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GOD OUTDOES HIMSELF!

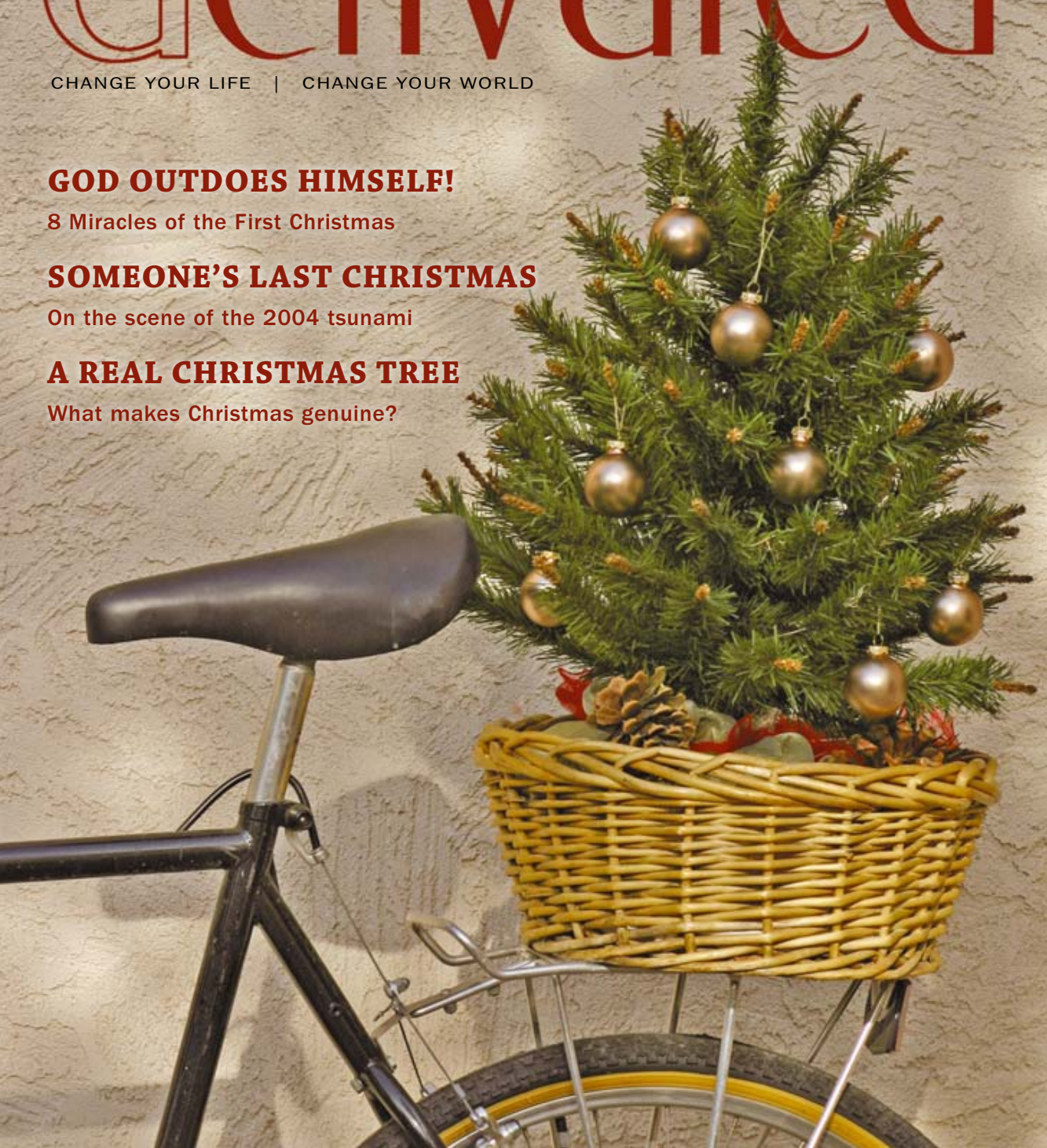
8 Miracles of the First Christmas

SOMEONE'S LAST CHRISTMAS

On the scene of the 2004 tsunami

A REAL CHRISTMAS TREE

What makes Christmas genuine?





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The five personal accounts of Christmas experiences in this issue could hardly be more diverse. In "Someone's Last Christmas" (page 8), Ike Suriwong writes from Phuket, Thailand, about the children he shared the meaning of Christmas with just before the tsunami of December 26, 2004, devastated that seaside paradise; in "Paid Forward" (page 7), Mario Sant'Ana finds a way to spread the Christmas spirit exponentially; in "Music with Healing Power" (page 12), Erika Blecic makes a discovery that is too good to keep to herself; in "A Real Christmas Tree" (page 10), Nyx Martinez remembers a childhood Christmas with no money, but everything that mattered; and in "Miracle on Flight IC814" (page 14), Rohit Kumar tells what he thinks the Christmas angels were up to on the 2000th anniversary of their Bethlehem assignment.

Each of the stories makes its own point, yet they all have one thing in common: They are all much more about giving than receiving. And it's not the "that made me feel so good" kind of giving, either, but the kind that does some genuine and lasting good in this tired old world of ours. It's the kind of giving that George Matthew Adams explained so well when he said, "Let us remember that the Christmas heart is a giving heart, a wide open heart that thinks of others first. The birth of the baby Jesus stands as the most significant event in all history because it has meant the pouring into a sick world of the healing medicine of love which has transformed all manner of hearts for 2,000 years. Underneath all the bulging bundles is this beating Christmas heart."

What wonderful things will this Christmas hold for you and yours? Here's the secret for making it the best one yet: It's all about giving. Merry Christmas!

Keith Phillips
Keith Phillips
FOR THE ACTIVATED FAMILY

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IN 1994, TWO AMERICAN VOLUNTEERS ANSWERED AN INVITATION FROM THE RUSSIAN DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION to teach Bible-based morals and ethics classes in several schools and institutions, including a home for about 100 orphaned, abandoned, or abused children.

Shortly before Christmas, the volunteers told the children at the home the story of the first Christmas—a story that most of them had never heard before. The children listened in rapt amazement as Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, found no

room in the inn, and ended up taking refuge in a stable where Mary gave birth to baby Jesus and laid Him to sleep in a manger.

Afterwards the volunteers organized an art project. They gave each of the children a small piece of cardboard to make a manger, part of a yellow napkin to cut up for straw, a piece of beige felt from which to cut baby Jesus, and a scrap of fabric to wrap Him in. As the children assembled their mangers, the volunteers moved around the room, interacting with the children and offering a little help where needed.

When one of the volunteers came to six-year-old Misha, she found that he had already finished his project. But as she looked closer, she was surprised to see two babies in his manger. When she asked him about this, Misha crossed his arms, knit his brow, and began explaining very seriously. For such a young boy who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related it all quite accurately, until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then he started to ad lib.

“Baby Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told Him I have no mama and no papa, so I don’t have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with Him. But I told Him I couldn’t, because I didn’t have a gift to give Him like everybody else. But I wanted to stay with Jesus very much, so I thought about what I could maybe use for a gift. I asked Jesus, ‘If I keep You warm, will that be a good enough gift?’ And Jesus told me, ‘If you keep Me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave Me.’ So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and said I could stay with Him for always.”

As little Misha finished his story, tears filled his eyes and splashed down his cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, he dropped his head to the table and sobbed. Misha had found Someone who would never abandon or abuse him, Someone who would stay with him “for always.”

—AUTHOR UNKNOWN

GOD OUTDOES HIMSELF!

Eight Miracles of the First Christmas

BY RONAN KEANE



EVERY BABY IS A MIRACLE OF GOD. The baby's first cry rings out, the umbilical cord is cut, and the proud parents and everyone else present—whether it's an obstetrician and attendants in a gleaming hospital or a tribal midwife in a thatched hut—rejoices at the wonder they have just witnessed. The birth of Jesus on the first Christmas was all of that, but also involved at least eight more miracles.

Angelic Pronouncement

Unlike others', Jesus' birth was announced before He was even conceived. "Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel said to her, 'Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!' Then the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus'" (Luke 1:26–28,30–31). Miracle number one.

Miraculous Conception—Times Two

It is, of course, one of the best-known and most outstanding miracles that at the time of Jesus' conception His mother, Mary, was a virgin.

The Bible is very clear on that:

“Mary asked the angel, ‘But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin.’ The angel replied, ‘The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of God shall overshadow you; so the baby born to you will be utterly holy—the Son of God’” (Luke 1:34–35 TLB).

This event was foretold 700 years earlier by the prophet Isaiah: “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel [‘God is with us,’ in Hebrew]” (Isaiah 7:14). In every sense, Jesus is the Son of God. Miracle number two.

Gabriel also told Mary that her cousin Elizabeth, who had been barren and was now past the age for childbearing, would also conceive and give birth to a son who would “turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.” Elizabeth gave birth to a boy who grew up to be John the Baptist. Everything happened exactly as Gabriel had announced (Luke 1:5–25, 57–66). Miracle number three.

Angelic Confirmation

What about Joseph, Mary's fiancé? What was he to think when Mary returned from visiting Elizabeth and he found out that Mary was three months pregnant? As can be expected, his first reactions were mixed. “Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly” (Matthew 1:19).

Joseph wanted to spare Mary humiliation and possible death—the punishment for adultery under Jewish law (Deuteronomy 22:13–14, 21)—but we can also imagine the pain he must have felt, believing that his betrothed was bearing another man's child.

That's when God sent an angel to Joseph also, as much to reassure and comfort him as to clarify the situation, no doubt. “An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus [“the Lord is salvation,” in Hebrew], for He will save His people from their sins.’ Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know [have sex with] her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus” (Matthew 1:20–21, 24–25). Miracle number four.

Place of Birth

It was also a miraculous fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, since His parents lived in Nazareth, some days' journey away. “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting” (Micah 5:2).

The Roman emperor Augustus Caesar had decreed that an empire-wide census should be taken, and Jewish tradition required that for any such business each man return to the place that he considered his ancestral home. For Joseph, a direct descendant of King David, that meant returning to Bethlehem with his pregnant wife, and she gave birth to Jesus shortly after they arrived. Miracle number five.

Angelic Announcement

Shepherds keeping watch over their sheep on the hill-sides surrounding Bethlehem were visited by an angel, who told them, “‘Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!’” (Luke 2:10–14).

The shepherds left their flocks and went to Bethlehem, where they found the Messiah exactly as the angel had told them. “Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child” (Luke 2:17). What this means is that, from day one of His life on earth, there were people testifying to the fact that the Messiah had come at last. Miracle number six.

Sign in the Heavens

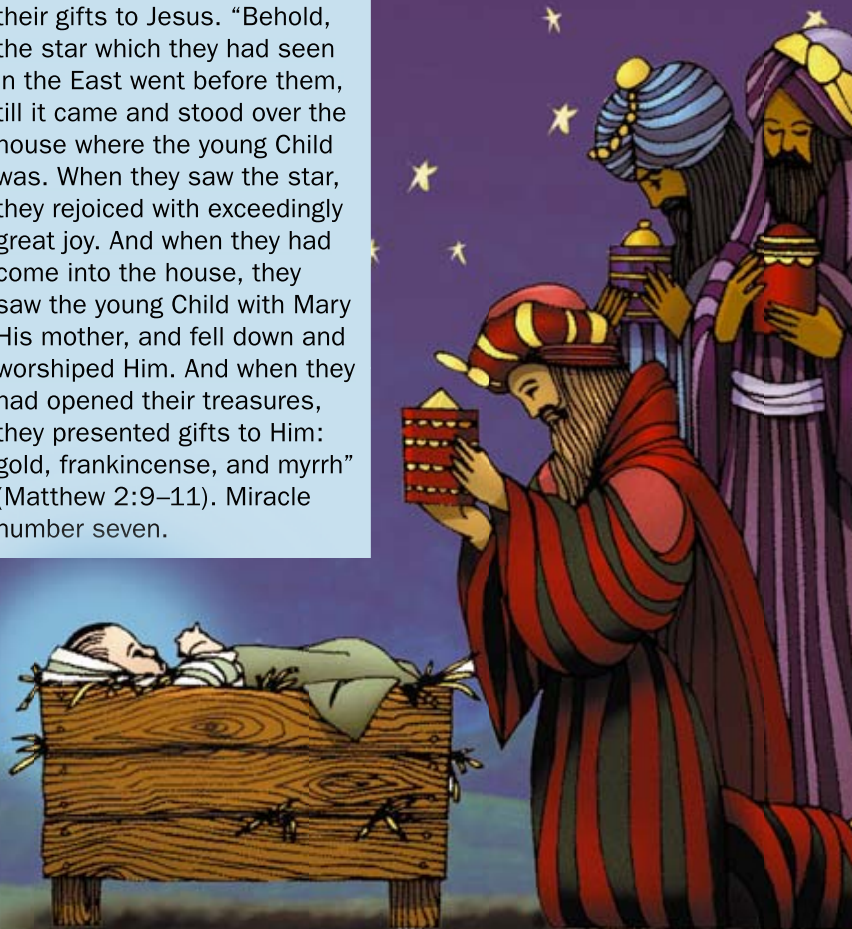
Wise men (according to tradition there were three, but the Bible does not specify how many) from the East (the Bible also doesn’t specify where in the East, but possibly Arabia, Persia, Babylon, or even as far away as India) observed an unusual occurrence in the heavens, which they interpreted to signify the birth of the “King of the Jews,” and they went to worship Him.

Travel in those days was difficult and slow, and it’s believed, based on other Scriptures, that it took the wise men up to two years of preparation and travel before they arrived in Judea and gave their gifts to Jesus. “Behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over the house where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Matthew 2:9–11). Miracle number seven.

Best by Far

The supreme miracle of Christmas, however, is not about angels or wise men or a sign in the sky. It’s about God’s only begotten Son taking on the form of a weak, helpless baby in order to better love, understand, sympathize with, and eventually die for you and me. Eternal life is God’s gift to us, and that life is in Jesus (1 John 5:11).

RONAN KEANE IS A FULL-TIME VOLUNTEER WITH THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL AND AN ACTIVATED CONTRIBUTING EDITOR.



THE GREATEST GIFT

If you haven't yet received God's gift from His heart to yours—Jesus—you can right now by praying the following prayer:

Thank You, Jesus, for coming to earth so I that could know my heavenly Father's love. Thank You for dying for me so I can be reconciled with Him and have eternal life in Heaven. I receive You as my Savior now. Please help me to get to know and love You in a deep and personal way. Amen.

PAID FORWARD

FOR SEVERAL YEARS, WE HAD PROVIDED A SPECIAL CHRISTMAS DINNER FOR LOW-INCOME FAMILIES HERE IN SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL. By November many of these people were already eagerly looking forward to and talking about the next one.

It wasn't until we started drawing up our guest list that we realized how much our work had grown. Our initial list had 500 names! Even if our sponsors were able to provide that much food, so many people would cause the event to be less personal than previous years. It was time to reevaluate—to pray, discuss, and possibly change what had already become a “young tradition.”

Perhaps you remember the movie *Pay It Forward* (2000), in which a schoolboy attempts to make the world a better place by inspiring people to respond to a favor done for them by doing favors for three new people—not paying back the debt, but paying *forward*. That was the basic challenge we put to those who had been on the receiving end in previous years: Change sides. Be the givers, the organizers, the hosts. What could *they* give to the community this Christmas?

Their reaction could not have been better! From day one, the small building where our social work is based was buzzing with excitement and activity. Children rehearsed pageants while a group of teenagers choreographed and rehearsed the Christmas songs they wanted to

perform. Some of the adults made a list of families that were having an especially rough time and set out to collect food, clothes, and other basic needs. Others decided to teach the children some of the games they used to play when they were small.

When the day came, city officials blocked off the designated street to traffic, and a stage was erected for the performances. Throughout the day children and adults played hopscotch, capture the flag, and other games. Children sang and danced. The story of the first Christmas was told once again, and once again it moved many to tears. A group of children and preteens from the Family International performed. People who scarcely had enough for their own needs worked tirelessly to deliver the food, cleaning supplies, clothes, and toys they had collected to others who had even less.

At the end of the day, we realized that Christmas lives on because, throughout history, ordinary people on the receiving end of God's extraordinary love have taken up the challenge to change sides and become donors of that love—a love that came to earth in human form on the very first Christmas. They've paid forward.

MARIO SANT'ANA IS A FULL-TIME VOLUNTEER WITH THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL AND ONE OF THE COORDINATORS OF PROJETO RESGATE (PROJECT RESCUE), AN NGO THAT HELPS 200 LOW-INCOME FAMILIES IN THE SOUTH OF BRAZIL.



Someone's Last Christmas

BY IKE SURIWONG

"THIS COULD BE SOMEONE'S LAST CHRISTMAS!" Growing up as the child of full-time Christian volunteers, I'd heard that every Christmas for as long as I could remember. Why was it that when other families were taking time away from work, school, and other responsibilities to relax and enjoy the holiday season, we were always busier than ever? Hadn't we already done enough this year to help others and show them God's love? Couldn't we celebrate the season like "normal" people just once?

I knew in my heart the answers to those questions, so after a short bout of self-pity I got busy sharing "the reason for the season" with as many as I could. It seems that people are never more interested in hearing about Jesus than at Christmas, even here in Thailand, where

less than 1% of the 60 million inhabitants are Christian, so this is a special opportunity to help others meet and welcome Him into their hearts.

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, other members of my Family International community and I visited scores of our friends and supporters, taking them Christmas cards and homemade cookies or other tokens of our love and appreciation. We also went Christmas caroling, did Christmas-related activities at several places where we have ongoing community service projects, and shared the Christmas story with individuals and at schools—especially at schools. We performed programs at an average of nearly three schools a day for two weeks straight. As a result, over 2,400 people prayed with us to receive God's great gift of love, Jesus.

As worthwhile and rewarding as that was, we all looked forward to December 27, when we planned to take a three-day break to rest, relax, and enjoy a little late Christmas cheer with our families and some friends who had come to visit. Our much anticipated break never happened.

On the morning of December 26, we were doing a Christmas program for 150 children in the Sapan Ruam slum, on Phuket's south side near the harbor, when a man ran past yelling something about an earthquake. He was followed by a panicking crowd. We immediately fled to higher ground and narrowly escaped a wall of water as it rolled inland.

Meanwhile, the entire western coast of Thailand was being gutted by the tsunami, which had been triggered by an earthquake off the coast of northern Sumatra, Indonesia, that measured 9.0 on the Richter scale. The tsunami would claim nearly 300,000 lives and go on record as the worst humanitarian crisis in history. UNICEF reported that a large percentage of the casualties were children who had been helpless when the waves came.

We joined the relief effort the next day. Over the weeks that followed, we met many of the children who had attended our Christmas programs and prayed with us, some of them now orphans. I have no idea how many of the hundreds we *didn't* see were among the more than 5,000 people here in the Phuket area who perished in the tsunami.

This tragedy woke me up to the fact that each Christmas—each day, in fact—truly *is* someone's last chance to feel loved. Thousands die in natural disasters, but many thousands more die every day without knowing their heavenly Father's love. Let's all do all we can and take every opportunity to share that love with others. I've started right where I left off, with the children and other local tsunami survivors, but I can only do my best to love those in my corner of the world. Can you do the same in yours?

IKE SURIWONG IS A FULL-TIME VOLUNTEER WITH THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN THAILAND.



I Heard the Bells at Midnight

I heard the bells at midnight
Ring in the dawning year;
And above the clanging chorus
Of the song, I seemed to hear
A choir of mystic voices
Flinging echoes, ringing clear,

From a band of angels winging
Through the haunted atmosphere:
“Ring out the shame and sorrow,
And the misery and sin,
That the dawning of the morrow
May in peace be ushered in.”

And I thought of all the trials
The departed years had cost,
And the blooming hopes and
pleasures
That are withered now and lost;
And with joy I drank the music
Stealing o'er the feeling there
As the spirit song came pealing
On the silence everywhere:
“Ring out the shame and sorrow,
And the misery and sin,
That the dawning of the morrow
May in peace be ushered in.”

And I listened as a lover
To an utterance that flows
In syllables like dewdrops
Form the red lips of a rose,
Till the anthem, fainter growing,
Climbing higher, chiming on
Up the rounds of happy rhyming,
Slowly vanished in the dawn:
“Ring out the shame and sorrow,
And the misery and sin,
That the dawning of the morrow
May in peace be ushered in.”

Then I raised my eyes to Heaven,
And with trembling lips I pled
For a blessing for the living
And a pardon for the dead;
And like a ghost of music
Slowly whispered—lowly sung—
Came the echo pure and holy
In the happy angel tongue:
“Ring out the shame and sorrow,
And the misery and sin,
That the dawning of the morrow
May in peace be ushered in.”

—JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY

REAL

A Real Christmas Tree



BY NYX MARTINEZ

WE CHILDREN HAD ALWAYS WANTED A REAL CHRISTMAS TREE—a tall, lavishly decorated one, like other families had. It would have “singing” lights, silver tinsel, and glass ornaments dressing its snow-topped branches. And, of course, beneath it would be overflowing with presents.

But another December had come and our living room remained bare. New Christmas decorations were way too pricey for a large missionary family like ours, so Mom pulled out the storage boxes and

made the old decorations look as good as new. Then she went to work on handcrafted “stockings” made from shiny red paper and trimmed with cotton balls. My little sisters helped cut and paste. There were 12 stockings—one for each of us kids—and Mom strung them up on the staircase banister. My two brothers managed to revive the colored lights for yet another year, and they strung them on the veranda.

For a Nativity scene we molded little clay figurines, then baked and painted them. Someone gave us a set of three cherubs that were the perfect match until we kids—all determined to keep rearranging the figurines until we found the perfect look—knocked over one of the cherubs and he lost his head.

Then one evening Dad came home and announced that he had bought a Christmas tree. Curious and excited, we all gathered in the living room to inspect the tree. Our first real Christmas tree!

“Isn’t it incredible?” Dad was *always* so enthusiastic.

In actuality, it was a papier-mâché model of an evergreen, about a foot tall.

“That’s our tree???”

More sour expressions on 12 faces.

“It’s so skinny!”

“It’s kinda strange.”

“Dad, that’s not a *real* tree.”

“What do you mean? Of course it’s a real tree, honey. The inmates at the prison made it. It seems they can make almost anything! Isn’t it great?”

Dad hoped his enthusiasm would catch on. “And look, I bought a matching reindeer to go with it!” With some fanfare he produced the reindeer—also made from recycled newspaper.

That was just like my father! Even though he didn’t have much to spend on extras, he always tried to help those who had even less by purchasing some of their wares. The tree and the reindeer would help the inmates have a bit of money to spend on their families this Christmas, perhaps to buy small gifts or a better meal for their children.

As a chaplain in the national correctional system in the Philippines, he had collected many such handcrafted items. Last year, for example, there was an intricately carved battleship that sat serenely on our library shelf until my brothers went to war with it. The year before, our house had been filled with glass bottles containing miniature scenes—homes on stilts, tiny matchstick people, palm trees by the beach.

One of my brothers would collect newspapers and old magazines for the craftsmen, and my sisters and I would help sell their beautiful handmade Christmas cards. The profits went back to their families.

And now this—our “real” Christmas tree.

“I suppose we could fix it up somehow,” one of my sisters suggested. So we set it up on the phone table, which was the perfect size for it. Mom cut ornaments from cardboard—stars, bells, and candy canes. Glitter glue gave the tree a touch of sparkle. I remembered a pair of plastic doves, covered in white mesh, that I’d found in a wholesale store. The doves went up too. We strung colorful miniature lights, which flickered prettily over Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus, and the two and two-thirds cherubs.

Christmas came all at once to our merry little home, and I’ll never forget it. That year in particu-

lar was a struggle for our family, but it was also one of the most memorable.

No, we never got our store-bought Christmas tree. Instead we got one that truly represented our family’s love. Our home was never outfitted with fancy décor, but it was filled with the laughter of happy children and the melodies of meaningful Christmas carols. Santa never fit in with our family, but you can bet we caught Mommy kissing Daddy somewhere near that tree. And as for Christmas presents, our parents gave us gifts that no amount of money could ever buy.

We spent many happy moments together as a family. Our parents taught us that Christmas was for giving of our hearts to others, and that the same selfless love should color our lives, not only at Christmas, but all year round—just like a *real* evergreen.

NYX MARTINEZ IS A FULL-TIME VOLUNTEER WITH THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN UGANDA.

A CHRISTMAS PRAYER

Loving God, help us to remember the birth of Jesus that we may share in the songs of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, and the worship of the wise men. Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world. Let kindness come with every gift and good desires with every greeting. Deliver us from evil by the blessing which Christ brings. May our minds be filled with grateful thoughts and our hearts with forgiveness, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

—ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

BY ERIKA BLECIC

MUSIC MUSIC MUSIC

WITH HEALING POWER

I SUFFER FROM MÉNIÈRE'S SYNDROME, AN EAR DISORDER THAT CAUSES VERTIGO, PERSISTENT RINGING IN THE EARS, AND SOME LOSS OF HEARING. In my case, if the low-pitched sounds are too strong, my head starts spinning so bad that I need to lie down before I lose my balance and fall. My TV and radio have been put away in the closet for a long time.

In March 2004, my boss sent me to cover a conference on volunteer work in the Italian community here in Rijeka, Croatia. I didn't know I was about to meet some wonderful people from the Family International. Anna, Paolo, Andrea, and Simone talked wholeheartedly about their mission. I found out that they do clown therapy for children in orphanages and hospitals, and they found out that I know how to sew. The next thing I knew, I was a newspaper reporter by day and sewing clown costumes by night. I kept it up for ten nights, but didn't feel tired in the least. I was happy to be helping people who were helping others.

And now my Christmas story begins. ...

Last December, I saw Andrea and Maggie at the Family's stand in a local shopping mall, and I bought their CD *Rhythm of Christmas*. For someone with serious hearing problems, this was definitely an odd thing

to do. I didn't even have a CD player! At least I knew that by buying something I would be helping their mission.

The next evening, on my way to another assignment, I walked into an electronics shop almost without thinking and came out with a CD player. I couldn't wait to get home and listen to that CD! Almost as soon as it started to play, a river of tears streamed down my face. Pictures of my late husband, sister, and aunt flashed before my eyes. Four years earlier, within the space of 13 months, all of them had died of cancer. While they had been on their deathbeds, I was with them, sharing their Calvary. I know what it is to share in others' suffering, to feel helpless, forsaken, and to be left alone.

At one point I wanted to turn off what seemed to be the source of my tears, but when I couldn't lift my hand to press the off button, I realized I needed to listen to it. I played it for over two hours. The more I listened and cried, the greater peace I felt and the more my soul was set free—finally free from the burden of suffering and desperation that I had carried inside for four years.

It was such a wonderful feeling that the next morning I wanted to listen to the CD again. *How can I, at work?* I wondered, even as I stuffed the CD and

player into my bag. Since it was just two days before Christmas, I asked my colleagues if I could play it for everyone. No one objected.

After about 20 minutes, someone said, "Thank you! I haven't felt so good in here for a long time!" In addition to the usual pressures of putting out a newspaper, our paper is constantly on the brink of bankruptcy. The atmosphere in our office is often quite tense, but this heavenly music broke through all that.

On Christmas Eve I gave another copy of *Rhythm of Christmas* to one of my colleagues as a present. She too had suffered a terrible tragedy in her family, and still hadn't recovered. She too couldn't find peace. On the 26th, she came to work radiant with joy. I couldn't remember ever seeing her so happy. "As soon as I started listening to that CD," she said as she gave me a big hug, "I felt lighter and even started singing and dancing."

Once I saw the wonderful effect that CD had on her, I started giving copies to other friends. It didn't matter that Christmas had come and gone.

A man who had been going through a particularly difficult time "found meaning to the suffering and the way to regain strength."

One of my relatives said he felt alive again.

Another friend now goes around singing its tunes and has lost her perpetual frown. She can't thank me enough for the present.

To her and each of the others I answered that seeing them happy and at peace, ready to receive and give love, is greater thanks and reward than I ever imagined.

Now whenever I meet volunteers from the Family, I joke that they must be getting tired of me always buying the same CD. But what can I do? Everyone I know who has listened to it has felt better—starting with me!

The more
I listened
and
cried, the
greater
peace I
felt and
the more
my soul
was set
free

MIRACLE ON FLIGHT IC814

CHRISTMAS IS ONE TIME OF THE YEAR WHEN GOD MANAGES TO GET MORE OF THE WORLD'S ATTENTION as our thoughts turn to the "miracle of the manger," Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. There's just something about reflecting on that act of divine intervention that kindles hope in our hearts. No matter what problems we have struggled through all year, Christmas still brings with it a special hope that things will work out.

On Christmas morning 2000, that hope flickered low at our Family International community in New Delhi, India. We awoke to news that an Indian Airlines plane had been hijacked and diverted to

a desolate airbase in the remote mountain city of Kandahar, Afghanistan. Our hearts sank further as we realized that one of our dear friends was aboard that plane.

It's hard to describe what happened next, but the thought of someone I knew personally, someone with a wife and two children, was now in danger of losing his life along with 120 other passengers, took me over. Almost without thinking, I got down on my knees and began praying. I had never prayed like that before. It was almost as though my entire being turned into a prayer as I asked the Almighty to intervene.



There's a saying in show business that also goes for our volunteer work, where others are always counting on us: "The show must go on." So we did our scheduled benefit Christmas musical shows that day—one at an orphanage, one at a prison, and one at a foster home for children from disturbed backgrounds. Our hearts were heavy as we empathized with those aboard IC814, but the happiness and laughter of those watching our shows gave us temporary reprieve.

Between shows, we prayed together and individually for the safety of the hostages. When we returned home, the mood was somber. The hijacking was headline news in every paper and on every network. It was all people talked about.

The next day brought more bad news. The hijackers had executed the first passenger—a young man returning from his honeymoon in the Himalayas. I went into my room and cried. Then I prayed for God to comfort the man's widow and family.

That evening the hijackers threatened to kill one passenger every hour until their demands were met. The situation continued to look bleak.

That night I desperately needed supernatural assurance that God was in control of the situation. We all did. As I lay tossing and turning in bed, unable to sleep, a verse from the Bible came to mind. "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7).

I decided to do something that I had done many times before—ask Jesus for a direct message to help me see things as He did. I found a pen and opened the notebook where I keep a record of all the things I believe Jesus has said to me about

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many personal situations, and I prayed, "Jesus, I really need to hear from You. I need Your words of encouragement and counsel."

Then I quieted my spirit and tried to put my preconceptions and all other thoughts out of my mind—and I waited. Slowly, His words started forming in my mind and I wrote them down.

"I will stay the hand of the hijackers, and no more shall perish. I have set strong angels about the plane, and they shall protect the passengers. Keep praying, for your prayers shall form a force field around them. You shall see your friend emerge from the plane."

It was a brief message, but a tremendously comforting one to me. All I needed to do was *believe* what the Lord had said, no matter what the circumstances.

I held on to Jesus' promise for the next five days, and in the end the hijack drama played out exactly as Jesus had told me. None of the other hostages were harmed, and on the night of December 31st they were all released. As we huddled in front of the TV, watching a live telecast of the hostages being brought home, our friend was the first person to emerge from the plane.

Later we discovered what the Lord had meant when He said, "I will stay the hand of the hijackers." Our friend told us that a few times during the crisis the hijackers had started preparing to execute the hostages one by one, but each time something seemed to stop them. I believe with all of my heart that the hijackers had been held back by the Lord and His angels, in answer to the prayers of many here in India and around the world.

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Gift exchange



The first Christmas was all for you. It was My Father's gift of love to the world, but it was also His gift to you specifically. And it was a "gift that keeps on giving," as they say.

For those who saw it firsthand—the star, the choir of angels, the baby in the manger—it was an unexpected and overwhelming spiritual experience. For the blessed few who recognized that baby as their Messiah, it was a dream come true. For them and the many millions since who have likewise believed, it has been the door to eternal life. And it's the same today. If you celebrate Christmas in spirit and truth, the same wonder, the same promise, and the same unspeakable joy can all be yours.

But now Christmas is more than that. It's more than a gift from My Father's heart to yours—it's a gift *exchange*. It's a special time for you as you soak in My love and relive the wonder of the first Christmas, but it's also special for Me in that you take more time to love and thank and praise Me for all I've done for you. This may be hard for you to understand and believe, but I need and appreciate your love as much as you do Mine. So if you're still wondering what to give Me this Christmas, that's it. Let's make this Christmas extra special by giving each other the *best* of all gifts—our love.