

*Life Together Christmas*  
*2020*



*God with Us*

LIFE TOGETHER 2020: GOD WITH US

Copyright © 2020 All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the individual chapter authors.

# Contents

<i>Preface</i> .....	<i>iv</i>
<i>A Texas Xmas (1949)</i> .....	<i>1</i>
Ruth Vassar Burgess .....	1
<i>Three Christmases Celebrated in Bethlehem by the Burgess Family (1985-1986)</i> .....	3
Stanley Milton Burgess .....	3
<i>Childhood Christmas Memories</i> .....	5
Sandy Schmidt Sutton .....	5
<i>Home for Christmas</i> .....	6
Lois E. Olena .....	6
<i>The Kindly Ghosts of Christmas Past</i> .....	8
Geoffrey W. Sutton .....	8
<i>Brown Santa's Gift</i> .....	10
LaDonna Friesen.....	10
<i>Leaping for Joy</i> .....	13
Julianne Hawes Nelson .....	13
<i>Hey, Give Me a Minute...</i> .....	15
Julianne Hawes Nelson .....	15
<i>Christmas Acrostic</i> .....	19
Julianna Sutton, age 9 .....	19
<i>Struggling for Christmas Traditions</i> .....	20
Nathan and Amy Sutton .....	20
<i>Anticipation</i> .....	21
Don Tosh .....	21
<i>Joyeux Noël</i> .....	22
Carole Tosh.....	22
<i>A Christmas Harmony</i> .....	24
Doug Olena.....	24

## Preface

This book came about at the invitation of our dear friends, Drs. Stan and Ruth Burgess, founding members of the Life Together Sunday school class at Evangel Temple. With a heart for the intergenerational transmission of faith and the passing on of heritage and story, they generously offered to publish the contributions of Life Together class members in celebration of Christmas 2020.

Without a doubt, our class has been a place of great joy, love, learning, encouragement, motivation, peace, and sharing—a haven and a safe place for expressing ideas, working through issues, and thinking together as Spirit-filled Christ followers. We all are so grateful for the opportunity to be together in this place.

In the last few years, Life Together our class (begun decades ago by Stan and Ruth Burgess and stewarded over the years by Mike Palmer, Jim Edwards, Marty Mittelstadt, and Doug Olena) has gone from meeting in a room in the main Evangel Temple church building to the “Corner House” across the street (July 2018) to “The Barn” (August 2019) to our first online Zoom gathering (March 29, 2020). In addition to our invigorating class sessions, we have also enjoyed fellowship times at Panera, a baby shower at Suttons, Christmas/ new year parties at the homes of the Olenas, Mittelstadts, Christi Tosh, and Friesens, a drive-by surprise graduation celebration for Anastasia, and even some outdoor, socially distanced gatherings at the Burgess farm!

Through all the changes and challenges, what remains is our commitment to one another and to walking together in Christ. With great thankfulness, we celebrate these relationships we hold so dear and offer these writings in celebration of Christmas 2020—a year none of us could have ever imagined, but when we could still rejoice in *God with Us*.























## A Texas Xmas (1949)

Ruth Vassar Burgess

Sleigh bells ring, are you listening?

*No. I hear the thuds of the brahma bulls' hooves on the centuries-old mud road.*

Oh, Christmas tree how fragrant are your branches.

*No. Servant women are scooping up cow manure to varnish our dirt floors.*

Oh, you better watch out He is coming to town.

*Who? Soombu, the mailman?*

He sees you when you are sleeping or awake.

*We hope not. Are you saying he is god?*

Holidays carry diverse meanings in multicultural settings. Such lessons continued to be learned by Ted and Estelle Vassar and their three children, Ruth, Teddy, and Helen. On this Christian Mission Compound were seventy-five orphans, Auntie Christelle Evans, and a myriad of workers.

This was to be the third Christmas the adults had spent in India this term, leaving their beloved Texas holidays behind. They had been studious in learning Marathi, the language spoken in Western India. But then the westerly winds blew up over the ghats. Childhood memories were stirring Christmases spent on the Texas plains, amid cedar bushes, tumble weeds, cotton balls that mimicked snow, as well as the jolly laughter of good ole Saint Nicholas.

Being a perennial optimist, Estelle suggested, "Why couldn't we have a Texas Christmas on the mission compound?" Ruth, recently returned from Highclerc boarding school, volunteered to make a Christmas tree. Green crepe paper strips were put on different lengths of wire and formed into a cedar-like tree. Last year's greeting cards provided further decorations for the streamers and homemade colorful decorative balls.

A Texas Christmas certainly required a Santa Claus. In a missionary box, some good-hearted folks had sent Ted a pair of red pajamas. Estelle found some cotton, which was placed on the new nightwear. WOW! Our celebration was coming along well, except we needed a Santa Claus mask.

The women persuaded Ted they needed to accompany him to engage in some shopping in Poona. We were going to shop for a mask and Christmas peppermints. We looked and were



asked many questions why one would want such a mask. Whew. We found one merchant who sold us a Father Christmas mask. Hold on. This Father C. is scary. He looked gruesome, as if he might jump out and skin you. We could not locate the happy, jolly, lovable, loving, and delightful man mask. Santa Claus was a Texas mirage from earlier times and places.

Estelle worked with the tailor in the preparation of new suits of clothes for the children and workers. Special candles and lamps were cleaned, and scented oil was secured. Indian bajees, karunjes, milk, and tea were prepared and brought to the long, front veranda. Most of us sat on the floor, ate with our fingers, and sang Christmas songs in Marathi. There was a lull in the festivities. Estelle said, "Ruth, please go into the dining room. I think I heard something." Just at that time, the curtains opened from the dining room.

In walked Saint Nicholas.

Screams permeated the veranda. People were scooting together, trying to get under the table or couchlike furniture, and they shouted, "BOOTH has come." (The devil has arrived.)

Needless to say, much repair work had to be done. We learned many valuable multicultural lessons in the dear land of Mother India.

## Three Christmases Celebrated in Bethlehem by the Burgess Family (1985-1986)

Stanley Milton Burgess

Any person who visits Israel during the holiday season has the option of celebrating Christmas in the very place that the first Christmas occurred. So it was with the Ruth and Stan Burgess family in 1985-86.

Ruth and I were both professors at Missouri State University (MSU) from 1976 onward. As such, we were eligible to seek sabbaticals in the sixth year there. And so, both of us applied to be gone for the spring of 1986. To our delight, we both were approved for the same semester. (We understand that this never happened again!) Shortly after turning in our sabbatical applications, I learned that I had been added to MSU's London Studies Program for the fall 1985. So it was that our third son, Scott, and I departed for London in mid-August 1985. I taught three courses during that fall semester, and we lived in South Kensington in London. By November the rest of our family (Ruth, Matt, Mandy, and David), who had remained in Springfield—to allow Matt to play Varsity football, Ruth to teach accelerated courses at MSU, and Mandy and David to attend elementary school—joined us until the London Studies Program was over.

On December 22, the six of us boarded a Dan Air jet headed for Tel Aviv. We knew adjustments had to be made when it took three attempts to take off successfully. Perhaps they just needed a new rubber band! When we arrived, we were immediately surrounded by Israeli forces and military tanks. After changing money, we arranged for a *sherut* (*monit sherut* or service taxi) to take us to Tantur, the Ecumenical Center for Theological Research, located at the southern edge of Jerusalem, just north of the ancient city of Bethlehem in Judaea. Our large taxi-like *sherut* had sufficient room for the six of us, in addition to two Israeli soldiers.

The next two days were busy with arranging living quarters for all of us, buying groceries in Arab food shops and preparing for a trip to Bethlehem on the evening of December 24. We wanted to enjoy Christmas Eve on the very spot where Mary and Joseph arrived, to pay their taxes, and where Mary gave birth to our Savior.

Having made what we thought were adequate preparations, the six of us joined with other Tantur residents on a chartered bus to transport us to the center of Bethlehem. There we experienced numerous choirs (from many countries), which filled the air with joyful yuletide singing. We learned that we had not arranged for tickets to actually go into the Church of the Nativity, where visitors entered the down-staircase to the sacred site of Jesus' birth. Instead, we were separated into two long lines, with Ruth and Mandy in one, and Stan and the three boys in the other.

We were so enthralled with the singing and sharing that we were enjoying that we somehow missed the bus when it left to return to Tantur. This meant we were to walk through country fields, including what turned out to be “Shepherd’s Field,” in our attempt to return to our apartment. As we walked, we suddenly discovered that this was far too cold for “shepherds to abide in the field, watching over their flocks at night.” We were reminded that the Roman Catholic Church had chosen December 25 for Christmas celebration in order to replace an existing pagan holiday. The real date for Jesus’ birth probably would be the summer of 6 BCE/BC, two years before Herod died (this is known to have occurred in 4 BCE).

No sheep ... but plenty of wild dogs! Mandy was frightened at the dogs’ unwillingness to allow us to make our way through their fields. Our prayers changed from rejoicing to pleading with God for safety. Finally, after about two hours of wandering through the Judean hills, we found the main road from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, and we reached our new home in Southern Jerusalem.

But that was not the end of our Christmas celebrating. Actually, Eastern Christian churches have celebrated two January dates (the sixth of January, Epiphany of our Lord—His “spiritual birthday”—and two weeks later, January 20). We discovered that our Eastern friends had differences, just as we have in the West. The amusing side of this is that it allowed our children to plead for three sets of gifts, rather than just one. Of course, this was a chance to remind them that we were already stretching our budget to accommodate our year abroad.

Meanwhile, we completed the targeted products of our sabbaticals. Ruth studied with Professor Reuven Feuerstein, eventually being asked to write his biography, which came out a few years later: *Changing Brain Structure Through Cross-Cultural Learning: The Life of Reuven Feuerstein*, published by Edwin Mellen Press, 2008. She also became a significant figure in the teaching of Feuerstein’s program. Stan fulfilled his project with Eastern Churches, resulting in the publication of *The Holy Spirit: Eastern Christian Traditions*, by Hendrickson Press, 1989. However, the greatest impact of this trip to Israel was on our children, who came to better understand their ancient Judeo-Christian traditions.

## Childhood Christmas Memories

Sandy Schmidt Sutton

Christmas was always the single most important (and fun) holiday in my family as a child. While I do not remember the specific year in which different events took place, I will attempt to piece together a patchwork quilt of family celebrations and traditions as I remember them. First and foremost, our family always knew the true meaning of Christmas and celebrated accordingly (no Santa, reindeers, elves and North Pole mythology for us!).

The last Sunday evening before Christmas was THE CHRISTMAS PROGRAM at our church. It was both a nerve-wracking and exciting event! It was very scary reciting your memorized piece in front of the entire church. After the program was the fun part where everyone received a large bag of peanuts and candy. Because I was not crazy about the peanuts, I gave those to my dad. However, I still remember the ribbon candy, gum drops, chocolate drops, candy canes, and various other hard candies. I had four younger brothers, and we would trade with each other for our favorite candy.

Because my grandparents, most aunts, uncles, and cousins did not live near us, we usually celebrated Christmas with just our immediate family. Our family tradition was to celebrate on Christmas Eve by opening our gifts. Growing up on a farm in the 1950s in Kansas meant farming chores for everyone in the family. Consequently, we had to complete all the farm chores, have supper, and wash and dry the dishes before we were able to get down to the serious business of opening our gifts. Needless to say, we probably set speed records in getting all of that done! However, it was not easy as we had 10,000 chickens, and we had to gather approximately 7,000 eggs daily. After the glorious time of opening our presents, we would either play with our new toys (ignoring the new clothes) or play games as a family.

During the week between Christmas and New Year's Day, we had a more relaxed pace and would play family games and eat snacks in the evenings. On New Year's Day we usually got together with the one uncle, aunt, and two cousins who lived only thirty miles away. We would exchange gifts with them, and I still remember the Lennon Sisters paper dolls they gave me one year.

After New Year's Day, it was back to school, discuss what you got for Christmas with your friends, and begin the long wait until the next Christmas.



## Home for Christmas

Lois E. Olena

In July of 1995 while living in Vermont, I received a call from my mom saying that my father, who had been fighting leukemia for years, had gone into septic shock. She said if I wanted to see him, I'd better come, since all his organs were shutting down.

My brothers and I flew to Alabama, stayed with him around the clock in ICU, and miraculously, he pulled through.

His oncologist said he would probably have another crisis like this before the year was out. We felt the Lord directing us to move from Vermont to Alabama to be with my parents, come what may. My mom had her hands full with her ailing mother too.

My husband, Doug, our two young daughters, Arwen and Eden, and I arrived in Birmingham December 3. Six days later, my 92-year-old grandmother said to me, "The angels are wondering where I am."

Four days after that, she passed away. My father performed her funeral, and as a result of being out in the cold he came down with double pneumonia. Despite antibiotics, he continued to deteriorate. He had almost no white blood cells.

By the evening of December 22, my dad was in the ER; we spent all night caring for him as he struggled to breathe. The next morning the doctor informed us that he would not make it through the day. We couldn't believe this was it. He had just worked the day before!

That evening, my father went to be with Jesus. What profound grief I felt as my sixty-five-year-old father left this earth.

I wanted him around for another thirty years, at least! When I returned home and told our daughters, through her tears Arwen asked me, "Mom, how come Jesus took Pa-Pa to heaven if He *knew* we already bought presents for him?" I said, "Well, honey, I guess Jesus just wanted to give him a better present than we could—his healing, being face to face with Jesus!" She paused then said, "He *sure* is gonna miss McDonalds!"

The next day was Sunday and Christmas Eve. Somehow, the Lord helped us to get up and go to church. Our pastor spoke kind words to our family about perseverance, about my father's loving and serving heart, and about how he would have wanted us to be there at church with our caring community.

On Christmas morning, only forty hours since my dad had entered heaven, our family gathered together. There, hanging from the fireplace was a red Christmas stocking with gold letters that

said Papa. I looked at it, thinking it was empty. I was surprised, though, when my husband, Doug, leaned over and pulled an envelope out of the stocking.

He began to read a letter to the family that he had written, as if from my dad. As his words filled the room, the healing tears flowed. “I just couldn’t bear to look at that empty stocking,” Doug said with a smile.

I knew then that Dad really was home for Christmas, and that we had received the gift of the presence of the One who is close to the brokenhearted (Ps. 34:18).

## The Kindly Ghosts of Christmas Past

Geoffrey W. Sutton

Throughout my childhood, our English Christmases became more and more Americanised as the ten-day Atlantic Ocean voyage drifted into history. We always had a live naturally scented fir tree decorated with a few simple ornaments, which dad brought from those first Christmases before World War II. My mum baked a traditional English Christmas cake surrounded by a colourful band, covered with a snowscape of Royal icing with Father Christmas, reindeer, and miniature fir trees.

Outside, the townsfolk of Vineland, New Jersey welcomed Father Christmas with red and green lights hung across the broad avenue. On Christmas Eve, we joined bundled church folk singing carols and collecting coins for the poor in honour of Tiny Tim. And at church on the Sunday before Christmas, we were sure to get a colourful two-layer box of filled chocolates. Dad always got my dark ones.

On that glorious morning, I would wake to discover a traditional red stocking filled with fruit and sweets that magically appeared on my bed. In the next scene, I'm on the floor looking at all the presents beneath the tree. Father Christmas came though we had no chimney—only a large oil-fed heater below a brown metal grate in the sitting room. Questions of world travel and chimneys wouldn't produce doubts for a year or two as I opened one package or another from the jolly elf. And there were always fancy boxes from London with toys made in Hong Kong, books and comics not seen by American friends, and my favourite English chocolates.

Later, when I was ten, I opened a special present on Christmas morning. Inside the cover of this small Oxford Bible, I read: "with fondest love from, Nana, Grandad xxx." I added the year—it was Sunday 1960. Perhaps I took my new Bible to church—we would never miss a Sunday morning service. I never separated from this parting gift, which she made sacred despite the edges now trimmed with electric tape.

Next year on 5 December, I was sitting in sixth grade when the teacher called me away from my desk. It was a strange thing to see Dad in the middle of the day. He must have told me the news on the way to our grey 1949 Plymouth. Mum was crying. Her mum had died. I wouldn't see Nana New again.

We lived in a cold, small two-bedroom rectangle suspended above swampland in East Vineland, New Jersey. Dad had left his office job on Baker's Street in London and found work loading grey concrete blocks on nondescript lorries in the promised land. It wasn't the sort of job that left him with spare change. In this context, Rev. Fred Packer made it possible for us to fly home. I was amazed at seeing the \$100 bills he gave to my dad. It was a loan of course, but how magnanimous!

Adults find ways to help children enjoy difficult times. In those days, flying was an adventure. We boarded a blue and white Pan Am jet in New York for our first-ever transatlantic flight. I got Pan Am wings, and dad got beer spilled on his grey suit, which offered a decidedly unsanctified odour and called for explanations and laughter amidst the mourning. Soon we were winding our way through the bleak, wintry streets of old London, which Dickens would have recognised by the smell of coal fires and the damp cold feel of walking through dense fogs that left flecks of black soot on my new cream-coloured coat.

As the days went by, I was hugged and kissed by my smiling nicknamed relatives and friends who revelled in memories before the war. Nana Sutton, aunts and uncles—they're all gone now.

Perhaps dad knew one of us needed a break? We walked along the Thames, visited old Finchley haunts, jumped on red double-deckers like grandad Sutton once drove, and went here and there through the underground labyrinth on roaring trains. One afternoon poor old grandad Thomas New reached in his pocket to give me a parting gift of twelve old English pennies surely worth more in weight than you could buy with a shilling. And then he gave me the gift of words, a miniature green dictionary. I didn't know then how precious it must have been because he only had three years of school before working in the brickfields. That was grandad's last gift.

Two years later, as a part of our growing American Christmas traditions, dad took me the forty miles across the Delaware to Philadelphia where fabulous old stores like John Wanamaker and Gimbels entertained families with lavish animated displays. It was a 1950s American Christmas wonderland. And there I got my favourite novel, *A Christmas Carol*, where I could connect year after year with ghostly stories that flit from scene to scene showing me joyful family gatherings, chestnuts roasting at Christmas markets, and frightful images of ancient markers in a London cemetery.

Like the stories in Nana and Grandad's Bible, Dickens did not leave me with clanging chains of sadness past but threw open the windows on another day inviting all of us to honour those who went before by investing in the possible future lives running to and fro.

In the eternal words of Tiny Tim,

“God Bless Us, Every One!”



## Brown Santa's Gift

LaDonna Friesen

When I was seven years old, Santa visited my home. He had a white beard and brown skin. I had seen the snow-swirling beard on Coca-Cola cans, but the cheeks and nose had been red as cherries underneath a forehead as moon-pale as mine.

I trembled, not because his face was different than I expected, but because I had learned to separate real from pretend, and now the pretend was in my living room in a perfectly red St. Nicholas suit.

His dark brown eyes were as warm as hot chocolate, but I could not drink his smile. I backed into the woodpile by the furnace, even as he passed out packages my siblings opened—red-covered drawing pads and a cornucopia of art supplies for my brother and old sister, a tricycle for my younger sister.

I was dying to touch him to see if he was real—a brown Santa holding a candy-striped package so close I could smell it. My heart quaked like the shepherds' when they saw a divine being.

Three weeks ago, Mr. Coffee, the principal, called my name over the loudspeaker in my first-grade classroom. I turned to stone. I had never been summoned to the principal's office. The other children told me that Mr. Coffee had a paddle with spikes on it, and a child never left his office without a bloody behind. I had nightmares of Mr. Coffee holding my arm as I begged him to let me go, as he dragged me into his office where the paddle, prickled with metal spikes, thick on the bottom and thin-sharp at the top, opened like a toothy jaw on his desk.

As much as I wanted to stay with my class, my teacher motioned to the door. I walked the maze of sidewalks from the first-grade rooms up the path to Mr. Coffee's realm, at a higher elevation than the rest of the school, probably because it guarded the dungeon of scarred children underneath.

When I arrived, three things surprised me. (1) Mr. Coffee did not have a paddle. (I looked for it first.) Instead, his hand was over his round brown face, and underneath it, his cheeks were wet. (2) My pastor and a long-time family friend were in Mr. Coffee's office. (3) My siblings were there too.

Something unnatural made me want to close in on myself. Just that morning, my pastor's wife woke me, instead of my mother, washed my face with cold water, which my mother would not have done, and then helped me dress for school. When I passed the living room, a cloud of church friends surrounded my father, who was sitting in the same chair where he had sat

for a month, too weak from the melanoma cancerous lumps on his neck to get up. Sometimes I slept on the floor near him, but last night I had slept in my mother's room.

At the drizzly bus stop, we siblings splashed in a puddle made by a pothole as jagged as a roughly opened tin can. Suddenly, my sister said, "Daddy is going to die today."

I was so startled I did not hear the bus. "No, he isn't!"

Now in Mr. Coffee's office, I discovered my sister was a prophet, or her intensely sensitive nature discerned the truth.

I said nothing when my pastor told me the news. The three men were crying, and we children were stiff, twisted shapes, sculpted like Adam and Eve leaving Eden.

And once again tonight I could not move. Behind me, the wood-burning stove flickered memories. Dad reading the *Little House* series to me by this fire. Dad chopping the wood for this fire while I recited the Ten Commandments and Bible phrases to the rhythm of his ax. Dad running from his office when I was stung by a bee just on the other side of this wall.

Santa slowly neared, motioning he would help me open my gift. Maybe he sensed my strange lightning and thunder of terror and excitement. He started at one end and I the other. When the paper was pulled off, he opened the womb of the box. At first a head, then the shoulders, and finally the whole body of the infant was in his arms.

When he knelt so that our eyes were level, I could see a little of his soul. It was full of longing. He wanted so badly to give me this gift.

His magic began unthawing me in a way the fire at my back could not. My hands behind me were too warm from the fire anyway. I moved them to my sides and then opened my hands. He lay the child in them, and in that moment, his arms touched mine, our foreheads bent in, and we were an enclosed circle with the child as its center. I was not thinking about what I had lost. My arms were full. I was given something to love by a presence that was my first knowing of fear-like awe.

I named my doll Bonny, meaning "beautiful" and "good," and she went with me everywhere except to school. She had the kindest face of all my babies, round and lovely and good.

Years later I learned that Mr. Coffee had notified Salvation Army about our loss, and an African American volunteer had dressed as Santa and delivered gifts to us. That Christmas, our family received so many presents that my mom hid some, embarrassed that we had too many under the tree. In our kitchen, the community stacked boxes and boxes of food. I liked sorting food from the packages, just for the joy of it. Even the pastor of the Baptist church, which we did not attend, sent a check, and people from his congregation gave us pies and canned goods. Eastern Orthodox women sewed doll clothes for Bonny.

The community placed love in our arms and journeyed with us into new life.

And that Christmas, I discovered some things that seem like pretend—like God becoming a human baby, like a father passing through the canal of death into new life, like Santa laying a child in my arms—were as real as Bonny’s loveliness. Much more real than Mr. Coffee’s spiked paddle.

## Leaping for Joy

Julianne Hawes Nelson

I love when children preach.  
I'm talking about Christmas programs.  
Love their stuffed animals in the stable, love their angel wings, their voices singing,  
their unrestrained excitement.  
Love the three wisemen's gifts I saw brought to the manger one year: Incense for a stinky  
stable, Gold Card for important purchases, and a Myrrh computer to get out the good news.  
I love when children preach.  
We get it, and we remember it.

Like we should, when good news is shared.

The Hebrew prophet Zephaniah had some good news to share.  
But first came the bad news.  
Zephaniah's name means "God has protected" and Zephaniah probably needed that  
protection.  
A lot of his words were railings against the Israelites.  
Ranting about them worshiping other gods, putting a whole lot of other things before God.

But then, all of a sudden, after the bad news, Zephaniah says, "those of you who are humble  
and still care about God, listen."

Sing aloud, the Lord is in your midst.  
Don't fear; don't let your hands grow weak.  
The Lord is in your midst.  
He will rejoice over you with gladness.  
He will renew you in his love.  
He will exult over you with loud singing.

Wow.  
He is saying,  
Dance a jig. Sing really loud. God is among you.  
And oh, by the way, God is leaping for joy over you.

This good news to people who had blown it big-time (and often) but some of whom were  
humble and still cared about God.

Joy.

In an unlikely place and time.

Hundreds of years later, God would break into history with another exclamation of joy.  
This time the angels delivered it:

Life Together Christmas 2020: God with Us

I am bringing you good news of great joy  
for all the people;  
to you is born a savior.  
Glory to God and on earth, peace!

This was delivered to good people in good times though, right?

Not exactly.

It was delivered to people who were oppressed economically and politically and religiously.  
It was not the best of times.

Some things were a mess.

And yes, they were ordinary people, getting up to do a day's work, trying to provide for their families and helping their neighbors when they could.

And into this ordinary, messy life came a surprise.

Joy.

In the form of a vulnerable, squalling baby who would need a whole lot of care before he could care for others' needs.

I imagine 1<sup>st</sup> century Israelites were surprised by it.

Joy.

In an unlikely form and time.

More hundreds of years later, we live our one-foot-ahead-of-the-other, messy, sometimes ordinary and this year, distressingly challenging, lives.

And sometimes we blow it and disappoint ourselves and God.

And most of the time, we get up every morning to do a day's work, trying to provide for our families and helping our neighbors when we can.

But into our ordinary and messy lives can come a surprise.

Joy.

Realizing, if we look around, that God is still here.

And oh, by the way, leaping for joy over you.

So, as Zephaniah would probably say and children everywhere would understand,  
we should be dancing a jig and singing really loud.

## Hey, Give Me a Minute...

Julianne Hawes Nelson

Luke 2:7

December 11, 2016

“Hey, give me a minute,” the innkeeper says to Joseph.  
Give me a minute.  
To do what?

Our scripture says,  
“Mary placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”  
Even a child, if they have heard the Christmas story once or twice,  
can tell you there was no room in the inn.  
Because they remember it.

Only one of the Gospels—Luke—records this fact and in only one sentence:  
“she placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”  
Only one Gospel writer and only one sentence records it and yet we all remember it.  
Why?  
I wonder if it’s because it seems so unfair.

If we believe that Jesus was God with skin on, it seems so unfair that God would have  
to be born in a drafty, stinky animal trough.  
Even for those who believe Jesus was just a good man,  
it seems unfair that no one would give up their bed for a pregnant woman.  
No room.

“Well, they should have planned better and gotten here earlier,”  
the innkeeper might have thought.  
“I can’t produce a room where there is no room; I have my limits.”  
That thinking is so logical.  
Makes so much sense.

The only problem is, it keeps a heavily pregnant woman out in the cold  
without a bed.  
Or, for those of us who believe Jesus was more than human,  
it keeps *God* out in the cold without a bed.

I remember a Christmas song I heard as a child.  
It’s entitled *No Room* and some of the lines go like this: (*sing*)  
*No room, only a manger of hay; no room, he is a stranger today.*  
*No room, here in his world turned away,*  
*no room, no room, no room.*  
*No room, here in the hearts of mankind;*  
*no room, no cheery welcome to find.*

Life Together Christmas 2020: God with Us

*No room, surely the world must be blind:  
no room, no room, no room.*

“But I have limits,” the innkeeper could well have thought.  
“I don’t have extra rooms and I don’t have money to build extra rooms  
just for the occasional extra visitors  
during the time of the census.”  
“Why can’t people understand that and plan better for their needs?”

Hospitality was a very high priority in ancient near Eastern culture.  
People would reach out and welcome others into their homes,  
preparing food for them.  
But everyone has limits, don’t they?  
We know there are many, many people in the world right now for whom there is “no room.”  
Thousands upon thousands of refugees fleeing violence in their home countries,  
seeking asylum in western Europe and North America.  
And some countries saying, “no room” or “no *more* room.”

I read an article last week by an acquaintance of mine, a young Marine and his wife who  
live in Virginia.  
He said about a year ago, he and his wife decided to start praying for refugees.  
Well, you know where that led.  
It led them to *care about* refugees.  
And then to sign up to adopt a refugee family.  
Which has been messy and hard and wonderful, he said.  
But he says he has a much deeper awareness now of the concept of  
“no room” and trying to “make room.”  
In their case, it led them to a family that was being threatened by the Taliban and had to  
flee Afghanistan for their lives.  
The couple, in their mid 20s, live now with their four children in a very small  
apartment in Virginia.  
They arrived with a total of 2 suitcases and very little knowledge of English.  
My friend and his wife are developing a friendship with  
them,  
transporting them occasionally to appointments,  
buying gifts for them on birthdays and Christmas,  
sharing meals in each others’ homes.

Is it enough?  
Is it the suite in the inn?  
No, it’s more like space in the stable.  
But Josh and Madison, like the long-ago innkeeper, decided to say,  
“hey, give me a minute.”  
Give me a minute to think of how I might make space in my already-crowded life.  
Give me a minute to think creatively of where that space might be.  
Josh would probably tell you that he and his wife are the ones who have been the most  
blessed by making space in their lives for this immigrant family.

“No room,” the innkeeper protested.  
“No more room.”  
And no one could blame him.  
But then he said,



“hey, give me a minute.”

Give me a minute to open my *heart* a little wider so I can open my *door*  
a little wider.

Hey, give me a minute.”

And after that minute, he found a resource to offer.

It wasn't ideal.

Not for a pregnant woman.

Not for a baby.

Not for God.

It wasn't ideal.

But I don't think “ideal” was the point.

I think the point was meeting the need of the vulnerable.

What we believe is that, in putting on human skin,

God made divine self vulnerable,

depending on humans to protect and nurture that vulnerability.

Recently, a friend of mine who is an attorney, said to me,

“I worked on such a great case last week.”

“What was it about?” I asked.

“Well,” she said, “a young mom who had made a lot of bad choices,  
was at the point of having the state take away her 1 year old child,  
or she could voluntarily give *up* the child.

She chose to voluntarily give up the child.”

I stared blankly at my friend.

Nothing in that case sounded very good to *me*.

But she went on:

“that young mom's decision prevented her from having to go through  
a trial, with all her bad choices rehashed for the jury.

And more importantly, it allowed her child to be adopted by the foster  
family that has had him for most of his life already.

*And*, it will allow the mom to write a letter to her child, explaining  
to him that she loved him but wasn't able to care for him well.

*And*, it will probably allow her to continue to have  
occasional

contact with her son and the adoptive parents.”

When my attorney friend paused, I nodded my head.

Now I understood.

She wasn't looking for “ideal” in this situation.

She was looking for the needs of the vulnerable to be met as well as possible  
in an UN-ideal situation.

She was looking for “room where there *was* no room.”

It may be that Jesus comes again and again,

looking for places to be born.

Not ideal places with ideal people and ideal furnishings and ideal resources.

But places where people can say,

“hey, give me a minute.”

Let me see if I can open my heart a little wider

so I can open the doors of my life a little wider.

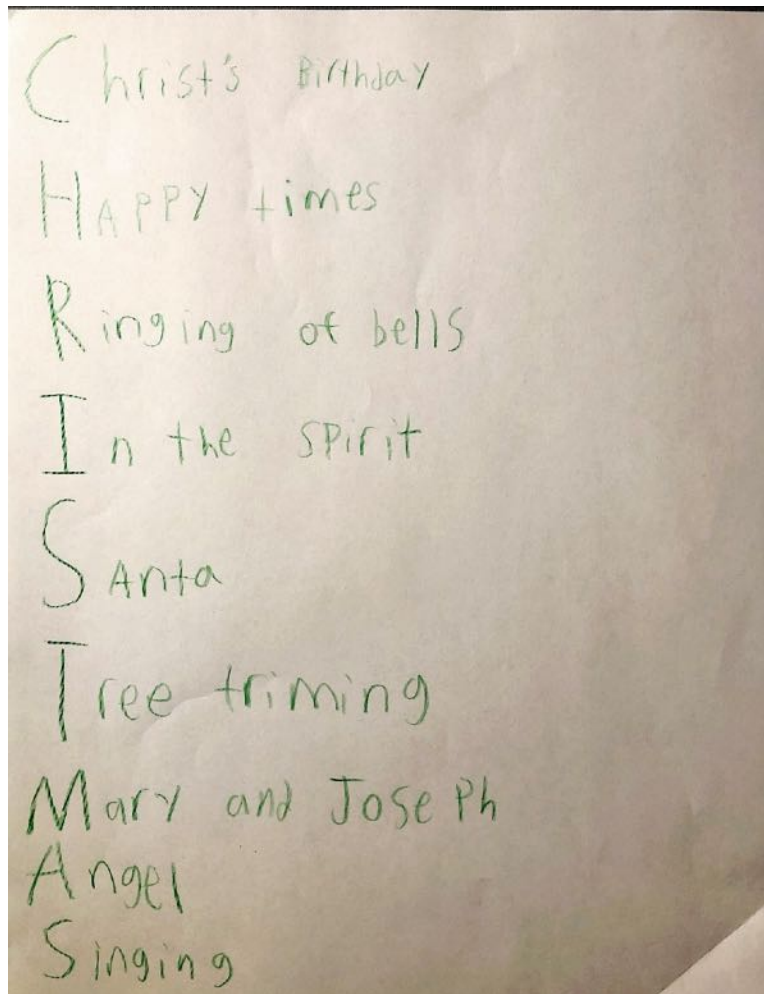
“No room,” we often think.

No more room in my life for any additional people or commitments.

The Bethlehem innkeeper might suggest we think again and consider saying, “hey, give me a minute.”

## Christmas Acrostic

Julianna Sutton, age 9



## Struggling for Christmas Traditions

Nathan and Amy Sutton

As we grow up, we learn our individual family's traditions.

- When do we dive into presents, perhaps Christmas Eve, and do we start with stockings?
- What foods do we eat?
- Who visits whom?
- What stories, movies, and music do we revisit?

This becomes the way of things, and it seems unchanging. However, when we came together, we learned of each other's family traditions. We tried to incorporate each other's traditions. This took effort, and, at times, we came to a head. This was more of surviving traditions—appeasing family.

When we had our first child, we had a reset. We purposely asked, “What will our traditions be?” It seems odd to invent a tradition, after all, don't they just come about, or they are dictated to us? We re-visited some questions such as food, visits, and presents. We asked new questions like, “How can we honor and protect our family unit while also honoring extended family? How can we make this as stress-free a season as possible?”

After some discussions, our own advent came about; we set things in place, but it wasn't long before life brought more change. Financial change, more kids, different priorities, growing kids with different activities. The list goes on.

Our advent and traditions had to adapt, which led us to the question, “What anchors do we hold fast to?” We had to realize that it's ok that the “what we do” has transience because the “why” has permanence. The “why” is what we want to pass on to the next generation.

## Anticipation

Don Tosh

Oh, the anticipation! In response to my older brother, who could snoop out the best hidden Christmas gifts, my parents applied the tactic of wrapping gifts early and placing them around the tree, sometimes as much as two or three weeks before Christmas. I would sit and stare and imagine what I was getting. I would shake them, sort them, and resort them. I could tell whether the object inside would slide, roll, or be immobile. Superman's x-ray vision would be so nice. The presents would have been placed tastefully around the tree, but I would have all the packages sorted and stacked by who the recipient was, with my stack out in front.

With about a week to go the suspense would have built to such a level that I would start to beg to be able to open one of my gifts early. After a few days of this, my mother would give in, and then I would have the challenge of deciding which of the gifts I would open. Would I guess wrong and open a package that had clothes in it, when I knew there were some toys that were just waiting to be played with?

Finally, the big night came. My parents had figured out that if we opened the gifts on Christmas Eve, they could sleep in on Christmas morning, and the three boys would get up early to play with their new treasures, not even bothering them about getting fed. It made sense because with the anticipation getting so high neither my brothers nor I would be able to get to sleep, so we would end up getting my parents up at 4 or 5 AM to open presents.

Looking back now, what do I remember most? Not the presents. I cannot recall a single gift that stands out above any of the others. No, what stands out in my memory is the anticipation of what was coming and the excitement of how happy I would be. In the years since then I have mellowed considerably in my level of excitement. I can sit back and vicariously enjoy the joyous anticipation of others, especially my daughter and grandchildren. I can appreciate the process, realizing that the anticipation is worth enjoying in its own right.

What a blessing it is to be able to give one another gifts and symbols of our affection. God has truly blessed us with the ability to bless others. My parents enjoyed watching our excitement and joy as we went through the Christmas season. And I did finally learn the basic truth that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

## Joyeux Noel!

Carole Tosh

It is early evening. My brother, three sisters, and I are on our way to bed. I can smell the spruce tree, which we decorated for Christmas, as I walk by. It smells so fresh and outdoorsy. I know it will take a long time to fall asleep, but we need to try because our parents will wake us up soon for midnight mass. Upon awakening I look out the bedroom window and notice that it is still snowing outside. It must have snowed a lot because our footprints from our afternoon play are now hidden under a blanket of white.

We are finally on our way walking to church bundled in our winter coats, mitts, hats, and boots. St. Joachim Church is only a block away. I can hear the church bells ringing and see the silver outline of the church building through the falling snow. As we enter, I am reminded how beautiful my church is. The white marble altar surrounded by white lights. The gold embossed tabernacle where the host is stored. The stained glass windows. The carved wall hangings depicting the way of the cross. The massive cedar pillars with their unique smell. And the lingering odor of incense.

Midnight mass, spoken in Latin with its soothing and familiar sound, begins. The priest is clothed in all white at this special happy occasion. Baby Jesus has been placed on his bed of hay in the crèche at the front of the church. *Minuit Chrétien* (O Holy Night) is being sung by a soloist accompanied by the pipe organ. This is my favorite part of midnight mass. After communion and mass has finished, we head outside to greet friends and relatives with a “Joyeux Noel!”

Our trek home is much faster as we run all the way. The fun time has finally come. PRESENTS!!! We gather under the tree, sitting on the floor as my father passes our gifts to us. This year I get exactly what I wanted: a blond-haired blue-eyed doll, a colouring book with a box of crayons and a long flannel nightgown for the cold winter nights.

And now for the Réveillon—a culinary feast of *tourtière* (French Canadian pork pie seasoned with clove, cinnamon, and nutmeg) with numerous side dishes. This is also one of the few times in the year where we can drink pop, Coke mainly. What a treat. There are hard Christmas candies, cookies, and chocolates on the side tables.

Sleepiness is now getting the better of us, and it is back to bed for us until about noon. The festivities of visiting relatives are part of Christmas Day. Our closest cousins in age and proximity are the first on our list. Uncle Gabby, Tante Julie, Kiki (my maternal grandmother), and my three cousins reside on the same plot of land. As we enter their house, we are met with an array of Christmas aromas. French cuisine passed down for generations are a part of these incredible smells. Our afternoon is spent talking, playing, and of course eating.

## Life Together Christmas 2020: God with Us

Our father's parents live about two blocks away. This is where we eat our turkey dinner with about eighty of our relatives. Each child also gets a gift from one of the adults. This gathering lasts well into the night. We have had another wonderful Christmas. You can tell by the chatter of our family as we walk home in the cold calm of the night.

These are the memories I have of numerous Christmases. Starting with decorating of the tree, midnight mass, the comfort of family, the incredible food, presents, and fluffy white snow.



## A Christmas Harmony

Doug Olena

In bed at 8 p.m. waiting for my wake-up call at 11 p.m., Christmas Eve was always predictable, even if it was a disturbance of our ordinary routine. My mom was in full celebration mode preparing for the days surrounding Christmas. Though she had been knitting sweaters since much earlier in the year, her efforts to celebrate the season began in November before the commercialization of the holidays became a perpetual and unavoidable foreground and unavoidable din. For years she would get a new Advent calendar so daily we could get another glimpse of the reason for the Christmas celebration. She would put it up shortly before December, and we would anticipate opening the little doors with treasures behind them, a gift, a Bethlehem star, a shepherd, a candle. My brothers, sister, and I would get to open one each day of December with the final door on Christmas morning opening before breakfast to find the baby Jesus in a manger.

My body had chosen this night to gift me with bronchitis. Even though I was struggling to breathe, and I complained to my mom that I was having difficulties, we got up and went to church for the midnight Christmas Eve service. She sympathized with my plight but encouraged me that I would be fine. I would see the doctor after Christmas, and yes, I was fine eventually. My brothers and I got dressed in our Sunday best, and for us that was cute little shorts with coats over our white shirts. My parents, dressed in finery, the kids all bundled up in winter coats on top of our cuteness, we got in the car and went to church. My brother, Kenny, and I were in the choir, but I didn't sing that night. I sat with my sister, Lolly, and youngest brother, Randy, in the pews.

We knelt, then stood, then sat, the liturgy driving our ways then we sang Christmas carols—all the favorites, “Sailing Ships,” “We Three Kings,” “Away in a Manger,” surrounded by the Christmas finery and the pomp of formal high church in Buffalo’s St. Paul’s Cathedral. From the priest and his assistants leading the cross around the sanctuary, to the candles and pine boughs ensconced on alternate pews, the small orchestra, and the simple but poignant liturgy, we went through the motions like putting on our most comfortable old sweater. We sang in the Christmas day, got our weary but excited bodies back in the car, and made our way home. We couldn’t wait to get back in our beds to wait for “Santa” to bring our stockings. Though I still struggled to breathe, the happy season made that bearable. We discovered it wasn’t really Santa shortly after we noticed that our dad delivered the stockings.

So, we would pretend to sleep while Dad carefully lay the stockings full of goodies, tiny toys, and treats on our beds so as not to disturb us. We would paw through the goodies only minutes after he had gone back to bed, but we were exhausted, too, and shortly found our way to dreamland. The next morning when we woke up with more vim and vinegar than our parents,

we pestered them, climbed on their bed, and generally made nuisances of ourselves. They finally got up, groggy, and business-like to attend to the day.

The first issue of the day was breakfast. As much as my siblings and I strained to get to the presents, my parents required that we all eat a decent breakfast. So, bacon and eggs, orange juice, and toast hastily gobbled made us slow down just a bit. Then we would tell the Christmas story, filling in the blanks while our parents prompted with the beginnings of phrases: “’Twas the night before \_\_\_\_\_, when all through the \_\_\_\_\_ not a creature was \_\_\_\_\_, not even a \_\_\_\_\_.”<sup>1</sup> We knew it by heart, and cheerfully went along even though it was one more delay before presents. Then we would get in a line—from youngest to oldest—and march to the Christmas tree.

Most of the presents were laid out under the tree, but each of us also had a place for larger or special gifts, my brother in front of the fireplace, me on the couch, etc. My parents, fair to the point of painfulness, knew that Santa had provided the best he could for each of us, but that didn’t keep us immature humans from envying what our siblings got. My inner child was in competition with my first brother, Kenny, so it didn’t matter that I got what I had asked for but that Kenny’s haul was worth squandering some goodwill to envy. It never did any good since my parents supported sharing, and we got to use each other’s stuff eventually. Default impulses, however, are tough to quash in the moment they spring up. We learned differently as we grew up, but cut us some slack, we were all under ten years old. To add insult to the injury we did to our parents with this and other primitive impulses, they gave us all plenty of the same things, chocolate, books, pens and pencils, toothbrushes, sweaters lovingly knitted by Mom, and a wonderful warm house with plenty of food. Certainly, we were on the top of the heap of people who were happy.

When the sting of envy had subsided, we all went about enjoying the things we had received. Then my dad’s friend, Bud Horne, showed up with a game or something for the whole family. Around noon we had Christmas dinner. Funny, but we focused so hard on the loot that we forgot our Mom was hard at work for us in the kitchen. It had become so natural to forget all the work it takes to make a holiday special, but my mom deserved every bit of thanks we could muster. It’s one of those things the experts make look so easy that you forget all the work that went into refining that skill. My mom was a wonderful host and entertainer, and she made us all feel special. Full after turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, corn, beans, milk, and a tasty dessert, we took our own dishes out to the kitchen then wallowed our way back to our toys.

I will end this short happy recollection of the wonderful Christmases our parents gave us by saying that I deeply appreciate every part of my parents’ drive to make us fair and equitable human beings. I know it is true for my siblings. Though my parents have passed away, I still strive today to become the good person my parents wanted me to be. I am grateful for the privilege that afforded us the opportunity to enjoy the wealth of our nation, and I pray that this may become true for more of us as we move forward.

---

<sup>1</sup> Clement Clarke Moore, “’Twas the Night Before Christmas,” accessed December 2, 2020, <http://pages.csdgs.net/~u119713267/christmas/twas-the-night-before-xmas.pdf>.

