"White signifies the peace on earth that Jesus brings and because of snowfall," said



❄ Burton. "It's almost like God puts a blanket over everything."

❄ She continued, "A favorite verse is Psalm 46:10, 'Be still, and know that I am God.' The Lord occasionally sends these gifts of peace and stillness to make us stop and focus on Him. There's so much noise and division in this world. Sometimes, He wants us to be quiet and remember He's in control. We tend to think we're in control, and we're certainly not. He sends these gifts to remind us we're not."

❄ Snow is as much a sensation as it is a sight. In southern Middle Tennessee, where Burton lives, heavy snowfalls are infrequent.

❄ "I love going outside when it's snowing. It's like feathers touching my face when it's falling, akin to being caressed or kissed by butterflies. These rare snowfalls allow me to escape my busyness. It's hushed and so tranquil. If snow had a sound, it would be like a music box."

These colors of Christmas invite us to something different than the world tells us. Ironically, it's an offer to more — of a different kind. It's a time to make room in our calendars and hearts to receive the true gift of Christmas.

Burton loves countless things about the holiday season, too. She shops with her sister-in-law. While browsing, she listens expectantly for the Christmas music and the Salvation

Army bellringers. Caroling with members of her church is also a tradition. Tree decorating, cookie baking, and similar things fill our time during the busy season. While these things are important to our celebrations, a deeper experience calls for us.

Burton said, "Christmas is the one time of the year when more people than usual focus on Jesus. Even though we don't know the exact day He was born, we know He was born. We need to celebrate that with all our hearts and not focus as much on what we get from others as on what we can give during that time. And that doesn't necessarily mean a physical gift, but giving our time to people, not engaging in the hustle and bustle but taking time for our families, us, and people."

She said it's not just for Christmas but a year-round giving of our time and efforts, focusing on being more present with our family and friends. Take an opportunity to step back and spend quality time.

And don't forget the gift in the tree. Burton said of the light she glimpses there, "There's a lot of hardship in the world, and to me, when I reflect on light, it's like the goodness breaking through into the darkness that's around, shedding light on our lives."

May we approach this Christmas very much like Burton. As we make a path through the



festive packages, let's lean in closer this year. Let's push aside the branches of busyness and press deeper into the gift of the season. May we look over the tinsel, treasured ornaments, and pretty lights and strain harder to see it — the pinpoint hole through the fabric of

eternity as we contemplate the Light of the World.

Meredith Leigh Burton is a motivational speaker, singer, teacher, and writer from Lynchburg, Tennessee. She loves to write stories with disability representation, heroism, and hidden strength.

Tina Neeley is an inspirational feature story writer from Shelbyville, Tennessee, who looks for the extraordinary in ordinary things, believing her myopic degeneration is a gift that inspires these closer looks.

Bible Quiz Answers:

1. Adam; 2. Enoch; 3. Methuselah; 4. Noah; 5. Shem; 6. Arphaxad; 7. Peleg; 8. Serug; 9. Nahor; 10. Terah; 11. Isaac; 12. Jacob; 13. Tamar; 14. Rahab; 15. Ruth; 16. Obed; 17. Jesse; 18. Nathan; 19. Solomon; 20. Bathsheba; 21. Zerubbabel;



From Holiday to Habit: Developing Year-Round Spiritual Hospitality

by Rhianna McGregor Hajzer

Each year, the arrival of Christmas awakens a renewed spirit of generosity within the Church. Clothing drives are held for people experiencing homelessness, soup kitchens supply hot meals for those in need, and shoeboxes are filled with gifts for underprivileged children. After all, this is

the season in which we joyfully celebrate the greatest gift ever given — the Savior, Jesus Christ. How can we help but share a portion of what we've been given with others?

I also find that alongside the physical acts of generosity, I more freely extend spiritual hospitality to others. What is spiritual hospitality? It's how one cares for and seeks to share the gospel with unbelievers. It involves acts of kindness like sharing clothing, feeding the needy, and living a life abundant in prayer, forgiveness, and a genuine, Christlike attitude. This deeper connection is essential for both their relationship with God and mine. The warmth of Christmas nurtures these desires, leading me to rededicate my faith. This Christmas, I decide, will be a new beginning as I vow to read Scripture daily, devote myself to prayer, and seek to grow closer to God.

So often, though, my lofty ideals fall through as soon as the calendar flips. Once the snow melts and the nostalgia fades, I revert to being a follower of my flesh, indulging in selfish acts and neglecting my responsibility to live out the spiritual hospitality Christ expects of me as His disciple. "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments," Jesus proclaims in John 14:15 (ESV). Yet, this mandate seems easier to overlook when the normalcy of life's distractions returns in full force in January. I forget the transforming power of the Christmas story and how it ought to

continually shape each moment of my life.

To only practice physical hospitality at Christmas while celebrating the birth of Christ and neglect spiritual hospitality throughout the year is a failure to fully grasp the true meaning of Christmas. Christ commands His followers to be charitable to those around us — feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, and clothing the naked (Matthew 25:35-40). Yet, we overlook the Scriptures that exhort us to show spiritual charity. Christ also commands us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44), forgive each other (Ephesians 4:32), and give thanks in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians 5:18). We forsake His words because they are difficult to fulfill.

Yet, these are commands, not suggestions. Jesus instructs us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44). Praying for those we struggle to love can feel impossible without the grace of Jesus Christ. Curiously, it feels more attainable during Christmas. In the soft glow of Christmas lights, the hurts inflicted upon us seem milder. In the light of what Christ came to Earth to later accomplish, my pain appears irrelevant.

However, the act of praying for others — especially those we struggle to love — requires a depth of vulnerability that can be daunting. Even so, I believe prayer is the utmost

generosity we can give to another, for only prayer has the power to connect us with the living God and, through Him, have any hope of leading unbelievers to salvation. It is a practice deeply intertwined with spiritual hospitality that requires us to confront our own hurts and fears. It demands a level of openness and trust that I find challenging, given past wounds and the fear of exposing my vulnerability.

I wrestle with prayer as often as I pray. The notion of bringing my heart before the Lord is steeped in anxiety. I fear judgment from fellow believers about not being eloquent enough, stumbling over my words, or praying for foolish or silly things. The intimacy of prayer feels precious and intimidating; it's a deeply private conversation with God that I struggle to share with others. While I understand the power of praying within a community of believers — and desperately wish to do so — the vulnerability involved holds me back, robbing me of the blessing God intends. Ironically, it's a struggle that will take prayer and God's grace and strength to overcome.

How, then, do we grow in our vulnerability in our relationship with Christ? The answer is beautifully illustrated in the very story we celebrate at Christmas. Christ came to Earth to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), but He didn't come as a soldier or revolutionary as many people at the time had expected. He came

as a newborn child — helpless, innocent, and utterly dependent on His parents to survive. A baby cannot thrive without his mother's milk, and as he grows, his father's godly teaching and example stand as the foundation upon which his life is built. Even as a child with His earthly parents, Joseph and Mary, Jesus exemplifies the life His followers should strive to emulate with the Father.

I believe that the most effective prayer is a vulnerable one. Like a child relies on its mother for sustenance, we depend entirely on the Lord in our human frailty. Through prayer, we enter into a relationship with Him that grows when we trust Him in our vulnerability. Charles Spurgeon declared, "The best style of prayer is that which cannot be called anything else but a cry." Like a newborn's cry, prayer ought to be raw in its honesty, desperate in its need, and trusting in its vulnerability to be effective in our growth as believers. Through a disciplined practice of prayer, we have a means of expressing our pain and praise and a way to grow in our knowledge and fear of the Lord and seek His wisdom in our lives.

Prayer is the quintessential means to keep open the doors of a spiritually hospitable heart. During the Christmas season, when the birth of our Lord and Savior is foremost in our minds, hospitality is expected and praised. Yet, prayer should be a constant practice throughout the

year, regardless of circumstance. Relationships with others can only grow and flourish when vulnerability deepens into mutual trust and love, as does our relationship with the Lord. It's how we mature from newborn believers into mature, godly followers of Christ, just as Jesus Himself grew from a helpless child into the man who, because He so loved the world, sacrificed Himself on the cross for our sins so that we might receive eternal life (John 3:16).

A cultural belief many Christians embrace suggests that maintaining a positive outlook on life requires adopting an "attitude of gratitude." While I agree that gratitude is important and even necessary for a humble, godly life, might I propose an alternative? Let's keep a heart so aware of its desperation for a Savior that we have no choice but to fall into the arms of Jesus for salvation and rest.

By embracing vulnerability in our prayers and maintaining a consistent prayer life, we open ourselves to the transformative power of God's love and wisdom. This continual reliance on Him deepens our faith and cultivates a spirit of hospitality and generosity that extends beyond the Christmas season and into every aspect of our lives.

Rhianna McGregor Hajzer is a Christian by grace, blind by design, and a writer by passion. She writes from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada.

When Holidays Are Hard

by Tammy Darling



In my 53 laps around the sun, this is a year of Christmas firsts I'm not excited about. The first Christmas that I have yet to buy a single Christmas gift; usually, I would already have them all purchased and wrapped. The first Christmas without my children at home to excitedly get up on Christmas morn and ask, "When are you waking up, Dad?!" The first Christmas celebrating in an empty nest. On top of all that, this is the first complete year without my mother, who passed away six days after Thanksgiving, which also happened to be her birthday.

The upcoming holiday season has hit me so hard that I'm seriously considering going elsewhere for Christmas ... to the ocean, perhaps, as it's my favorite place and where I feel closest to God. For some, it's the mountains, but for me, it's watching the ebb and flow of the endless water that brings a measure of peace and tranquility.

It remains to be seen if I will be at home or away for Christmas. What I do know is that I need to find some serenity because, currently, any thought of Christmas causes my eyes to water; that wetness falls like rain. Sometimes, it's a sprinkle or two; Other times, it's torrential. If I remain at home, the last thing I want when my children come to visit is to find me down and depressed with a soggy face. Christmas isn't always bows, baking, family,

and fun; when grieving, it can also be sorrow, sadness, and loneliness.

So, whether here or there, these are the things I'm starting to do in the days and weeks leading up to Christmas:

REMEMBERING THE REASON FOR THE SEASON

Many people face the sadness of the holidays because of loss, loneliness, an empty nest, or something else. When it comes to Christmas, there is an extraordinary reason to celebrate that extends far beyond any presents. Without Christ, there is no Christmas; Jesus is Christmas' main character. And without His presence, the presents mean very little.

Though my heart is sad, I know joy and sadness can coexist. I just don't want the sadness to tip the scales. Therefore, I'm zoning in on the miracle of the Christ of Christmas. Don't get me wrong, I'm not stuffing down those feelings of sadness; when tears threaten, I let them flow. Then, I press on by recalling why we have a Christmas celebration in the first place.

The prophecy in Isaiah 9:6 has been fulfilled: "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" (NIV). In this, I can rejoice.

This Christmas crisis of sorts has been a real eye-opener. I now understand the holiday struggle many feel during this time of the year. The circumstances may vary, but sadness and grief are universal. Grief has increased my capacity for compassion toward others who are hurting; it's the silver lining for those times when teary clouds roll in.

DOING SOMETHING NEW

In the days leading up to Christmas, I am trying my hand at something new. I figure that by learning a skill or just getting out of my box, I will expand my horizons instead of complacently remaining in a rut.

I'm not particularly crafty; however, I am trying to make homemade Christmas ornaments, which I saw on Facebook. The process gives me a sense of accomplishment. As a bonus, I will have something unique and meaningful to give my children and others.

I'm also mixing up my typical holiday decorating, listening to more Christmas music, and watching lots of Christmas movies. Instead of sticking my head in the proverbial sand, I purposefully embrace the season by doing new things.

All the while, I trust that God is doing something new, too. This I believe because God's Word says so. "See, I am doing a new

thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland” (Isaiah 43:19).

I’ve decided to count my blessings and name them one by one, as the classic hymn goes. Gratefulness ushers in joy, something I’m lacking right now. So, while it is a process, I am fully convinced that by the time Christmas Day rolls around, my heart will be pleasantly full of joy, for “You make known to me the path of life; You will fill me with joy in Your presence, with eternal pleasures at Your right hand” (Psalm 16:11).

USING MY WORDS

Wordsmithing is therapeutic for me. Instead of stuffing my emotions way down deep, I employ words to transport them to the surface so I can address them in healthy ways. Some days, it’s in the form of an article, such as this one; other days, it may be poetry or journaling.

I’m also becoming a modern-day scribe of sorts. I’ve decided to hand-write the gospel account of Jesus’ birth word-for-word from the Bible. Writing the account out by hand allows me to slow down and really process what is taking place and the significance of it all.

FINDING FUN

Though I may be sad now, I don’t have to stay that way. These feelings of sadness and

loneliness may ebb and flow throughout the holidays. Still, I can be proactive about my situation and deliberately incorporate fun into the season.

For the first time in my small hometown's history, there will be an old-fashioned Christmas celebration a few weeks before Christmas. It'll be a walk-around-town event that includes the town tree lighting, music at multiple churches, craft and food vendors, a live nativity, and carolers throughout the streets. I plan to attend and look forward to it.

Here's what Ecclesiastes 8:15 says on the matter: "So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun."

I also bought tickets for my husband and me to attend a Chris Tomlin Christmas concert. I have always loved attending Christian concerts and worshipping with thousands of other believers, so this is right up my alley. Bonus: Being a Christmas concert, the songs will help to put the Christmas season in proper perspective.

FOCUSING ON OTHERS

I was always taught that focusing on others

is the best way to lighten our burdens. Serving, lending a listening ear, or just being there in whatever way is needed uplifts all involved.

Taking my focus from myself and placing it on others who may be sad, suffering, or grieving is what love is all about. Yes, I am struggling this holiday season, but so are others. And really, isn't giving what it's all about? John 3:16 reminds me that God so loved the world He that gave ... Love gives, even when it's painful.

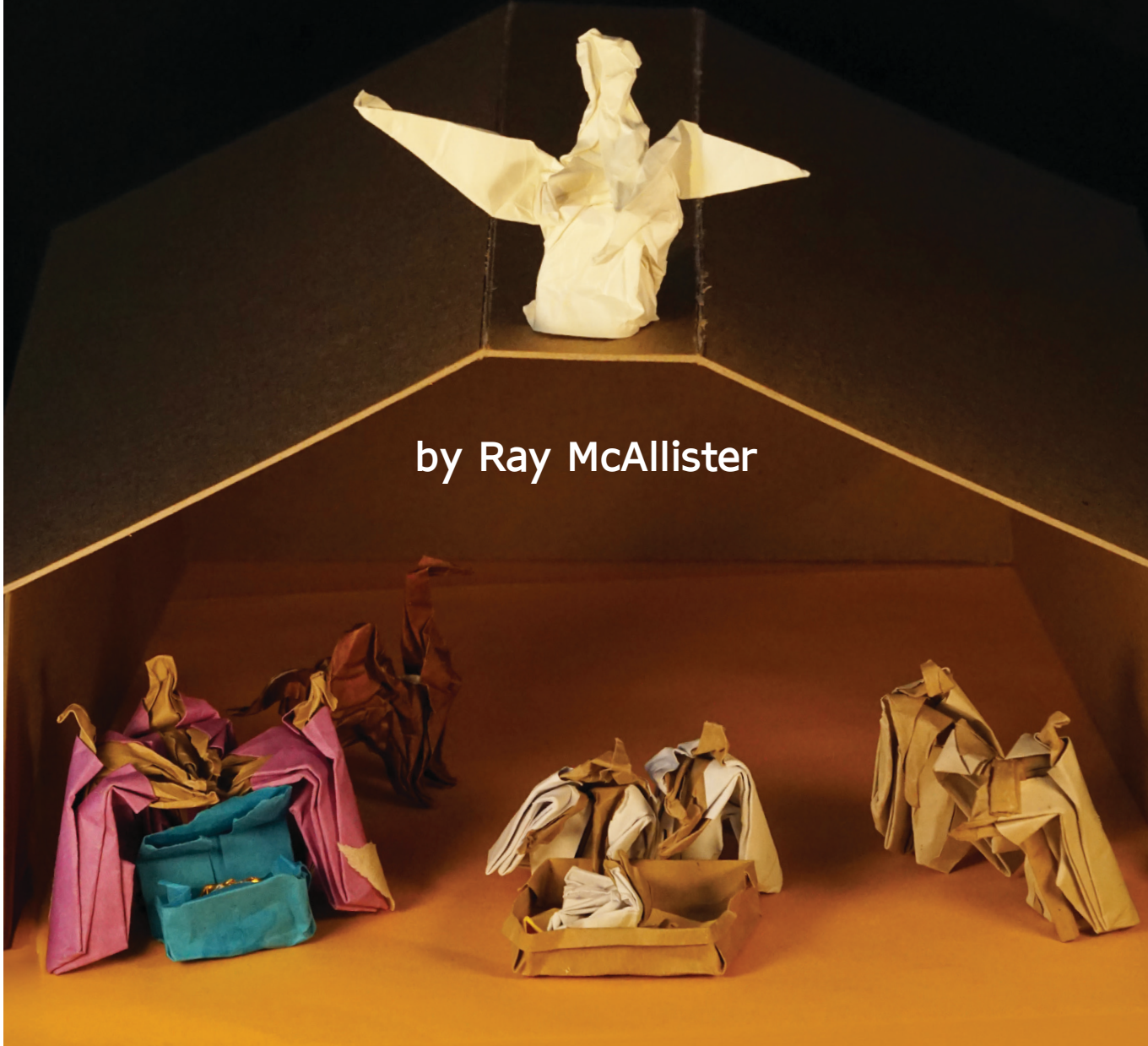
I'm checking into various community opportunities to serve during the Christmas season. This is my first time creating "Blessings Boxes" for women experiencing crises or abusive circumstances. Like the Grinch, my heart is already expanding in size.

Not every holiday season will be a happy-clappy time, and that's OK. But no matter my circumstances, I don't have to wallow in sorrow or self-pity. I can change the narrative, write my own story, and take proactive measures to make the most of a difficult time. Above all, I can invite Christ into my every moment and fully recognize the presence of Immanuel, God with us.

Tammy Darling is the author of 1,500 published articles and three books. She writes from her home in rural Pennsylvania.

CHRISTMAS PAPER

by Ray McAllister



What holiday traditions do you have? Celebrating important moments with traditions is essential, no matter our disabilities. The following paragraphs delve into the accessibility and feasibility of a unique Christmas tradition for the blind.

As a boy, I was exposed to origami at a summer camp for the blind. The Japanese art of paper folding fascinated me. However, the instructor whirled through pattern after pattern so quickly that I had no time to retain anything. In college, someone showed me how to make a paper balloon, which I inflated by blowing into it with my mouth. I enjoyed occasionally making balloons for children for the next 10 years.

About 17 years ago, a friend showed me more designs. I also met someone from the art department at Andrews University who introduced me to additional patterns. I learned these by rote, so I could remember each step. This kind of learning also allowed me to grasp the art well enough to create my own designs, liberating me from needing sighted individuals to demonstrate them to me.

I researched ways to acquire better origami paper because the children's kits I found were low quality. A printing business near my home cuts paper into squares for me at a reasonable cost. I also found a store in Japantown in San Francisco, California, that would send origami paper by mail. This paper was thinner, easier to fold, and in colors that weren't available at a printing press. This paper was more expensive at about \$0.06 per sheet but worth it. My wife Sally helped me sort the paper by color, and I stored them in manila envelopes, which I

labeled with braille. We bought a portable file folder set with pockets. I could braille label the colors, and I was good to go.

I spent time that year feeling various flowers and animal models. An ice cream business in town had a life-size model of a cow, which I could feel to learn its shape. A movie we bought came with a miniature model of a camel.

The following Christmas, I realized I had learned enough to figure out all the designs needed to make a small nativity scene. For the stable frame, I created a 4-inch square paper box of sturdy printing press paper. Origami paper would not make a "stable stable." I made various traditional models and color-coded them for easy identification. The wise men were dressed in purple, Mary and Joseph donned white attire, and the shepherds wore a greyish-brown hue. I placed Mary next to an angel and positioned Joseph, who was slightly taller, with his arm around her. The shepherds stood beside their customary J-shaped crooks.

According to Matthew 2:11, the wise men did not visit the baby Jesus in the stable, but after Mary and Joseph moved into a house. Nevertheless, this was a nativity collection and would be organized according to tradition.

After that, I crafted some animals to place around the stable's perimeter. This set included

a cow, a ram, and a camel. Additionally, I created a box for the magi's gifts and added some gold paper. Lastly, the manger, filled with crumpled yellow paper to represent hay, would be placed in the center, with the baby Jesus positioned on top. Finally, Sally glued the figures into the stable. In all, this took about two hours to produce.

The first couple of displays I made were received very positively by friends. We learned that if Sally glued a ribbon onto the display, the nativity scene could be hung from a Christmas tree. I continued making at least one nativity scene a year to give to someone at Christmas. Sally utilized her aromatherapy expertise to enhance the magi's gift box by adding drops of myrrh and frankincense oil, creating a more authentic experience.

In 2020, Sally and I hosted a Korean foreign exchange student. It turns out I was the one to give him his first significant experience with origami, and he excelled at it. I planned to make his family a nativity scene he could take home. By November of that year, it became clear that this student was advancing enough in origami to make the scene himself, with a bit of guidance from me. He was excited when I suggested the idea.

We set aside an hour every evening to work on production. I made two nativity scenes while

the student made one, as it took him longer to produce the models. He did well, though, and when he gave it to his family in Korea, they were deeply touched. His father wanted to know more about the story of Christmas.

A year or two later, I taught someone else how to make a nativity scene for her family. She had much fun doing the project, and her family was impressed. I don't always train people to do this, but it's fun when I can.

Around this time, Sally and I took a couple of exchange students to an animal park in Indiana, where there were tame animals to feed and touch. I felt the shape of a donkey's ears. With that, I developed an origami pattern for a donkey. I updated my personal nativity scene, displayed year-round, by adding a donkey. Now, every new arrangement includes a donkey.

The essence of my message is clear: Even individuals who are blind can successfully create origami. It's done by making three-dimensional objects of folded paper. There's no coloring or drawing needed. It would be best if you found someone to show you some designs. Art instructors are an excellent place to start. You'll want to learn patterns by rote and fold several models of each so you don't forget them. If you have limited eyesight, you may not be able to browse the internet

to evaluate a design. Occasionally, you can check something you've created, but it could be challenging to find the specific model you're interested in, especially if you've made several. For this reason, it is advisable to master the fundamental principles of origami and apply your expertise to freely create desired forms.

With this new skill, you, too, can make fancy nativity scene displays, fold flowers for restaurant waitstaff, and even quietly make models during meetings or concerts, which you can share with people. Origami is a fun and inexpensive hobby that can help you connect with people around you, especially at Christmastime.

Creating and sharing origami nativity scenes has become a cherished tradition. As I craft these models, I am reminded of the warmth and love that Christmas brings. Sharing these handmade creations with friends, family, and strangers has initiated countless conversations and deepened relationships. Giving something made with care and attention to detail resonates with people, making the holiday season even more special. This tradition has reminded me that the blessing of Christmas lies in the joy of giving and the connections we build with others.

Ray McAllister is a frequent contributor to Light magazine from Berrien Center, Michigan.

The Greatest Gift

by Mary Hiland



“Mmm, these smell wonderful,” I announced as I slid a sheet of cookies out of the oven.

“Yummy,” said Kara, my 9-year-old daughter, as she arranged the red and green sprinkles, frosting, and other edible ornaments on the kitchen table. She would do the

decorating this year. Being blind, I was glad for her to take that over. The year was 1981, and we saved this part of our family tradition for Christmas Eve. We looked forward to a day of baking, wrapping, and listening to Christmas carols on the radio.

My husband Mike and Steve, our 12-year-old son, were preparing to brave the crowds and do their Christmas shopping. Our little dog, Genie, ran up and down the stairs with anticipation. Whatever her people were doing, she was sure it was something fun, and she wanted to be in on it. My Seeing Eye® dog, Mindy, lay under the table, hoping for a cookie to fall, but she would never do anything so undignified as to run around excitedly.

Kara carefully spread the icing and decorated the cookies with great concentration and precision. Then, we rolled out more dough and began the delicate process of cutting out star and angel shapes and placing them on another cookie sheet. Mike and Steve pulled on their coats and boots and trudged to the snow-covered car. I could hear them scraping ice from the windshield as the car warmed up in the driveway.

Mike stepped back in to tell me they were leaving when the lights blinked and then went out. The radio stopped mid-hallelujah, and the furnace died.

"Oh no!" Kara and I cried out together. "How are we going to bake these cookies?" Mike returned to the car to turn it off and brought Steve back in with him.

The house was beginning to cool. Mike went to the basement to test the circuit breakers, and when nothing happened, he said, "I think I'll call the Holtons and see if they have electricity. Maybe they won't mind if I drop you and Kara off for a couple of hours while Steve and I do our shopping."

"OK," I agreed with some hesitation. I didn't want to barge in on our friends' last-minute holiday preparations, but I also didn't want to stay in a frigid house or sit in the car at the shopping center. I made a nest of sweaters and Mike's woolen Navy peacoat on the couch for Genie. Even though Mindy would be going with us because she went with me everywhere, I reasoned that Genie was a dog after all and would be fine. Still, I felt a pang of guilt as we piled into the car without her.

On the way to our friends' house, Mike noted that the traffic lights were dark on our side of town, but, as expected, as we neared the Holtons' neighborhood, they all were working just fine. Sharon and Jerry greeted us at the door with cheery smiles and welcoming hugs.

"Oh, it's no trouble at all," Sharon exclaimed when I apologized for interrupting their

Christmas preparations. Sharon pressed a steaming cup of tea into my hands as she led me to a sweet little rocking chair in one of the bedrooms. After I assured her the tea was delicious, she returned to changing sheets, running the vacuum, dusting, mopping floors, making an enormous pot of stew, and baking three pies. They were readying their home for houseguests due to arrive that evening. These welcoming people were the very personification of the story in Matthew 25:35-40, where Christ famously makes clear that kindness and caring for those in great need is the same as doing it for Him.

Mindy and I hung out in the bedroom, listening to the happy sounds of a family's anticipation of the coming blessed holiday. Kara and their youngest son, Patrick, played games in the basement.

Meanwhile, Mike and Steve left for the mall and would be back later to fetch us and return home. But as they drove back through our neighborhood, they saw that the lights were still out, so they suspected they would not be bringing us home anytime soon.

The day wore on into late afternoon, and when Mike and Steve returned, Sharon and Jerry insisted on sharing their hearty supper with us.

"If you don't get your electricity back by

tonight,” they said, “You must stay here.” I was reminded of Hebrews 13:2, “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels” (NIV). I smiled and thanked them while dreading the thought of spending Christmas Eve in someone else’s home, no matter how fond we were of our friends and how understanding their houseguests would be about unexpected visitors.

I worried about Genie alone in our house as it cooled into the night. We would have to go get her, but she would not be a welcome guest. Genie was cute, but she was a barker and could sometimes try to run out the door. No, she would be more trouble than even the Holtons could take with a smile.

What would we do about our Christmas morning traditions? It seems silly to think about that now, but it was important to me then.

The stew was delicious, hot and rich with meat and vegetables. Over dinner, we decided to go to our respective Christmas Eve services and then make plans after that. I must admit that during the service we attended, I prayed for the power to be back on at our house and that Genie was OK.

When we stepped out of the church into a peaceful night of gently falling snow, I felt

my world would be right again. Sure, our friends had welcomed us with grace and true friendship, but I just wanted to go home.

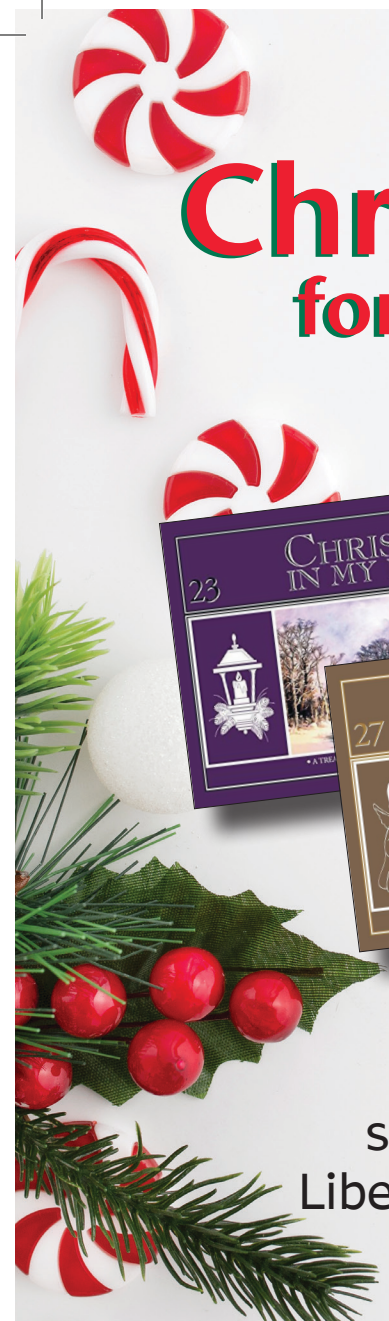
Instead of returning to the Holtons' home, we turned in the direction of ours. One traffic light after another glowed green and red in the darkness, lighting up hope in our hearts.

Pulling into the driveway, the kids shouted, "There's Genie in the window, barking her head off." We tumbled out of the car and slogged through the snow to the front door. We stepped into a chilly house, but the furnace was running! Genie was jumping and barking joyfully at our return, and I thanked God for the best gift of all — to be back in our home for this blessed night.

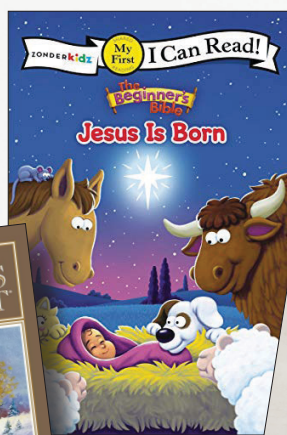
Kara headed straight for the kitchen. "Looks like Genie had her own little Christmas party without us," she announced when she saw the empty cookie trays. Nobody scolded Genie. She deserved Christmas treats after her day alone in a cold house.

We called Sharon and Jerry and thanked them for their kindness, thinking of Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind and compassionate to one another." We made some hot chocolate and settled in for the best Christmas Eve ever.

Mary Hiland is an essayist, author, and columnist from Gahanna, Ohio.



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